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**New Trends in Population Migration in China**

**Zusammenfassung:** Dieser Artikel fasst gegenwärtige Migrationstrends in China anhand von Daten aus neueren Migrationserhebungen und aus dem Zensus von 1990 zusammen. Er konstatiert eine Zunahme der provisorisch gemeldeten oder ungemeldeten Wanderbevölkerung bei gleichzeitigem Rückgang von Personen mit einem offiziellem Wohnsitzwechsel. Dem entsprechen eine Abnahme von Wanderungen aufgrund staatlicher Arbeitsplatz-zuteilungen und eine Zunahme spontaner Migrationen aufgrund von eigener Arbeitssuche oder privaten Migrationsgründen wie Hochzeit, Verwandtenbesuch oder Familiennachzug. Ebenfalls auffällig ist eine Umorientierung der Migration von Chinas ländlicher Peripherie zu Kerngebieten an der urbanisierten Ostküste. Der Artikel empfiehlt eine graduelle anstatt ein abrupten Freigabe der Migration. Er weist sodann drei aktuelle Thesen der innerchinesischen Diskussion zurück: 1) Ländliche Wanderarbeiter würden Stadtbewohnern die Stellen streitig machen; 2) Migrantinnen vom Land würden die Geburtenzahlen in die Höhe treiben; 3) ländliche Migranten würden eine destruktive Kraft in der chinesischen Gesellschaft darstellen.

**Schlagworte:** Migration, Migrationsrichtung, Meldewesen, Migrationsgründe, Beschäftigung, Geburten, Land-Stadt-Gegensätze, politische Kultur

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**Abstract:** Based on recent surveys and 1990 census results, this article summarizes current Chinese migration trends. It notes an increase of floating population with provisional or none registration as opposed to a decrease of persons with an official change of permanent household registration. This correlates with a decrease of migrations via state-administered job allocations and an increase of spontaneous migrations via own job-seeking or private migration reasons such as marriage, visiting kin or family co-migration. In the process, a reorientation of migration away from the rural periphery to the core regions of the urbanized coastal belt has become conspicuous. The article recommends a gradual instead of an immediate liberalization of migration. It then refutes three theses advanced in current Chinese discourse: 1) peasant migrants would compete for jobs with the resident urban population; 2) women migrants from the countryside would drive up birth numbers; 3) peasant migrants would constitute a destructive force in Chinese society.

**Key words:** Migration, direction of migration, household registration, migration reasons, employment, births, rural-urban conflicts, political culture

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## NEW TRENDS IN POPULATION MIGRATION IN CHINA

### Contents

<b>1 Introduction.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2 The Decrease in Migration With Official Change of <i>Hukou</i> and the Increase in ‘Floating Population’ Migration.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3 Spontaneous and Self-Determined Migration Gains Momentum.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>4 Migration Streams Turn Back East and into Urban Areas.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>5 The Emergence of the ‘Labour Boom’ .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>6 Transitional Migration Model.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>7 Three Issues Under the Current Public Spotlight.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>7.1 Whether or Not In-migrants Are Competing With Official Urban Residents     on the Labour Market.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>7.2 Whether or Not the Floating Population Will Weaken Family Planning     Policies.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>7.3 The Differences Between the Modern Floating Population and     Traditional Vagrants.....</b>	<b>13</b>

## 1 Introduction

Since the foundation of the People's Republic of China, the country has been undergoing a transition from pre-industrial society, or a society characterised by a natural economy, to the early stages of industrial society. In the process of transition, changes in occupation and residence of the rural population are inevitable. Under the pre-reform planned economic system, the state controlled the quantity of migration, its direction and its structure by means of policy and administrative intervention. Encouraging planned and organised migration, the state kept a leash on spontaneous and self-determined migration so as to retain total control over population redistribution - especially rural-urban redistribution - and thereby meet the needs of the planned economy. Hence, in this period China exemplified the closed model of population migration. This model is characterised by the following features: (1) Fluctuation: In the 30 years following Chinese Liberation, rural-urban migration fluctuated dramatically in quantity, never stabilising. (2) A homogeneous structure: The social characteristics of the migrant populations were strikingly similar across regions and in towns or cities. (3) Fits and starts: Rural-urban migration was sluggish and directed by fits and starts due to bureaucratic commandism: central government adjustment quotas determined the quantity of migration and administrative selection determined the quality of migrants. (4) Oriented by state industrial strategies: Migration flows were mainly from the eastern to the western parts of China. (5) A back-to-the-countryside orientation: During this time period millions of students and urban workers were sent down to the countryside. (6) Uni-direction: Administrative and economic controls made flows from urban to rural areas, from big to small cities and from inland to remote border areas much easier than vice versa. (7) Administrative barriers: China's household registration system and grain marketing supply system were obstacles to free urban in-migration. People legally could not settle down in urban areas without a permanent residence booklet (*hukou*), and informal migration was limited by the strict grain supply system.

Following the implementation of the reform and open door policies, China has been undergoing a shift from a planned to a market economy. Hence, several of the above characteristics of the closed model disappeared and migration patterns are now showing several new features.

## 2 The Decrease in Migration With Official Change of *Hukou* and the Increase in 'Floating Population' Migration

Since the abolishment of the state monopoly over grain procurement and marketing, there have been fewer restrictions on gaining provisional urban residence. As a result, urban in-migrants have increased dramatically. Although members of the floating population still cannot get official urban *hukou* registration booklets, they nevertheless may stay in cities as long as they want. Besides this administrative relaxation, food supply is also not a concern since the monopoly has been lifted in grain marketing. These factors contribute to the daily increase of the floating population. According to 1982 census data, 6,574,848 people had left their place of origin for more than one year and were living in other places temporarily without an official change of permanent residence.<sup>1</sup> By 1990, census figures show the figure had swelled to 21,610,000,<sup>2</sup> about a fourfold increase. However, these figures do not include two other important migrant population components: short-term migrants (i.e., those away from home for less than one year, such as seasonal migrants) and people in transit for any reason (migratory or otherwise). To include these groups into a picture of the *total* floating population, relevant department estimates suggest that in 1985 there was a daily average of 50 mio. 'floating' people,<sup>3</sup> 70 mio. in 1988,<sup>4</sup> and 80 mio. in 1995 - of whom 44 mio. were registered as provisional residents and 36 mio. were in transit.<sup>5</sup> Taking Beijing as an example, it is estimated that there were 250,000 'floating' people every day in 1979, 400,000 in 1983,

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<sup>1</sup> *Zhongguo di sanci renkou pucha zhuyao shuzi* (Major Findings of the Third Population Census of the People's Republic of China), Beijing 1982, p.9.

<sup>2</sup> *Zhongguo 1990 renkou pucha ziliao* (Material on China's 1990 Population Census), Beijing 1993, Vol. 1, p.6-7.

<sup>3</sup> *Jingji Ribao* (Economic Daily), September 15, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> *Renmin Ribao* (People's Daily), December 16, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> *Renmin Ribao* (People's Daily), July 9, 1995.

510,000 in 1984, 1,160,000 in 1988,<sup>6</sup> and 3,295,000 in 1995 - of whom 3,251,000 are provisional residents and 44,000 are in transit (but, again, not necessarily in migration), and of these 3,251,000 provisional residents, 63.2% are rural in origin.<sup>7</sup>

Compared to the period 1954 to 1984, average national-level total numbers of migrants who officially changed their *hukou* registration in the period after 1984 dropped significantly. From 1954 to 1984, there were 4 years during which the annual gross migration ranged from 30 to 33 mio. people, and 6 years with the annual figure ranged from 20 to 29 mio, 18 years with the annual figure ranged from 10 to 19 mio.,<sup>8</sup> and 3 years with the annual figure from 5 to 6 mio. The annual average national gross migration over this 31-year period was 19 mio. However, according to the 1990 census, data indicates that in the five year period between July 1, 1985 and July 1, 1990, the total number of migrants at the national level was about 34 mio,<sup>9</sup> about the same as for the single year of 1960. The figures for 1992 and 1993 were both 18 mio.<sup>10</sup> Explanations for this trend include the opening up of grain marketing channels and a relaxation on gaining provisional residence status, both of which have encouraged many people to migrate without changing their official *hukou* registration - some of whom are legally entitled to change their *hukou* registrations but don't bother to, and some of whom are not legally entitled to urban *hukou* booklets but no longer need them to live in urban areas.

### 3 Spontaneous and Self-Determined Migration Gains Momentum

Under the planned economy, migration was made mostly according to overall state plans - for example, the transfer of government cadres at various levels, job assignments for college and middle-level technical school graduates as well as for demobilised military personnel, and labour recruited into state and collective own enterprises in rural areas. Although it was also possible to migrate to follow a spouse or other family members who migrated for one of the above reasons, this was still controlled in urban areas by quotas rather than individual volition. Thus, this latter type of 'co-migration' is also planned, but in a secondary way.

As the market economy in China develops, enterprises of various ownership types have come into being, such as domestic-funded, foreign-funded, joint-venture and private enterprises. Most of the workers in all these enterprise types come from the nascent labour market. Job seekers nowadays care less about the ownership of the enterprise than the nature of the job and its salary. Thus, rather than relying on job assignments from the state, many college and technical school graduates find their jobs on the labour market. The mobility and migration of self-employed workers are even more free from state intervention and control. Among the self-employed, the direction of migration - e.g., rural-urban versus urban-rural and inter-provincial versus intra-provincial - is oriented primarily by economic information and market signals. This idea is supported by 1990 census data. Table 1 indicates that the predominant causes for both intra- and inter-provincial migration are to do business or perform manual labour.

To sum up, due to a variety of choices in labour force participation, labour force migration flows are becoming increasingly spontaneous and self-determined.

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<sup>6</sup> *Gaige kaifang zhong de renkou wenti* (Population Issues under Reform), Beijing 1994, p.202.

<sup>7</sup> *Beijing Wanbao* (Beijing Evening Post), June 15, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> *Dangdai zhongguo de renkou* (The Population of Contemporary China), Beijing 1988, p. 249.

<sup>9</sup> *Zhongguo 1990 renkou pucha ziliao* (Material on China's 1990 Population Census), Beijing 1993, Vol. 4, pp.452, 472.

<sup>10</sup> *Quanguo fen xianshi renkou tongji ziliao 1992* (National Population Statistics by County and City 1992), Beijing 1993, p.37; *Quanguo fen xianshi renkou tongji ziliao 1993* (National Population Statistics by County and City 1993), Beijing 1994, p.35.

Table 1 Causes for Migration (1985-90)

Causes	Inter-Province		Intra-Province	
	Numbers	Percent	Numbers	Percent
<i>Economic</i>				
<b>Work Transfer</b>	1,666,745	15.1	2,379,728	10.3
<b>Assignment and Recruitment</b>	500,904	4.5	1,553,473	6.7
<b>Seeking Employment in Industry and Running Business</b>	3,259,570	29.4	5,302,947	23.0
<b>Study or Training</b>	927,482	8.5	3,211,636	13.9
<i>Social</i>				
<b>Visiting Kin</b>	1,149,585	10.5	2,206,274	9.6
<b>Retired</b>	163,764	1.6	369,519	1.6
<b>Moving with Household Head</b>	1,201,823	10.9	2,355,888	10.2
<b>Marriage</b>	1,511,857	13.7	3,241,164	14.1
<b>Other</b>	683,631	6.2	2,405,105	10.4
<b>Total</b>	11,065,361	100.0	23,025,734	100.0

Source: Zhongguo 1990 renkou pucha ziliao (Material on China's 1990 Population Census), Beijing 1993, Vol. 4, p. 452-91.

#### 4 Migration Streams Turn Back East and into Urban Areas

In consideration of the international environment and theories of the redistribution of productive forces, at the early stages of the foundation of the People's Republic, the state emphasised the middle and western regions in developing its productive forces for economic construction. Thus, the main streams of migration from 1949 to the late 1970s were dictated to run from eastern to central and western regions, although there were also very small streams running in opposite directions. There was very little migration between southwest and northwest regions.

Since the beginning of the reform and open-door period, the economic and geographic advantages of the eastern regions, especially its coastal areas, have been seized to build up economic open areas and special economic zones, soon after which large quantities of foreign capital started flowing into these areas and foreign-oriented economic sectors came into being. The amount of foreign capital invested in China from 1978 to 1995 is estimated to be U.S.\$ 200 billion (including amounts for which agreements have been reached). Until the end of the eighth five year plan (1995), around U.S.\$ 140 billion in foreign capital will have been delivered to China,<sup>11</sup> a large proportion of which is targeted for the coastal provinces and other eastern areas. Such huge amounts of investment have attracted large amounts of labour into these parts from central and western areas. Thus, changes in the distribution of productive forces are in large part responsible for the eastbound stream of migration.

<sup>11</sup> Zhongguo tongji nianjian 1994 (China Statistical Yearbook 1994), Beijing 1995, p.527.

Table 2 Inter- and Intra-Provincial Migration 1985-90 by Province, Autonomous Region and Municipality Under Direct Jurisdiction of Central Government

	Out-Migrants	In-Migrants	Ratio of In- to Out-Migrants	Net-Migration
<i>Northern</i>				
Beijing	216,484	765,692	3.54	549,208
Tianjin	107,616	280,697	2.61	173,081
Hebei	1,458,236	1,333,230	0.91	-125,006
Shanxi	845,828	934,579	1.10	88,751
Inner Mongolia	881,267	832,548	0.94	-48,719
<i>Northeast</i>				
Liaoning	1,178,391	1,425,491	1.21	247,100
Jilin	966,731	848,709	0.88	-118,022
Heilongjiang	1,663,002	1,423,093	0.86	-239,909
<i>Eastern</i>				
Shanghai	305,712	843,762	2.76	538,050
Jiangsu	1,809,067	1,981,240	1.10	172,173
Zhejiang	1,431,941	1,137,338	0.79	-294,603
Anhui	1,402,933	1,207,891	0.86	-195,042
Fujian	961,085	975,315	1.01	14,230
Jiangxi	1,027,859	959,547	0.93	-68,312
Shandong	1,724,859	1,800,414	1.04	75,555
<i>Central</i>				
Henan	1,828,569	1,717,229	0.94	-111,340
Hubei	1,434,664	1,520,136	1.06	85,472
Hunan	1,826,570	1,570,282	0.86	-256,288
Guangdong	2,921,540	3,931,685	1.35	1,010,145
Guangxi	1,477,291	1,031,293	0.70	-445,998
Hainan	248,850	293,322	1.18	44,472
<i>Southwest</i>				
Sichuan	3,661,305	2,817,738	0.77	-843,567
Guizhou	777,480	655,586	0.84	-121,894
Yunnan	1,009,657	986,559	0.98	-23,098
Tibet	54,582	--	--	--
<i>Northwest</i>				
Shaanxi	1,068,503	1,021,040	0.96	-47,463
Gansu	730,346	649,010	0.89	-81,336
Qinghai	253,041	266,761	1.05	13,720
Ningxia	179,361	214,749	1.20	35,388
Xinjiang	638,324	702,671	1.10	64,347
Other	36,512	--	--	--

Source: Zhongguo 1990 renkou pucha ziliao, Beijing 1993, Vol. 4, p. 152-331.

In addition to the above-described trend of eastbound migration, there has also been a clear trend of rural-urban migration over the past 15 years. According to 1990 census data, 51.9% of inter-province rural out-migrants moved into cities, 21.4% moved into towns, and only 26.7% migrated to rural areas of other provinces. Among intra-provincial migrants, 61.9% of the rural out-migrants migrated into cities, 17.5% migrated into towns, and only 20.5% migrated to other rural areas within the province. As tables 3 and 4 further suggest, rural-urban migration in China has gained seemingly irreversible momentum.

Table 3 **Inter-Provincial Migrants by City, Town and Village**

Place of Destination	Place of Origin			Total
	City	Town	Village	
<b>City</b>	1,959,380	879,150	3,422,560	6,261,090
<b>Town</b>	472,380	441,120	1,408,460	2,321,960
<b>Village</b>	312,040	180,890	1,760,280	2,253,210
<b>Total</b>	2,743,800	1,501,160	6,591,300	10,836,260

Source: Zhongguo 1990 renkou pucha 10% chouyang ziliao (Material on the 10% Sample of China's 1990 Population Census), Beijing 1991, p. 484-495.

Table 4 **Intra-Provincial (But Inter-County or Inter-City) Migrants by City, Town and Village**

Place of Destination	Place of Origin			Total
	City	Town	Village	
<b>City</b>	2,303,670	3,283,510	9,035,900	14,623,080
<b>Town</b>	770,980	1,145,920	2,556,360	4,473,260
<b>Village</b>	417,040	439,360	2,997,610	3,908,010
<b>Total</b>	3,545,690	4,868,790	14,589,870	23,004,350

Source: Zhongguo 1990 renkou pucha 10% chouyang ziliao (Material on the 10% Sample of China's 1990 Population Census), Beijing 1991, p. 676-677.

## 5 The Emergence of the 'Labour Boom'

As peasants keep moving into urban areas in huge quantities, there emerges a 'labour boom'. In the late 1980s, the drive to achieve high speed economic growth brought about an imbalance in production and a shortage of materials and funds. Trying to cool down the over-heated economy, the government adopted measures for reducing or even halting construction projects and for rationalising township and village enterprises, resulting in thousands of economic and industrial projects being terminated and millions of labourers losing their jobs. These unemployed labourers then moved from coastal urban areas in the southeast to the north in search of jobs. As they failed to get employed there, they turned their direction of movement to the west. A relative shortage of employment opportunities in the country at this point resulted in an enormous expansion of the floating population as new rural labourers were added to the ranks of those already in search of work. These two types of migrants merged together, clogging national transportation arteries and squatting in cities. This situation was alleviated after the execution of programs to improve the flow of traffic. Nevertheless, there have been regular and serious transportation crunches caused by labourers returning to their home villages for Spring Festival (Chinese New Year). Meanwhile, the floating population in urban areas, especially coastal urban areas in the southeast, keeps increasing.



The net volume of in-migration into the 22 coastal cities in 1992 was 0.279 mio., equal to 14% of the volume for all 507 remaining Chinese cities (which totalled two mio.).<sup>12</sup> While these urban in-migrants bring benefits to the urban economy, they also bring negative side-effects, such as pressure on the daily urban life, social security and the environment.

Measures adopted by the government to deal with this 'labour boom' fall under a program called the 'Project for Systematising the Inter-Regional Flow of Labour',<sup>13</sup> which will set up a labour market information system, management organisations and service networks for the purpose of rationalising and systematising inter-regional migration flows. More concretely, this project will include the following measures: (1) establishing employment agencies in places of origin to send labourers out through official channels; (2) establishing administrative bodies to oversee the labour market and enforce labour market regulations in places of migrant origin; (3) establishing responsible service networks; (4) constructing labour market monitoring systems to allow for immediate information on the supply and demand of labour in high migrant concentration areas; (5) executing effective programs to improve traffic flows during peak holiday travel periods, such as Spring Festival. In the face of current and clearly manifest problems, all of these above-mentioned approaches are aimed at perfecting labour markets and the organisation and management of inter-regional migration flows with the goal of gradually forming an 'information-oriented, need-based, identification card-managed and comprehensive service-supported' employment system for the migrant labourer. In addition to meeting the needs of the individual migrant, the implementation of such a program would also contribute to prevent the overloading of urban areas, enhance urban public security, maintain the normal pattern of daily urban life, and protect the natural environment.

## 6 Transitional Migration Model

In China the shift from a planned economy to a market economy is proceeding smoothly and is paralleled by a correspondent shift in migration from a closed model to an open model.

At the background behind what I call the 'transitional model' are three interrelated processes that are yet unbalanced: (1) a desire on the part of peasants to switch economic sectors (e.g., from primary sector to the tertiary sector); (2) a desire on the part of peasants to switch administrative residential units (e.g., from the village to the city); and (3) the breaking down of the administrative wall separating rural and urban areas (making these switches possible). Although the development of China's non-agricultural sectors has been extremely rapid, it has been far from sufficient to allow for the complete absorption of rural surplus labour in urban areas. Therefore, the door to the city should be opened only gradually. Of course, complete rural-urban segregation would only hinder socio-economic development; but if the city doors swing completely open, these social, cultural and economic centres would find their resources severely strained by the in-pouring migrants. Hence, currently being used is a 'transitional model' in between completely closed migration and completely free migration - a model of gradual opening to cope with the economic system changes through a combination of administrative controls and economic monitoring to guide the flow of migration. The new characteristics of migration described earlier reflect this transitional model. This model will remain in use until the economic system transition is completed. Only by that time, will the three migration processes listed above correspond in balance and harmony with each other and will people migrate freely without any administrative control and interference.

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<sup>12</sup> *Quanguo fen xianshi renkou tongji ziliao 1992*, pp.273, 280.

<sup>13</sup> 'Nongcun laodongli kuadiqu liudong youxuhua gongcheng' ('Project for Systematizing the Inter-Regional Migration of Labor'), in: *Renmin Ribao* (People's Daily), January 17, 1994.

## 7 Three Issues Under the Current Public Spotlight

### 7.1 Whether or not in-migrants are competing with official urban residents on the labour market

One issue of great concern to the public is whether those migrating into cities are competing and generating social conflict with existing urban dwellers who may also be looking for jobs - e.g., those urban dwellers 'waiting for work' (*daiye*), temporarily relieved of duties (*xiagang*), or laid off from state-owned enterprises.

From the viewpoint of the author, however, this is not an issue of concern. It is known that employers choose employees according to the qualification requirements of the post, while the employee chooses the job according to its suitability and income. Generally speaking, the mean educational attainment of the rural labour force is less than that of the urban labour force. Hence, in most trades and professions in-migrants are unable to compete with urban dwellers on the labour market. Todaro pointed out in his classic migration model that peasants migrating into cities in developing countries typically first enter 'traditional sector' occupations such as peddling, unskilled service work, handicrafts and manual construction work, after which some succeed in moving into occupations of the more 'modern' sectors.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, in general, the economic activities in which the rural labour migrants engage supplement and compliment the trades and professions of the urban dwellers. Thus, it would not be wise to prohibit all rural labourers from moving into cities; only those with no skills to offer should be barred.

Table 5 Occupational Composition of Out-Migrants From 100 Villages in Urban Areas of Destination, 1986

Occupation	Number of Migrants	Percent
Agriculture	2,197	8.1
Industry	4,593	17.0
Construction	8,596	31.8
Communication	1,655	6.0
Trade	1,204	4.5
Catering and Service	1,045	3.9
Other	7,721	28.6
Total	26,993	99.9

Source: Yu Dechang, *Quanguo baicun laodongli qingkuang diaocha ziliaoji* (Data from the National 100 Villages Labour Force Survey), Beijing 1989, p. 32.

Changes in the occupational structure of Chinese rural labour after entering urban areas follow Todaro's migration model closely. Data from the 1986 100 Villages Labour Survey, conducted by the Institute of Rural Development, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, as well as from the 1992 50 Villages and Towns Survey on Population Movement, conducted by the Population Institute, Chinese People's Public Security University, reveal a pattern that support Todaro's model: about 50% to 60% of in-migrant labourers were engaged in service, construction, transportation, trade, purchasing, household help and handicraft industries (see tables 5 and 6).

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<sup>14</sup> Todaro, M.P., 'Model of Labor Migration and Urban Unemployment in Less Developed Countries', in: *American Economic Review*, 1969, Vol. 3.

Table 6 Occupational Change Among Out-Migrants From 50 Villages and Towns Before and After Migration, 1992 (%)

Occupation	Pre-Floating	Post-Floating
Agriculture	78.59	12.86
Industry and Service	2.85	35.96
Handicraft	4.48	7.82
Construction	0.38	7.90
Transportation	0.86	2.73
Trade	0.90	9.07
Commerce	1.48	4.61
Cadre	0.60	0.56
Teacher	0.25	0.20
Student	7.83	4.69
Household Help	0.00	0.56
Other	1.78	13.04
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: Zhang Qingwu, *Zhongguo 50 xiangzhen liudong renkou diaocha yanjiu* (A Survey of Population Mobility in 50 Townships of China), Beijing 1994, p. 112, 114.

Data from the Beijing Floating Population Survey conducted by the Beijing City Government in 1995 also show that about 60% of the economically active in-migrants in Beijing were concentrated in construction, trade, catering and household help occupations (see table 7). More specifically, about 80% of these labourers aged 15 - 44 were engaged in one of three main kinds of work: (1) commerce, such as trade, (2) manual work, such as street sweeping, public toilet cleaning, construction or coolie work and (3) service work, such as tailoring, repairing (e.g. bicycles, shoes, watches), cotton fluffing, catering and household help. What these three types of work share in common is their being shunned by urban dwellers. That is, these are vacancies on the labour market left by urban dwellers. At present, these in-migrants do not present a challenge to their urban counterparts in labour force participation. But it should be noted clearly that this is contingent upon the volume of rural-urban migration not exceeding the urban carrying capacity.

Table 7 Reasons for Moving to Beijing, 1995 (%)

Reason	Percent
Trade	29.0
Construction	21.4
Catering	5.9
Industry	5.0
Household Helper	1.9
Agriculture	0.9
Visiting Relatives or Friends	12.5
Medical Treatment or Marriage	1.7
Meeting or Study	4.0
Tourism or Changing Trains	2.3
Other	15.4
Total	100.0

Source: 'Liudong renkou diaocha fenxi' (An Analysis of a Population Mobility Investigation), in: *Beijing Wanbao* (Beijing Evening Post), June 17, 1995.

## 7.2 Whether or not the floating population will weaken family planning policies

Women who leave their villages are often accused of doing so to evade family planning policies. While it is true that there are some women in the floating population who move solely to exceed government limits on births, the majority act according to economic motivations. Generally speaking, birth rates among the economically motivated floating population are lower than the local birth rates of their places of origin and only slightly higher than the birth rates of their urban destinations. This trend has emerged from many surveys in several different countries. In the case of China, data from a national survey on internal migration in 74 cities and towns in 1986 as well as from the 1990 census indicate that the average number of births from rural women migrants, including women in the floating population, is less than that of rural non-migrants women (see tables 8, 9).

There are three major demographic explanations for this pattern: (1) The majority of women among the floating population are relatively young and single or married without children. Their educational and skill levels are higher than that of the non-migrant rural population. Moreover, they tend to be more open-minded and receptive to new experiences so that they are more likely to accept the low fertility concept. This idea is supported by research showing that the fertility rate of rural migrants is on the average lower than the fertility rate of their place of origin before migrating. The argument is that these people deliberately

Table 8 Average Number of Children Ever Born by Non-Migrating and Migrating Rural Women

Age Group	Non-Migrating Women	Migrating Women
20-24	0.58	0.32
25-29	1.62	0.98
30-34	2.26	1.39
35-39	2.93	2.21
40-44	3.68	3.05
45-49	4.31	3.50

Note: Data for non-migrating women and migrating women are from 1987 and 1986 respectively.

Sources: *Quanguo 1% renkou chouyang diaocha ziliao huibian* (1% National Population Survey Sample Data Compilation), Beijing 1988; *Zhongguo 1986 74 chengzhen renkou qianyi chouyang diaocha ziliao* (Data from China's 1986 National Population Migration Sample Survey of 74 Cities and Towns), Beijing 1988.

Table 9 Average Number of Children Ever Born by 'Floating' Women in Shanghai Compared to the Average for Women in their Places of Origin

	Women 'Floating' into Shanghai	Women in Jiangsu Province	Women in Zhejiang Province	Women in Anhui Province
20-24	0.289	0.457	0.394	0.546
25-29	1.159	1.209	1.162	1.611
30-34	1.611	1.534	1.682	2.170
35-39	1.924	1.882	2.168	2.706
40-44	2.279	2.452	2.726	3.380
45-49	2.837	3.095	3.303	3.986
50-54	3.115	3.632	3.896	4.383
55-59	3.413	4.118	4.342	4.575
60-64	3.058	4.194	4.418	4.148
Standardised Number of Children Who Survived	2.187	2.508	2.677	3.056

Notes: (1) Women 'floating' into Shanghai are defined as women who had lived in Shanghai for less than one year and had also been away from their places of origin for more than one year at the time of the Fourth Population Census in 1990. (2) 86.6% of the women 'floating' into Shanghai were rural in origin, and 80% came from Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Anhui provinces.

Source: Zhou Yinggen, *Renkou qianyi liudong yu shengyu* (Population Mobility and Fertility), Shanghai Census Office, April 1992, No. 2, p. 10.

control their fertility in anticipation of and in preparation for out-migration. That is, the motivation to migrate is behind their low fertility selectivity. In demographic theory, this model is thus known as the selectivity model. (2) Another explanation posits that migrant life is unstable and physically and psychologically taxing, resulting in a tendency to delay marriage and hence fertility. Furthermore, migrants often live separately from their spouses. These factors reduce pregnancy rates and hence fertility rates. In demographic theory, this model is known as the disruption model. (3) A third theory argues that, after settling in an urban area, the floating population tends gradually to adapt itself to the urban way of life and to discard their traditional concepts for modern ones. They start pursuing a higher quality of life, paying more attention to their children's education, and regulating their fertility voluntarily. Eventually their fertility levels approach the urban average. In demographic theory, this model is known as the adaptation model.

From the foregoing discussion, it should be clear that population migration contributes to fertility decline. Therefore, people should not worry about the floating population causing large numbers of excess births.

### 7.3 The Differences Between the Modern Floating Population and Traditional Vagrants

The author of the book *China in the Third Eye*<sup>15</sup> argues that throughout China's history the modern floating population and traditional vagrants are one and the same thing. He maintains that, "with no exception, all dynasties in [China's] history have been destroyed by vagrants [*liumin*]", and that "today's 'refugee boom' is a big powder keg to society". "If there occurs a big social upheaval in China again, these unemployed peasants would certainly be active participants and become the main force of destruction".<sup>16</sup> Although the author focuses primarily on the issue of rural surplus labour and relieving their underemployment in order to reduce the danger of crime, he commits the mistake of mixing the modern floating population with the historical vagrant population, two distinct groups that are qualitatively different. Furthermore, his case for the decisive role of traditional vagrants in the downfall of dynasties is also overstated - even though a thorough critique of this point is beyond the scope of this article.

Throughout China's history, the vagrant phenomenon occurred in many dynasties. Although there were various causes, most vagrants were motivated by the "loss of land or the wish to leave the land", as the author defines it.<sup>17</sup> In general, the causes behind the emergence of vagrants were mainly natural disasters, pestilence, tyranny and wars - forces driving farmers from their land. There are plenty of such records in China's historical books showing that once the disaster, war or tyranny ended the "vagrants" generally would return home and resume farming. The *Annals of the Han Dynasty (Han Shu)* supply evidence of vagrants returning home to farm and open up new land: "When Emperor Zhao came to power, most of the refugees returned home, farmland was cultivated and expanded, and there was surplus grain in every household."<sup>18</sup>

The nature and causes of today's Chinese floating population are completely different from those of traditional vagrants in China's history. During the social transition from pre-industrial society to industrial society, the share of agriculture in the economy shrinks just as the share of industry expands. This transition will eventually bring the majority of China's rural population into the urban areas and the secondary or tertiary sectors. Only through migration will these changes be realised. Hence, China's floating population is both the cause and result of China's industrial transition. In short, today's floating population is a phenomenon related to social and economic transformation, while traditional vagrants throughout China's history are a phenomenon related to disaster and calamities. These two phenomena are qualitatively different and therefore should not be confused.

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<sup>15</sup> This book is a political comment discussing state policies towards China's peasants, intellectuals and economic construction. Among other topics, it spurred a nation-wide debate about the treatment and role of both Chinese intellectuals and rural-urban migrants.

<sup>16</sup> Wang Shan, *Disan zhi yanjing kan Zhongguo* (China in the Third Eye), Taiyuan 1994, pp.26, 28, 62-63.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> China Publishing Bureau ed., *Han Shu* (Annals of the Han Dynasty), Beijing, p.791.

Finally, the statement in the book *Third Eye* that “If there occurs a big social upheaval in China again, unemployed peasants would certainly be active participants and become the main force of destruction” also overlooks the fact that the majority of the floating population retains close social and economic ties to their home villages and farmland. While some stay outside their villages doing business or other work for extended periods of time, most engage in seasonal migration. Data from the 100 Villages Survey on Labour show that in 69 villages in Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian and Hebei, long-term out-migrants only account for 20.7% of the total out-migrants, while the remaining ones are all seasonal migrants.<sup>19</sup> These seasonal migrants keep their property and farmland in the village. They seek work outside the village when their marginal economic contributions at home fall below a certain level. They retain their grain rations at home and are also eligible for state assistance in case of natural disasters. This situation is totally different from the social environment of China’s Ming Dynasty, of which historical record state: “Serious famine was widespread throughout Shaanxi, and Yansui suffered from a shortage of food. Soldiers in Guyuan robbed the local government storehouse...and peasants revolted and were reinforced by other starving people.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, to claim that the contemporary floating population of China is a big powder keg of society is to misconstrue reality.

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<sup>19</sup> Yu Dechang, *Quanguo baicun laodongli qingkuang diaocha ziliaoji* (Data from the National 100 Village Labor Force Survey), Beijing 1989.

<sup>20</sup> China Publishing Bureau ed., *Ming Shi* (History of the Ming Dynasty), Beijing, Vol. 26, pp.7, 296.