

## How Migrant Labor Is Changing Rural China

One of the most dramatic and noticeable changes in China since the introduction of economic and social reforms in the early 1980s has been the mass migration of peasants from the countryside to urban areas across the country. Itinerant workers have left villages and farms in large numbers to take advantage of opportunities offered in cities by the new, lively climates of the economic boom. Migrant labor has been both the backbone of economic development and the bane of urban governments as they seek to cope with the burden of growing and unsettled populations. The impact of the migration phenomenon on urban areas and the national economy has been an active area of concern for scholars of Chinese society. In this book, Rachel Murphy provides the first study of the new implications of the boomerang effect – the return flows of the migrants, their earnings, and information – that is beginning to change the Chinese countryside.

Murphy's in-depth fieldwork in rural China offers a rich basis for her findings about the impact of migration on many aspects of rural life: inequality; the organization of agricultural production; land transfers; livelihood diversification; spending patterns; house building; marriage; education; the position of women; social stability; and state–society relations. She investigates the little-studied phenomenon of entrepreneurship by returned migrants, their contribution to rural industrialization and rural town construction, and their role in political lobbying. Her analysis focuses on the human experiences and strategies that precipitate shifts in national and local policies for economic development; she also examines the responses of migrants, nonmigrants, and officials to changing circumstances, obstacles, and opportunities. This pioneering study is rich in original source materials and anecdotes and also offers useful, comparative examples from other developing countries.

Rachel Murphy is a British Academy Post-Doctoral Research Fellow in Development Studies and a Research Fellow in Social Sciences at Jesus College, Cambridge.

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RACHEL MURPHY  
*Jesus College, University of Cambridge*



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## Glossary

- cadre** A person in a position of authority, such as a departmental head or a government or Party administrator.
- dagong** The colloquial term for selling one's labor to a boss; to work.
- fen** Unit for the measure of land; 1 mu is divided into 10 fen.
- hukou** The *hukou* registration system divides the population into urban residents and the agricultural population.
- jin** A unit for the measure of weight; a “catty,” where 1 catty = 0.5 kg.
- laoban** Colloquial term for a boss.
- mu** Unit for the measure of land; 1 mu = 0.1647 acres = 0.0667 hectares.
- phoenix** The word *feng*, phoenix, refers to an accomplished or successful person. For example: *feng mao ji mei*, worthy son of a high officer; *qi feng teng jiao*, a rising name in literature.
- population quality** (*renkou suzhi*) A term used by the Chinese state and Chinese policy-makers that incorporates the aspects of (1) eugenics and physical quality, (2) cultural quality (level of education), and (3) ideological quality (politically correct thought and moral behavior). Improving “population quality” is a key component of the national population policy, as enshrined in the slogan “control population increase, improve population quality.”
- rural collectives** Township and village enterprises owned by the rural residents at the township or administrative level.
- xiang** Township. The *xiang* is an administrative unit, a rural jurisdiction at the same level as towns. The townships replaced the former people's communes in 1983. Townships fall under the jurisdiction of counties or city districts and are subdivided into administrative villages.
- xiaokang lou** A “comfortable living building” – that is, a two-story house with sturdy walls and concrete floors and glass in the windows.
- yuan** Unit of Chinese currency, where £1 roughly equals 13 yuan and \$US1 roughly equals 8 yuan (1997 exchange rates).
- zhen** Town. The *zhen* is an administrative unit, a small urban area on the same administrative level as townships. Towns fall under the direct jurisdiction of the county.

- zu** Group. A village is made up of groups, each comprising about 30 to 50 households and 100 to 150 people. The village committee allocates tasks to group leaders who help with disseminating government policy, mediating disputes, improving rural incomes, and organizing labor for the construction of township and village projects. In my fieldwork villages, the clusters of houses in which the members of each *zu* lived were spatially separated, with paddy fields in between, and it could take anywhere from five to fifteen minutes to walk from one *zu* to the next.