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.
I Work in the City

Extracted verses from a poem by Yu Chengda

Another dawn blowing dust in my face
In a strange city, I unload my bundle of dreams.
The skyscrapers are taller and denser than the trees of home.
The bright neon lights are like leaves,
Like drops of acid dew in the moonlight,
Which cannot moisten my chaffed lips . . . .

Here I must bid farewell to a rhythm of life
Which is as slow as the yellow cow plowing.
I must speed ahead as fast as a car
To chase the moment
And build a life from reinforcement steel, and concrete,
And drops of sweat . . . .

At the end of every month,
Neither wind nor rain stops us from going to the post office,
To remit notes of money which are thin but not heavy,
And wipe away the longing and poverty of home . . . .

We will meet without prior appointment
At a common spot with our luggage rolled up
Returning down a familiar path
And our hearts will be clear
That in the distance
Autumn and farming await us.