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“Hey, Coolie!”

Local Migrant Labor

A farmer-turned-laborer pulls a load of scrap metal. Even the slightest gradation required extra strength from behind. Going over a bridge, we backed up traffic until all three pushcarts crawled across.

Life is hard in Guizhou’s countryside, as the lives of my friend’s three uncles in a remote village vividly communicated. Roadless sheer mountains, shallow soil, no running water, backbreaking labor, stripped forests, too many mouths to feed, and little money make life a constant challenge. Even so, people’s ability to live as well as they do—wood-beam houses built into abrupt mountainsides, terraced rice paddies, recently installed electricity, and now even TV sets and rice cookers for some—amazed me every time I made the trek to Splendid Village.

Lack of food and clothes in this community no longer poses a serious threat. Villagers say their biggest need is cash: the means to pay their children’s school tuition, prepare daughters’ dowries, and purchase fertilizer and other crucial items like cooking utensils.

As a result, 90 percent of the men and many of the women in their twenties and thirties have departed Splendid Village for the cities as migrant laborers. Despite the strong attraction, however, urban areas stir apprehension in the hearts and minds of these rural dwellers.

One of First Uncle’s daughters was deceived while looking for a job in coastal Guangdong Province; she ended up getting sold as someone’s bride. She later escaped and found her way home, exhausted but free.¹

Second Uncle’s sister-in-law, who stopped by while we were eating breakfast, lost her husband in a mining blast in neighboring Guangxi Province last year—yet another migrant-labor casualty. Second Uncle says he would be working in a city somewhere, regardless of the risk, were it not for his wife’s frail health. Because of chronic arthritis in her hips and knees, she is incapable of managing the affairs of their home on her own. Some days she cannot even get out of bed. So Second Uncle remains with his family. That neither of them is able to pursue cash outside

the village has led to a painful family decision: Which one of the three children will drop out of school after Spring Festival next month?

Third Uncle works in nearby Duyun, the prefecture capital, pulling a pushcart from dawn to dusk. He happened to drop by while some of us were visiting at his brother's home. Third Uncle speaks to me without raising his eyes. He says he has no other choice but to do this kind of work. He appears ashamed. Yet after expenses he averages 500 yuan a month (U.S. \$60), a bit more than the average annual per capita income for the township! Good money, yes, but he earns every *fen* of it through exhausting labor and the disdain of urbanites. I know—I've seen him around town. Life is difficult in the mountains; but for farmers-turned-migrant laborers in the city, it is bitter, degrading, and dangerous.

Many observers view China's labor migration as primarily a flow from the country's backward hinterland to the more prosperous eastern seaboard. Indeed, it looks this way from afar. But disparity in China cuts most deeply between city and countryside, not coast and interior. Labor on the move responds accordingly.

Most of the farmers I spoke with in Guizhou Province say that more of their fellow villagers seek work in southwest China's urban areas than venture toward the better-known coastal destinations of Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Shanghai. Two-thirds of those who leave Splendid Village, for example, remain in Guizhou's cities.

China is not a country simply tilted east, with all of its labor sliding toward the coast. Rather, urban centers across the land—small, medium, and large—are like raised magnetic points, attracting China's estimated 200 million redundant farmers from fields and mountains as if they were fine metal filings.

Obscure Duyun, a city of 460,000 squeezed along a river valley in the middle of southern Guizhou's mountains, is one of those points. Just ask some of the two thousand pushcart pullers who run its streets each day.

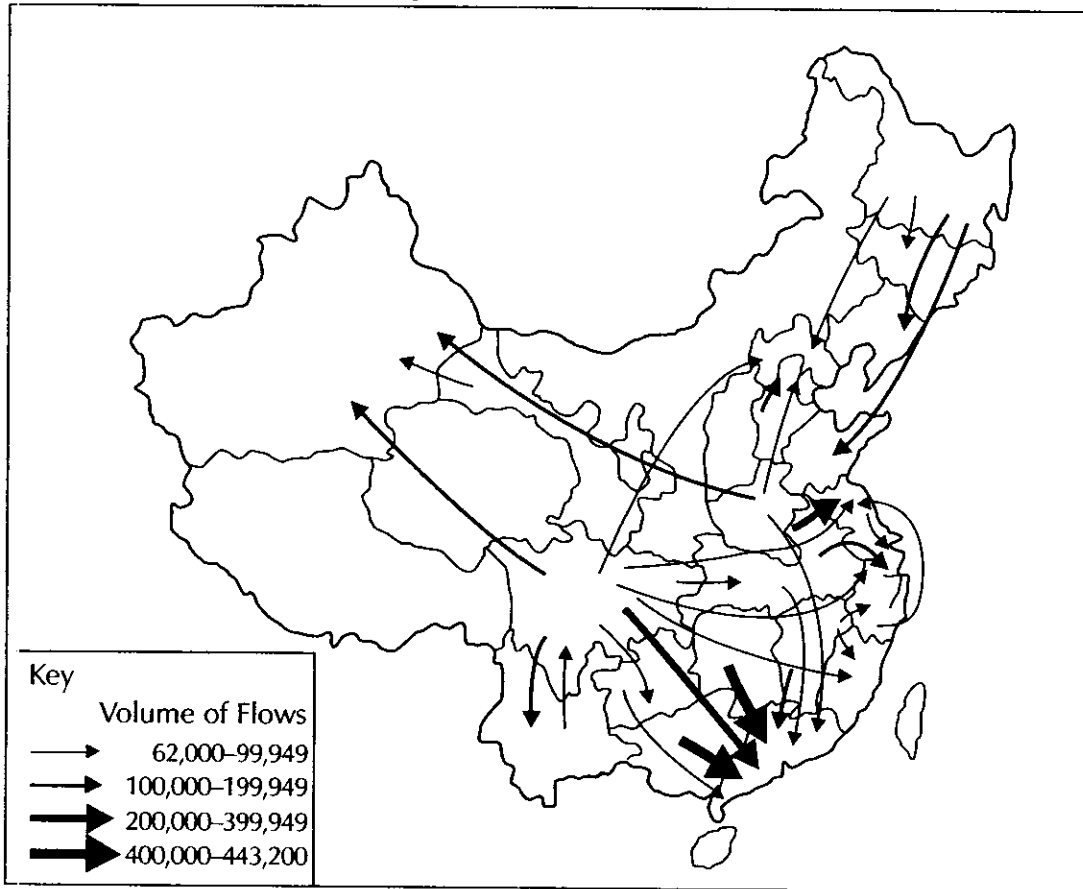
WARMING BY THE FIRE (KAO HUO)

From a distance the parked pushcarts look like idle surfboards lined up on Malibu Beach. It had snowed twice in five days, so I wasn't surprised to see a group of porters huddled around a fire, warming themselves as they passed the frigid January day.

Since returning from visiting with the three uncles just days before, I had become absorbed with the realization that the majority of "migrant" laborers in China probably never even travel beyond their provinces' borders.² Compared with the stereotypical "Overland Chinese"—those laborers who work on the eastern seaboard and remit significant amounts of cash back to their homes in the hinterland—what distinguishes this lesser-known but equally significant group of migrants? Why stay closer to home? Does one give anything up by not going to

Map 4.1 Labor Migration in China, 1990–1995

The Largest 30 Inter-provincial Migration Streams, 1990–1995



Compiled and Prepared by Kam Wing Chan, "Recent Migration in China: Patterns, Trends, and Policies," *Asian Perspective* 25, no. 4 (2001): 137. Source: National Population Sample Survey Office, 1995 *Quanguo 1% Renkou chouyang diaocha ziliao* (Data on 1995 National 1 Percent Population Sample Survey) (Beijing: Tongji Chubanshe, 1997).

Rural Migrant Labor Flows, 1990–1998 (millions)

1990	15.57	1993	34.48	1996	39.84
1991	15.80	1994	39.38	1997	42.13
1992	18.28	1995	30.27	1998	49.15

Kam Wing Chan defines rural migrant labor in several different ways. Here we use his more narrowly defined tally, compiled from State Statistical Bureau surveys, for non-*hukou* migrants (those who do not obtain household registration permits and all of the associated benefits) who work outside their township, excluding those away from home for six months or more and those employed in township and village enterprises (TVEs).

In a 2002 article that demonstrates the rapid rise of China's off-farm labor force, Scott Rozelle and a team of scholars state that by 2000 almost as many of China's 200 million off-farm workers were living away from home as in the village. By including those who remain away from home for longer periods of time, the total shock of migrant labors would be approximately 100 million.

Sources: Kam Wing Chan, "Recent Migration in China: Patterns, Trends, and Policies," *Asian Perspective* 25, no. 4 (2001): 131. Alan de Brauw, Jikuan Huang, Scott Rozelle, Linxiu Zhang, and Yigang Zhang, "China's Rural Labor Markets," *The China Business Review* 29, no. 2 (March–April 2002): 20.

the more prosperous coastal cities? How do urban residents in the interior view this segment of the floating population? What are their pleasures, their hardships?

The next thing I know, I'm in the circle with these guys, chatting about their lives in the city. Surprised, but with typical rural hospitality, they respond warmly to my interest in them. The fire feels good even though they are burning old pieces of board. It turns out they are part of a larger group of thirty that has come from the same home village, about three hours from Duyun. Some are old-timers; one of the young ones has been in the city just three days. Most have been pulling pushcarts for three to five years. They average thirty years in age.

Their huddle occupies a street corner toward the edge of the city. The intersection serves as the terminus for vans and transport trucks that arrive from outlying counties and Guiyang, the provincial capital. The city government has designated their gathering point as an "official" pushcart location—the sign says so. According to the men, it simply means that if their pushcarts are not parked in a row, they may get fined. In addition, porters are required to pay an annual tax of 100 yuan (U.S. \$12), the equivalent of about four days' wages. The porters are not aware, however, of any government services they receive in return.

Besides their strategic location, the group has developed a clientele of sorts with a variety of nearby stores, factories, and an auto-repair garage. The porters haul anything and everything: construction materials, furniture, coal, bags of cement, lumber, sheets of glass, scrap metal, sacks of grain, even slaughtered hogs just off the bus from the countryside. If it can be loaded onto an eight- by three-foot flat space, they can deliver it. The porters average 4 or 5 per load (U.S. \$0.45). The best haul they can remember is a job that paid 30 yuan; it was a heavy delivery that had to go a long way. After expenses, which are minimal (30 yuan for rent and 100 yuan for food), each porter clears between 300 and 500 yuan (U.S. \$37–\$45) a month. Compared to the cash available at home, this is a significant sum.

As we speak, an occasional request comes: "*Ban che* [pushcart]!" But they may as well have been calling, "Hey, coolie!" One of the men hops up from around the fire and is off to the job. The circle tightens and expands as porters come and go.

"Why did you all leave home in the first place?"

"We're too poor. There's no money back there."

"Who takes care of your fields and family while you are gone?"

"We all have family members who look after things and do the work. If an emergency comes up, we are not far away."

"How often do you return home?"

"Spring Festival, planting, harvest, . . . about four or five times a year."

"Why didn't you go to the coast to work? Isn't the money better there?"

"The money's better, yes, but the risk is greater. It's much more dangerous there than here, and here is already bad enough. Plus, like we said, we're closer to our village and it's much easier to return home."

“What do you enjoy most about working here in the city?” I ask to see their reaction to something they probably don’t think about very often: pleasure.

No response. I don’t fill the silence. Finally, one of them says, “Full stomachs.”

“And the hardest thing?”

The answer comes more quickly: “City people look down at us. We occupy the bottom of society.”

“Why?”

“Because we’re from the countryside. The work we do is dirty.”

Among the circle, three do most of the speaking; the others just seem to take it all in. One man in particular, an older man about fifty years of age, with a weathered, unshaven face, emerges as the group’s spokesman. He’s the veteran and has lived in Duyun some thirty years (when he was young, his family moved from the countryside under special circumstances). He points to a shoddy two-story brick structure across the road. “That’s my home. My wife, children, and I live there.”

But originally, he’s from the same village as the others.

At some point in the morning conversation, a cute little girl runs up to him from across the street.

“This is my daughter. Actually, she’s adopted.”

“What’s her name?” I ask, as we squeeze her inside the circle so she can enjoy the warmth.

“Tang Lujian. *Lu juan* means ‘flower by the road.’ We found her as a baby, abandoned along the street in front of our house.”

Jackpot! He and I have the same last name: Tang.

“We’re *jiamen* [relatives]!” Lao Tang declares to all. Family runs deep in China, even with adopted foreigners like me.

“We built the Tang Dynasty,” he earnestly says to me, now holding my hand, “but our family name is in decline. There are very few of us left in Duyun. We’ve got to stick together.”

Very pleased, but unable to reciprocate his fervor, I switch the conversation back to the reason I first approached the group: “I’m quite interested in your work, both because it enables you to earn cash for your families back home and because of your contribution to the welfare of this city. How else would the city people transport their things—like furniture, new refrigerators, and television sets—around town?”

As I complete my sentence, a young rural woman with a scarf tied around her head strides by, balancing a shoulder pole with a stack of charcoaled sticks fastened to each end. Without telling the guys what I am doing, I stand up and shout, “*Mutan* [charcoal]!” After paying the woman, I instruct her to drop her load over by the circle.³ When they realize what is happening, the men give a shout of “Hurrah!” We then settle back in around our upgraded fire.

Each day over the better part of a week, I frequented the porters’ huddle. I’d sit for a while, chat, warm up, and then head on. I also walked the streets of Duyun,

observing pushcarts and pondering this integral segment of the local migrant labor population.

One day, I return, determined to do more than talk. I want to experience a bit of their work firsthand. The fire is already warm by the time I arrive.

“What is the most effective way to find work as a pushcart puller?”

“You can roam or you can park yourself outside a store and hope that someone makes a purchase while you are standing there, but by far the best way to make money is to have a good relationship with a store owner or person at a factory who will direct work to you.”

“What’s the worse thing that has happened to you all out here?”

“We’ve had guys killed. Cars drive too fast and don’t pay attention.”

On this day there are just half a dozen of us gathered around the fire. It’s still quite cold. Someone walks up and asks for a porter to haul something down the street.

“How much?” asks Lao Tang.

“Two yuan.”

The men laugh off the offer and turn back to the fire.

Fifteen minutes later another call comes—“*Ban che!*” A man, whom they seem quite familiar with, dismounts his bicycle and says something about hauling scrap metal.

“How many of us do you need?”

“Three.”

“How much per cart?”

“Twenty yuan for three carts.”

“Fifteen per cart.”

They settle on ten yuan a cart. Three men hop up; Old Tang is one of them. I follow. We head toward an auto-repair garage that specializes in trucks. Several tons of rusted metal from wrecked trucks need to be hauled away to a man’s scrap shop. They load each pushcart, piece by piece, occasionally checking to make sure the stack of strewn metal is balanced by lifting the cart’s handles.

After about an hour, all three loads—about a half-ton each—are ready to go. We pull out of the factory compound and onto the main road. Even the slightest gradation requires all four of us to help: one in front pulling, three straining from behind. Fortunately, most of the route is level. We arrive at our destination forty-five minutes later.

Subcultures, whether Washington, D.C.’s homeless population or Beijing’s princelings, have their distinct mores, vocabularies, and common experiences.⁴ In this way, I was struck by the community experienced by the porters who had left the countryside (and their families) to pursue cash in the city. The relationships were especially strong among those from the same hometown or village.

At the same time, I was equally impressed by the extent to which urban dwellers

look down on porters—for that matter, on all laborers who come from the countryside.

EVERY GRAIN OF RICE . . .

“Dirty” is the first word used by a young urban woman when I ask her about migrant laborers in Duyun city. “Of course, though, I don’t feel that way,” she adds, when she sees the look on my face.

“When we were children,” she explains, “our parents often told us that if we didn’t study hard, we would end up like them, working on the streets.”

At the same time, urban kindergarten children memorize a Tang Dynasty poem called *Min Nong* (Compassion for Peasants):

Weeding rice paddies,
while the bright sun shines down from above;
Sweat off their brow drips to the ground below,
mixing with soil and seedlings;
Who knows the toil
that went into each grain of rice that sits on your plate?

Memorized appreciation? Perhaps. Rural laborers construct their buildings, pedicabs cycle them around town, porters transport their burdens, and women laborers polish their shoes, wash their plates, and care for their children. But prejudice runs deep. In the eyes of most urban residents, rural folk are just, well, filthy.

Though the primary ways in which the urban–rural divide was institutionalized in the 1950s—household registration and migration restriction—have been eased or eliminated, they produced a two-caste mindset that remains until today.⁵ The result has produced perhaps China’s greatest wall: little understanding or appreciation between its agricultural and nonagricultural populations. Most rural people I have spoken with seem to have internalized this bigotry. A pervasive inferiority complex expresses itself in frequent self-diminishment, like the rookie porter who told me I would lower my status if we had our photograph taken together.

Even so, as long as cash remains difficult to come by in many of China’s rural regions and as long as the wage difference remains so unbalanced, millions of rural laborers will continue to migrate to the cities, looking for work. How their urban bosses view them is among the least of their concerns.

In the longer term, practically inexhaustible flows of redundant labor from the countryside to China’s cities—coast or interior—must be viewed as a temporary solution to the shortage of cash in the countryside. Both the numbers (approximately 200 million redundant farmers) and the realities of the rural–urban divide are just too dramatic. Market centers must be developed that are more numerous and diverse than simply the urban areas that dot the country.

One obvious need is to promote nonagricultural income-generating alternatives in the countryside. Township and village enterprises (TVEs), for example, brought means of production and capital to the countryside. In this way, TVEs have become an important source for absorbing idle farmers; they have assimilated 27 percent of redundant rural labor nationwide.⁶ But that's primarily in eastern, more prosperous China, where rural areas tend to have better infrastructure, access to markets, and traditions of nonagricultural production. As of 1995, TVEs in western China had produced only 4 percent of the total national value, compared to 63 percent in the east and 33 percent in central China.⁷ The potential is vast for TVE growth in western China. The need is certainly evident. Still, it takes money to make money. Financial institutions, even of the most basic sort, that extend credit to rural residents must be normalized and made more accessible. For even the better-off poor regions of rural Guizhou, however—like Splendid Village—the likelihood of extending credit in any meaningful way seems light-years away.

Equally vital are infrastructure improvements, which are especially slow to reach desperately poor mountainous regions like Guizhou Province. As policy-makers work to improve conditions in the countryside, the continued development of urban areas must not be overlooked either. Cities and towns will continue to attract rural laborers. As these points across the country become increasingly connected into road, railway, and telecommunication grids, they have the potential of stimulating complementary growth in the countryside. In this way, urban-rural relations need not be seen as a contradiction—rather, as mutually dependent. Generations-deep prejudice, however, is difficult to reverse.

In the meantime, as China faces a declining trend in rural incomes and levels of corruption thwart efforts to institutionalize rural residents' ability to gain access to cash at more local levels (especially in towns and townships), the welfare and stability of the countryside will in large part depend on the ability of migrant laborers to earn money in the country's urban areas.⁸

Despite the unsettling reality of overwhelming numbers of migrant laborers, it is encouraging that significant numbers of rural workers prefer to pursue employment near home rather than simply rush to the coast. Coastal urban residents and policy-makers attempting to address rural stability and the countryside's need for cash-generating activities can take heart that the disparity pie in China first slices vertically along the urban-rural gap, not along the horizontal coast-interior divide.

Still, if migrant laborers have no other way to meet their families' needs for cash, they will continue to be drawn to cities in numbers that could potentially overwhelm all of China's urban areas combined. Irresistibly, one recalls Mao Zedong's theory on peasant revolution: "From the countryside surround the city" (*cong nongcun baowei chengshi*).

During the time I spent with pushcart pullers around Duyun, they would often describe their work as *ku li* (literally translated, "bitter labor"). But it was not until

one afternoon that it suddenly struck me: *ku li* sounds like the English word *coolie*. I asked the guys about it. My “distant relative” Lao Tang gave confirmation: “We porters have a long legacy; we are one and the same with the Shanghai dockworkers of old.” Indeed, the men huddled around the fire are China’s modern-day coolies.