



3

One in Fifty Million *On the Rails with China's Migrant Labor*

At a train stop somewhere between Guizhou and Guangzhou my companions opened the window just long enough for me to take this picture of people trying to push their way into the train's doorway. As soon as those in the back of this crowd saw our opened window, they rushed toward us. We were able to close it just before the crowd closed in.

If you want to create wealth in the long-term, plant fruit trees;
If profit in the medium-term, raise animals. But if you need money
now, go to the coast and work.

—Heard around Guizhou Province countryside

Li Wanding spoke with emotion about his role in freeing Guizhou's farmers. Director of Guizhou's Labor Bureau during the 1980s, Li used to lie awake at night, distressed because he knew the province's rural residents did not have enough to eat. And he was responsible for them.

When the Communist Party consolidated power in the 1950s, it implemented an elaborate system of migration restrictions—household registration requirements and rationing—that effectively interrupted almost all free movement of people across the rural–urban divide.

This made existence especially difficult in impoverished regions like Guizhou. Along with occasional government handouts, Guizhou's mountain farmers were given a straightjacket. One size fits all. They could no longer react to hard times—as they had “pre-liberation”—by sending members of their community off to the city in search of employment opportunities. Guizhou's destitute farmers were sealed off behind a locked door.

The result was perhaps the supreme irony of the Chinese revolution—that rural

revolutionaries who were committed to combating urban bias ended up institutionalizing precisely that, in extreme and deep-rooted forms.¹

Then the door sprang open. Li remembers, “The day in the mid-1980s I heard travel restrictions had relaxed, I knew instantly this was the answer. I began to encourage local governments to send their people out, to leave their villages for the cities where they could find cash.”

The freeing of China’s farmers happened simultaneously with perhaps the most dramatic economic growth in world history. In post-Mao China, Deng Xiaoping’s reforms stimulated growth that doubled the country’s per-capita gross domestic product *two times* between 1978 and 1996. Compare that to the shortest length of time it took other countries to double their per capita gross domestic product *just one time*: Britain, 58 years (between 1780 and 1838); the United States, 47 years (between 1839 and 1886); and Japan, 34 years (between 1885 and 1919).²

Millions were drawn to China’s cities by the “pull” of urban income levels, convenient lifestyles, and strong labor demand for urban construction and factory production, combined with the “push” of rural poverty, scarcity of cultivable land, surplus labor (currently estimated at 200 million farmers!), the low social status of agricultural work, and unfavorable government policy.³ By 1998, a conservative figure of 50 million farmers made up the migrant labor force, though estimates range as high as one hundred million.⁴

Director Li had requested to meet with me because he had read about my travels with Guizhou’s migrant-labor army. As I recalled my experience to Li, I joked that I had been one of the lucky ones: I had successfully competed with several hundred migrant laborers for a seat on train No. 488 for its thirty-five-hour journey from Guizhou to China’s coast. It was just a few days after Chinese New Year, the most important holiday of the year, and my travel companions were returning to work after two weeks at home with family and friends. My comrades and I stood, squatted, and sat together as the train crawled through the mountains of Guizhou Province, over its 1,600-kilometer route toward the fertile farmland and wealthy cities of Guangdong Province.

Despite increased mobility, home remains an important part of migrant workers’ emotional makeup and is central to their sense of responsibility. The result is a fascinating phenomenon before and after Chinese New Year each year: millions upon millions of people on the move—crowded into buses, trains, and planes to celebrate the holiday at home and then flowing back to the coast to continue or search for work.

In order to form my own opinions on the role and prospects of China’s migrant labor, I had decided that the best place to begin was not in books, newspaper articles, or interviews with government officials, but rather as part of this mighty annual migration on a piece of hard-fought-for bench.

As I stood outside the Duyun train station, enjoying what would probably be the last breaths of fresh air I would have for two days, I noticed a steady but quiet stream of people, baggage in hand, filing through the narrow door of the train

station's tearoom. Naturally curious, I walked over to see what was happening. Two yuan (U.S. 25 cents) for a head start on the rest of the masses, a train attendant announced at the door. I dished out the cash and slipped in the entrance with the others. There in the dimly lit, barlike atmosphere stood at least one hundred people crowded toward a door on the other side of the room that would eventually open onto the platform side of the building.

Imagine the starting gates at the Kentucky Derby, with only one difference: all of the horses have to fit through one gate at the jingle of the starting bell. Once the gate opens, anything goes. And though no prize money is at stake, the difference between getting to sit on a bench for thirty-five hours and having to stand or squat is enough incentive to muster every ounce of energy available, and then some.

Trains in China normally have three classes of tickets: soft-sleeper (a closed compartment with two soft bunk beds), hard-sleeper (rows of three-level bunk beds), and hard seat (rows of benches, each pair facing each other). My ticket read "hard, open seating." The number of tickets sold for soft-sleeper and hard-sleeper class is controlled; each ticket has an assigned bed. Hard-seat tickets, however, are often sold without limit, especially when large numbers of people travel. The result is a wild free-for-all. My hard-seat ticket for the thirty-five-hour, 1,600-kilometer journey cost 88 yuan, or about U.S. \$10.

After about twenty minutes of waiting in the dark, crowded silence, the door cracked open and daylight suddenly shone into the room. The bell had sounded. After initial gridlock, the physics of the mass convergence of flesh began to spit people through the doorway. After almost losing my left arm, I, too, popped into the daylight of the train platform. Once through the door, to my surprise and temporary relief, we were immediately forced into a single-file line and led by train security officers toward the final car, an empty one provided for those in Duyun headed to Guangzhou (train No. 488 had originated four hours up-rail in Guiyang). The rest of the cars already overflowed with people.

Though I was about 40th in the single-file line of roughly 250 and knew there were at least 100 seats in the car, I was suspicious of the fragile order (long, single-file lines are rare in China). The officers had difficulty forcing back the occasional traveler who broke from the ranks in an attempt to get ahead. Though I and those in front and in back of me walked slowly and remained in line, internally I, like everyone else, was coiled like a spring, fully prepared to join a rush at the train door.

Order was preserved—that is, until the single-file line was released into the car. As soon as I was up the steps and had turned down the aisle, I confronted a surprise burst of activity: people scrambled back and forth, claiming seats, throwing luggage onto the racks above, blocking others from their space. As I began to run down the aisle, a stout man wearing a black leather jacket and wire-rim glasses waved me over: "Hey! Hey! Hey! You sit here," he yelled above the pandemonium as he stood blocking a two-seat bench. "I'm saving this other one for my little brother.

You sit in this seat; my brother will sit in this one." I threw my bag in the rack above and sat down.

Though the chaos continued around me, every competitive nerve in my body finally relaxed. When the man's little brother arrived and sat down, big brother slipped out through the train's window, lowering himself onto the gravel below. Now I could focus on the next tasks at hand: sitting for thirty-five hours, getting to know those around me, and considering up close migrant labor's role in the unfolding reality of China's hinterland.

Has migrant labor contributed to China's growth, or is it simply a nuisance, an unwelcome result of reform? Does migrant labor threaten or promote social stability? Does migrant labor leave those left behind poorer, or does it transfer wealth to China's backward regions? Is migrant labor divisive, or does it help integrate a country characterized by pockets of prosperity in the cities and special economic zones? What role should the government play in this otherwise spontaneous flow of human resources?⁵ Obviously, the answers to these questions, especially the views of government leaders, create very different policy responses to this unusual population group—growing and on the move—which outnumber the combined populations of Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, and Guangzhou. Lots to think about; lots of time to think.

Right on schedule, the train began to roll down the tracks at 1:11 P.M. Our car, now full of at least three times as many people as the number of seats, began to settle in. As in elementary school days when I traded lunch-bag goodies for others' treats, the first several hours of the ride involved an occasional offer of what each of us sitting in our little group had packed for the long journey: hard-boiled tea-eggs, sunflower seeds, dried fruit, cigarettes, candy, and every form of cured pork imaginable. Some fell asleep, decks of cards were shuffled, magazines and newspapers were exchanged, conversations began. The entire car, divided naturally into groups of four to seven people by the position of the benches, began to get acquainted.

A rare gleam of sunshine lit up the blue sky, and fields of yellow rapeseed blossoms provided a delightful foreground to Guizhou's beautiful mountains. Everyone was fresh; conversation was lively. Even those left standing and squatting in the aisles seemed upbeat.

It turned out that many of those sitting around me were "off-post," or laid-off, factory workers headed for the coast to look for a way to support their families. Directly across from me sat a quiet, self-confident man, about thirty years old, who was returning to his job in a Shenzhen electronics factory, a position he had held for a number of years. The annual journey back to Duyun to see his wife and daughter, for him, was no major ordeal. He was used to it. One of the first things he told me, however, was that people on this train won't tell you, and you can't see it on their faces, but they're scared to death. They fear the unknown that lies ahead of them. Most of them don't know where they are going.

Sitting next to him was his twenty-year-old companion, a friendly, diminutive,

and hyper chap. The young fellow enjoyed singing along with the pop music that floated through the train's speakers. He also seemed to take pleasure in climbing across the tops of the benches in his stocking feet. The failing state enterprise he worked for in Duyun could not compete with his hopes for wealth on the coast. This was his first trip to Guangdong.

Another young man, twenty-four years old, who shared my bench with me, had recently been laid off from his Duyun factory job. He was going to see his other brother, who worked in Dongguan, a city near Guangzhou filled with export-targeted manufacturing plants. He hoped his brother could help him land a job.

A woman on the bench behind me was interested to know why I as a foreigner would travel hard-seat class. "Why not at least go hard-sleeper?" she asked. "It's only one hundred yuan (U.S. \$12) more."

"If I traveled hard-sleeper," I said loud enough for all of my traveling companions to hear, "I would not have the chance to meet nice folks like you all. And you? Why are you traveling hard-seat?"

"I used to work for a state-owned children's clothes factory in Duyun, but left because it could no longer pay my wages. I'm headed for Shenzhen."

"What would be your ideal kind of work?" I asked.

"*Jiating funu* [housewife]," she joked, "but I'd settle to be someone's maid."

I shouldn't have been surprised that among those I was meeting were laid-off urban factory workers, but I was. I had always imagined migrant labor as folks from the agricultural countryside, part of China's army of surplus rural labor.

As the train rumbled down the tracks, I began to realize that, with the slow-motion collapse of much of China's state-owned sector, traditional migrant labor is absorbing a new type of person: urban factory workers from across the country, some skilled and others not, who are joining the search for wealth in Chinese cities and special economic zones. One fellow on the train told me that in Duyun, a city of 460,000 that was developed around state-owned industry, at least 30,000 people have been laid off, 80 percent of whom have left Duyun to look for work on the coast. This is just a drop in the bucket of the officially estimated 30 million laid off across the country who are being forced to find food outside the "iron rice bowl."

After my dinner (a plastic bowl of instant noodles), I showed the folks around me my one-and-only card trick—a real showstopper. While I was in the middle of my performance, a teenage girl and a boy emerged through the crowd. The boy was very shy and did not speak. The girl, giggling between phrases, asked on his behalf if I would be willing to take a picture of the boy and his four friends. They had noticed my camera. I was in the middle of my card trick and it was already late, so I told them I would come find them the next day. They told me they had seats about halfway down the next car.

The night was miserable. By 11 P.M. I had already been sitting for ten hours. Any discomfort to that point had been diverted by snacks, reading, card games, and, most of all, fascinating conversation. But now, no matter how much I shifted

around in my seat, I could not get comfortable. My back ached. My neck was stiff. My buddies—some asleep, some staring in a daze—and I leaned on each other. A man I had not even spoken with, who squatted pitifully beside my bench, rested his head against my thigh, sound asleep. But worst of all, the air inside the car was stifling. The sour stench of urine from the bathroom, mixed with an oppressive haze of cigarette smoke, hung like smog. Trash had begun to build up in the aisles and under the seats. If I hadn't had to breathe, I wouldn't have.

Like a computer in suspend mode, my mind slipped into a fog as I sat shifting back and forth, in and out of sleep. All I could think of, beyond my own physical discomfort, was how much I respected these people for what they were going through just to make ends meet.

By morning's light we had entered Hunan Province. The weather had turned cold and rainy. At most stops we couldn't open our window, fearing that people outside, trying to get on the train, would force their way through our window.

By lunchtime, we were nearly twenty-four hours into the trip. I no longer was a researcher seeking to understand what my fellow travelers were experiencing. By this time in the journey, I, like them, was just trying to get through the trip. A monstrous headache descended. I felt like a fish lying on the ground, out of water—gills moving gently up and down, gasping for life. I began to feel sick.

To get my mind off my discomfort, I decided to visit the teenagers who had asked for a picture the night before. I asked the man who had been leaning on me for most of the previous twelve hours to hold my seat. He was glad for the chance to sit down. As I came into view, the boys seemed delighted to see me. They cleared a space on their bench, pulled out some home-cured ham strips, and asked me to do my card trick again. As I shuffled the deck, I asked them why they had decided to leave home.

"We're from the countryside in northeast Guizhou; it's very poor there. We want to come out, earn some money, and see what we can learn. Who knows what will happen? But we can't stay at home."

I have read the literature that evaluates migrant labor—like these teenagers—as a social, economic, and political threat.⁶ Since they form a group outside the system, it is argued, there is no way to organize or control these people. Whether for family-planning purposes, concern over rising crime, or just the menace of the unemployed sleeping in the streets, migrant labor lives beyond the reach of the state. Others also cite migrant labor's vulnerability to exploitation and the lack of basic social services available to them, especially health care. Needless to say, it doesn't take much imagination to envision a chaotic drama of fifty million jobless migrant laborers swamping China's cities.

The teenagers' attitudes fascinated me. They certainly did not consider themselves a threat. They were attracted to, not envious of, the relative wealth of the coast—a part of China they had seen only on television. And as a group of five buddies, traveling together for their first time away from home, they did not seem afraid.

From the way they talked about working the stony fields back home, these young men seemed to represent the views of a large number of China's rural laborers who consider agriculture to be an unprofitable, unattractive, and even redundant economic activity. In the rural regions of China's interior where there are few nonagricultural activities, migration is often seen as the only way out. After all, if one family member leaves home—like these young middle-school dropouts—it means one less mouth to feed. And if the migrant is able to land a job, even the dirtiest of manual-labor jobs, he earns on average in *one month* what he would earn in an *entire year* at home. In this way, one family member who has gone to the coast may be able to support an entire family back in China's rural interior.

More and more government officials view migrant labor as a normal consequence of economic reform, which, while loosening control of China's countryside through the breakup of the commune system, encourages some areas and some people of China to prosper first (namely, coastal cities and special economic zones).⁷ As a de facto component of government policy, therefore, it is only natural that large numbers of people would flow from the less- to the more-developed areas of the country. The challenges of migrant labor are indeed very real. The contributions the laborers make, however, to both the coastal areas and to their home regions outweigh the costs and risks.

And while migrant labor can be viewed as a threat to stability, an equally persuasive logic argues that migrant workers are the thread that keeps a rapidly transforming China from ripping apart. Migrant labor serves both to relieve pressure from the country's impoverished regions and to transfer resources and skills back to those areas. When I put the "stability" question to a Guizhou government official who works in Shenzhen, he responded immediately with an interesting comparison: the threat of starving North Korea that looms over South Korea. "If North Koreans could travel to South Korea as migrant labor," he said, "the problem of instability on the Korean peninsula would be solved." His analogy is obviously flawed, but I got his point. The general freedom Chinese labor has had to pursue wealth, regardless of where it may be found, has alleviated what would otherwise be unbearable pressure, and certain instability, in China's impoverished interior regions.

In addition, much of China's economic growth has been built by the callused hands and sweat of migrant labor. In urban areas, for instance, migrant labor often does the dirty work that locals would never touch. China's powerful export market, as well, has been underwritten by the inexpensive and willing labor of those from the interior.

Like the powerful force of Overseas Chinese—ethnic Chinese who live outside China but who contribute billions in gifts and investment to their ancestral homelands each year—China's *Overland Chinese* (my term for the millions of migrant laborers who work on the coast but who remit significant amounts of cash to their

homes in the interior) play an important role in their local economies. A Guizhou official told me that in 1997, migrant laborers from Guizhou remitted five billion yuan (U.S. \$600 million) to family members back home. Equivalent to 10 percent of the province's gross domestic product, the figure equals Guizhou's entire annual local-government revenue. In this regard, one of the most important contributions made by migrant labor is the ability to channel resources directly into the hands of individual families in China's poor interior, something government bureaucracies and aid programs seem to have great difficulty doing.

The Guizhou *Economic Daily* reported the story of thirty migrant laborers, all from the same village in Guizhou but who work in different locations on China's coast, who recently formed an "association" to support their home village.⁸ Most funds from migrant labor are remitted directly to family members and do not contribute to village services like education and health care. Nevertheless, the example illustrates the Overseas Chinese-like role that migrant labor plays. To become a member of the association, each worker must agree to do three things: First, learn one skill he or she can share with fellow-villagers; second, provide at least one piece of information to the village regarding work conditions on the coast; and, third, provide an annual donation to the village.

The contribution made by migrant laborers to their home villages is, therefore, not just monetary. Several migrant laborers told me, as we traveled down the tracks, that beyond the funds remitted home, they believe their role is to open their family's minds to new ways of doing things and to try to keep their village from being satisfied with simply having enough clothes to wear and food to eat. In fact, many migrant laborers, after a few years of "eating bitterness" on the coast, wake up to realize that they could be their own boss back home, using the skills they have learned.

As our train crossed from Hunan into Guangdong Province, even though we were at least four hours from our destination, everyone seemed renewed by the reality that we were nearing the end of the trip. Groans changed to humming, card playing started back up, life came back to peoples' faces, conversation picked up. Even my headache went away. Four hours late, we finally arrived at the Guangzhou train station at midnight. After thirty-five hours crowded together, we sent each other into the night with sincere wishes for success and safety.

The labor that surges from China's interior to the coast serves as a conduit to transfer resources, skills, and experience from wealthier areas back home. And while the interior-to-coast flow of labor is the most dramatic illustration of the response to the eased travel restrictions of the 1980s, the longer I lived in Guizhou the more I came to realize that significant numbers of the province's farmers opt to forgo the long trip to the coast. More and more, it appears they are choosing the benefits of work in nearby locations a few hours from their home villages in one of the province's nine cities, like Guiyang, Zunyi, Duyun, and Anshun.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING,
CHAPTERS 3 AND 4**

- Chan, Anita. "The Culture of Survival: Lives of Migrant Workers through the Prism of Private Letters." Pp. 163–88, in *Popular China: Unofficial Culture in a Globalizing Society*, edited by Perry Link, Richard P. Madsen, and Paul G. Pickowicz. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002.
- Chan, Kam Wing. "Recent Migration in China: Patterns, Trends, and Policies." *Asian Perspective* 25, no. 4 (2001): 127–55.
- Li, Cheng. "200 Million Mouths Too Many: China's Surplus Rural Labor." Pp. 111–26, in *Rediscovering China*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997.
- Li, Zhang. *Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and Social Networks within China's Floating Population*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001.
- Solinger, Dorothy J. "China's Floating Population." In *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reforms*, edited by Merle Goldman and Roderick Macfarquhar. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Whyte, Martin King. "City versus Countryside in China's Development." *Problems of Post-Communism* 43, no. 1 (January–February 1996): 9–25.