

Migrant Workers and Local Development

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The migration of young people from the Chinese countryside to cities raises a number of questions about the future of rural and mountainous areas. Will this exodus create deserted areas, without working force and creativity, or will these youth come back to transform and energize their place of origins? Here are a few reflections that come from my experience as an intermediary for developing sourcing of Chinese products by foreign companies. I often say to my clients that the labour cost in China should remain stable in the coming years as there is a large reservoir in China's countryside - though I am starting to wonder whether the supply is so large after all.

I like to discuss with migrant workers at our suppliers' places. Generally speaking, they are happy with their situation even if social safety net is lacking. The typical young migrant worker stays in the city for 3 to 5 years and then returns home for marrying a local woman. I remember the night watchman of a small brushes joint-venture in Tianjin, he was so happy to have found this job: "My life is very comfortable here, I have heating and a shower, and I can eat 3 hot meals a day, my wife is working in the factory during the day when I sleep; in the evening, when the workers are back home, the general manager gives us the opportunity to produce more brushes. I have the chance to be with my wife at night when she sleeps, I look after the factory and can make more brushes, together we get 4 salaries each month probably 20 fold what we would earn in our village; after 3 years I will be back to my hometown near Yan'an, then I can buy the largest cave house of the village with a small plot of arable land and have a quite life with my friends for the rest of my life."

These workers learn a lot and will certainly bring back know-how. I believe that the recent development of Chinese countryside comes from such people. Nearly all of them are going home for each Chinese New Year, and many do not come back afterwards, even if they promised to do so. Only the cleverest ones will go up in the hierarchy or start their own company and stay in the city. The ones who speak English will have a greater chance to stay, and will get far higher pay, these as white collars have few chance to go back.

The employers I meet have more and more difficulties to find workers (more in Guangdong who seem to pay less than in Shanghai area), and some decide to move their factories inland to follow the workmanship. Some of my clients hesitate to purchase from suppliers who require extensive overtime from their workers, but the workers prefer to work more during a short period and get a better pay. I therefore ask myself: why should we consider overtime on a year per year basis? Working double time during three years and then having a 3 years holiday at home might come to the same...

Summing up, migration is a decision taken by an individual within the frame of possibilities offered to him or her. It is also largely a side effect of schooling and development, directly or ... indirectly: The creation of a primary school in a remote village often goes with the introduction of electricity in the village, electricity allowed for the purchase of TV sets, and TV spread the use of Mandarin language, which enabled people to find jobs out of their home place (statistics tell us that still less than half of Chinese people speak correct mandarin!).

The development of local initiative in the countryside, partly due to the coming home of migrant workers, should be progressive and based on local initiative. Tourism is certainly a service industry with much potential, as can be seen in many places of China. Let me give here some examples:

Songpan: the main attraction is a horse team started and developed by a local; they propose horse treks (2 to 15 days) at 100Y/ person/ day all inclusive, one guide will accompany 2 visitors and supply horse, tent & sleeping bag, the team supplies the food.

TLG (Tiger Leaping Gorge) near Lijiang: many simple private inns developed aside the gorge providing food, accommodation and guides. It seems it developed completely from private initiative with the help of some backpackers.

"Nongjiale" in the suburbs of Peking, Shanghai, Chengdu,... designed mainly for town people wishing to spend one week-end enjoying bio fresh food in the countryside, some offering fishing.

Heshun near Tengchong (Yunnan at the border of Burma) is an example of the development of old villages. Heshun is so isolated that it can cater only to Yunnan people. It has 5 to 10 private hotels, many restaurants, it developed some commerce of souvenirs, and reactivated the local customs of which the locals are very proud.

Once again, economic development starts from local developers. Helpers from outside can still organize task forces for support: teaching project management, giving and exchanging ideas, and providing some technical know-how on management and marketing.

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