

# Internal Migration in China – Opportunity or Trap?

## Introduction

Since the 1980s, migration within China has increased considerably along with the economic upturn.<sup>1</sup> It now represents a third of all internal migration worldwide, and is equal to the entirety of international migration.<sup>2</sup> Foreign direct investment and the export orientation of China's economy, a building boom and the revival of the service sector – all these were factors that led to the creation of a great many new jobs in the large conurbations along the east coast of China. These became favored destinations for rural migrant workers, who were looking for alternative sources of income in the face of meager earnings from agriculture. The policy brief provides an overview of central aspects of rural-urban migration in China. The central question is whether and to what extent it offers an opportunity for the poorer rural population of China. In answer to this question we propose, after a brief introduction to the concept of Chinese internal migration, to begin by discussing the various functions of the *hukou* system (registered residency status), which is the institutional foundation of Chinese rural-urban migration. We shall follow this up by describing the characteristics of Chinese internal migration, including specific patterns of migration, areas of employment, regional and gender-specific features and the differences between succeeding generations of migrants. On this basis we shall investigate how Chinese migration and urbanization policy has changed in the light of economic and political priorities since the start of the Chinese policy of reform, and what effects this policy is having on the working and living conditions of rural migrant workers in the cities. In considering future trends, we argue, finally, that although the central government has strategies to achieve a migration-based urbanization that allows for the development of a broadly based middle class, there are numerous obstacles in the path of such development, notably the economically motivated interests of the cities at local level and the significant costs that increased migration is expected to entail.

## Terminology: Migrants, Migrant Workers, Outsiders

The concept of internal migration differs from the general concept of migration in that the latter embraces international

migration across state borders. In China, internal migration most commonly takes the form of migration from the country to the city<sup>3</sup> which is predominantly labor migration.

In speaking of Chinese internal migrants, a variety of different terms are employed: the commonest among these are *liudong renkou* (floating population/migrants, migration population), *nongmingong* (migrant workers, literally 'peasant workers'), *waidiren* or *wailai renkou* (outsiders, external people), *dagongzai* and *dagongmei* (working boys, working girls) and *xin yimin* (new migrants). Recently, there has been a debate in China about whether these various terms could be a source of unfair discrimination. Two further terms are *xin-shengdai nongmingong*, referring to the second generation of migrants, and *yidi wugong ren yuan* (external staff), a 'politically correct' neologism.

Three groups of internal migrants are statistically relevant (i.e. can be counted):

1. Persons who remain for longer than 6 months at a place of residence other than their habitual abode<sup>4</sup>;
2. Persons who hold a temporary residence permit (i.e. anyone who registers with the police at their destination city);
3. Migrant workers (*nongmingong*), who are sub-divided into
  - a) local migrant workers who engage in a non-agricultural occupation within their community, i.e. commuters; and
  - b) migrant workers who work for longer than 6 months outside their permanent place of residence, beyond the administrative border of the community. These are the real migrant workers.

It is difficult to say how many internal migrants there are in China, as often no clear distinction is made between internal migrants in general and migrant workers as a sub-category.

## Background and Outline of the Issue: Urban-Rural Disparity and Registration System (*hukou*)

Of fundamental importance for an understanding of Chinese internal migration is, firstly, the disparity between city and

country (rural-to-urban migration) and, secondly, the rise and changing function of the Chinese system of household registration.

### Urban-Rural Disparity

With the transition to a market economy the income gap between urban and rural income widened from 2.2:1 in the 1980s to 3.6:1 at the start of the 21st century. But even in the Mao era there was an income gap between city and country. The background was a nationwide land reform in the early 1950s that led to a dual system of rural and urban households. Every household had to decide between two options: Rural households were entitled to a plot of land;<sup>5</sup> urban households were entitled to a job, subsidized housing, access to urban educational facilities and inclusion in a system of health care and pension provision. With the introduction of the planned economy (1953) it very quickly became clear that comprehensive provision for the urban population (which at this period constituted no more than 15% of the Chinese population) could only be achieved through a transfer of resources from the country to the cities and would be at the expense of the peasants. There were many instances of spontaneous<sup>6</sup> migration from the country to the city, although the authorities soon put a stop to this.

### The *Hukou* System

Against this background, in 1958 a system of household registration was set up, which codified the distinction between urban and rural households. Since that time the *hukou* system has had essentially four functions<sup>7</sup>:

First, it acts as a residents' registration system. That is nothing special in itself: China already had a registration system before the introduction of the *hukou* system and other countries have similar systems for the registration of residents.

Second, it forms the basis for the allocation of resources and subsidies to selected groups of the population, chiefly city dwellers. In this second function the *hukou* system, with its rationing of food and other daily necessities, was particularly important in the Mao era of the 1950s to 1970s and was an effective deterrent to migration. The abolition of rationing and the transition to a market economy in the 1990s partially deprived it of this function. However, since the urban-rural disparity still exists, and, if anything, has become greater, the *hukou* system has retained its function as an instrument for regulating access to public goods, entitlements, subsidies and other privileges, although this is now happening in an environment characterized by the entrepreneurial activity of cities in competition with each other.

Third, it is designed to regulate internal migration and avoid the emergence of slums in China's big cities and megacities. The *hukou* system has undergone a change in its third function too. Whereas in the early days of the Chinese reform policy at the beginning of the 1980s the top pri-

ority was to put a stop to migration, since the 1990s the aim has been to direct migrants toward small and medium-sized towns and cities, so as to guard against the development of slums and prevent the 'Latin Americanization' of Chinese cities.

Fourth, it functions as a system for the surveillance and social control of selected target groups (e.g. dissidents) that are believed to pose a threat to political stability. This function only applies to a relatively small number of population groups. With respect to internal migration, this fourth function was particularly important from 1995 to 2003, when migrants with no income, no home and no papers were picked up from the streets and taken to detention centers pending expulsion.<sup>8</sup>

Due to altered circumstances, the second and third functions (resource allocation and regulation of migration) have each undergone a change and are now in conflict with each other: Whereas on the one hand migrants are supposed to be directed toward smaller towns, these towns do not have the necessary resources to attract them. By contrast, the big cities, although rich in resources, are reluctant to assume the costs entailed by a large number of migrants, fearing that their own competitiveness would thereby be adversely affected. In 2001 and 2005 these deep-seated problems of resource distribution caused two rather more comprehensive attempts at fundamental reform or abolition of the *hukou* system to founder.<sup>9</sup> The cities show little inclination to share their assets and have recently come under increasing financial pressure owing to their mounting debt. In spite of the ongoing rhetoric about reform of the *hukou* system, apart from selected reform provinces and individual experiments like those in the cities of Zhengzhou (Henan) and Chengdu (Sichuan) (cf. section on Migration and Urbanization Policy), a solution to the problem is not yet in sight.

## Patterns of Migration: Rural-Urban and Labor Migration Predominate

### Number of Internal Migrants

Internal migration in China is predominantly rural-to-urban migration and is accompanied by a rapid process of urbanization. In 2011 – for the first time in Chinese history – more than half the Chinese population were living in cities. According to projections by the Development Research Center, which comes directly under the Chinese State Council, by the year 2020 the rate of urbanization will have reached 60%.<sup>10</sup> Out of a total population of 1.34 billion, according to the 2010 census, 666 million (or 49.7%) were city dwellers and 674 million (or 50.3%) were country dwellers. In 2010, the total number of internal migrants, that is, those who remained for longer than 6 months at a residence other than their habitual place of abode, amounted to 221 million. In comparison with the previous census in the year 2000 (117 million), this was almost a doubling of the number of internal migrants.<sup>11</sup>

About three quarters of Chinese internal migration is labor migration.<sup>12</sup> According to the National Bureau of Statistics, in the year 2011 there were, in total, 253 million migrant workers (*nongmingong*); if we discount local commuters, that leaves 159 million migrant workers who live and work away from their permanent place of residence for long periods. Of these, 126 million were on their own and 33 million (21%) were accompanied by their families. The overwhelming majority of the migrant workers (95%) were working as paid employees.

### Destinations of Labor Migrants

The country's principal metropolitan areas and conurbations are the main centers of attraction for rural migrant workers. In 2009, 63% of them were employed in large and medium-sized cities – 9% of them in municipalities<sup>13</sup>, 20% in provincial capitals and 34% in cities at the level of prefectures.<sup>14</sup> Since the 1990s the direction of the migration flows has remained unchanged: the destinations are the megacity regions in the Pearl River Delta, Shanghai, the Yangtze Delta and the Beijing/Tianjin region. The principal provinces of immigration are Guangdong, Zhejiang, Jiangsu and Shandong. There are smaller migration flows in the opposite direction, e.g. to Lhasa or to Xinjiang for the cotton harvest. The Chinese policy of tending to invest more heavily in the western regions of

the country also has some influence on the direction of migration flows. Currently, for example, production sites are being moved from the coast to inland locations. As a consequence, central Chinese provinces like Hunan, Hubei and Sichuan, i.e. classic provinces of emigration, could retain more of their workers. The rapidly growing megacities of inland China could also become more attractive. Cities such as Xi'an, Kunming, Urumqi and Harbin are considered to be the next candidates for expansion to megacities (cf. figure on page 5).

Despite the presence of so many rural migrant workers, since around 2004 there has been a shortage of labor in the destination regions of internal migration. This has led to a debate among experts about whether the reservoir of cheap rural labor in China is exhausted and a phase of rising wages has begun, or whether other causes are more significant (e.g. non-payment of wages or excessively low wages, the fear of accidents at work or improved living conditions in the countryside itself).

### Areas of Employment: Regional and Gender-Specific Differences

The majority of migrant workers are employed in the manufacturing industry and work predominantly in the developed regions along the east coast (see Table 1). Employment in the construction industry follows in second place but is comparatively scarce in the eastern regions as, on account of the threat of a property bubble, investment is sluggish and consequently job opportunities in this sector are limited. This is not the case in the provinces of central China nor, in particular, the western provinces. Accordingly, more migrants are employed in the construction sector in these regions than along the east coast of China. These figures are also reflected in the Chinese government's policy of investing more heavily in the infrastructure of the inland provinces.

At least three differences between male and female migration should be highlighted: (1) concentration in particular areas of employment. Whereas it is predominantly men that work in the construction industry, in the export industry and in the catering and service areas many young women are also employed. (2) Roughly the same number of men and women migrate, but fewer female than male migrants are in an employment situation. The ratio of male to female migrants was (2009) 50.4% to 49.6%.<sup>18</sup> In 2009, altogether 78.6% of 16 to 59-year-old migrants were in employment. For the men the figure was 92.5%, while for the women it was 65.5%; more than a quarter of them were housewives. (3) On aver-



**Table 1 - Areas of Employment of Rural Migrant Workers in China by Regions in % (2011)**

Areas of Employment:	Total	Eastern Regions <sup>15</sup>	Central Chinese Regions <sup>16</sup>	Western Regions <sup>17</sup>
Manufacturing industry	36.0	44.8	23.0	15.4
Construction industry	17.7	13.4	24.7	27.4
Transportation, communications, warehousing and mail	6.6	5.5	8.1	9.3
Wholesale and retail	10.1	8.7	13.1	12.5
Hotel and catering	5.3	4.5	5.9	7.3
Service industry	12.2	12.3	11.4	12.2

Source: [http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjfx/fxbg/t20120427\\_402801903.htm](http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjfx/fxbg/t20120427_402801903.htm), accessed 6-24-2012

age, the female migrant workers are younger than their male counterparts. Fewer young women take up paid employment than young men, but when they do, they start at an earlier age. Thus there are more women than men in the age cohorts 15-19, 20-24 and 25-29; in the higher age cohorts the reverse is the case.<sup>19</sup>

## A Second Generation of Migrants: New Aspirations

A second generation of migrants, who were born in the 1980s and 1990s, has now grown up. Those who belong to this generation not only have fewer ties to their place of origin than the first generation (whether because as children of migrant families they grew up in cities, or because although they grew up in the country they themselves have had no experience whatsoever of agriculture), they also (thanks to their access to new media and the stories told by other migrants) are much more strongly oriented toward the city in their whole lifestyle. On the other hand, the young migrants often lack the financial means and (because of the rural *hukou*) other forms of support (e.g. inclusion in urban systems of social security) that would enable them to live in the cities for any length of time and raise a family of their own there. For while the migrants may find work in the urban centers, they face very high real estate prices there. For this second generation, rural-to-urban migration threatens to become a trap, as it denies them any prospect of return to the country yet does not offer them the chance of long-term integration in the city. More and more villages are inhabited only by people who are elderly or otherwise incapable of earning a living, or by children whose parents are earning money in the cities. On the one hand, from the point of view of the young migrants there is no longer any real alternative to urban life, while on the other hand they are only 'recognized' as cheap labor, not as young people who want to – and must – secure a livelihood for themselves. The situation is made more complicated by the institution of marriage, which, in China, particularly in the country, is still a matter between families. Numerous unwritten laws set the standards (which are high) for wedding celebrations and presents. For example, the bridegroom is expected to bring a house into the marriage. So it sometimes happens that men build houses in the country in order to find a wife, only for the houses to stand empty because both husband and wife work in the city. However, if

they become pregnant, the women usually return home, as the cost of giving birth in the cities is too high and mother and child can be better looked after in the family environment.

There is another section of the generation born in the 1980s and 1990s that finds itself in a similarly hopeless, or at least problematical, situation to that of the second generation of migrants, namely, young university graduates with a rural *hukou*: on the one hand they would like to remain in the big cities after graduation, while on the other hand they are not part of the social networks that would enable them to make a career for themselves and perhaps be appointed to one of the coveted government positions

which – unlike jobs in the private sector – offer attractive working conditions, higher salaries and better prospects. Like the majority of migrants, these university graduates live and work within the informal sector, although, because of their educational qualifications, they see themselves as representatives of the middle class.

## Migration and Urbanization Policy: Priority of Economic Growth

Ever since the beginning of the reform process introduced in the late 1970s by Deng Xiaoping, the direction of Chinese migration and urbanization policy has been determined by the need to promote economic growth. This has led to a fundamental shift in the attitude toward rural-to-urban migration. After having been directed exclusively toward keeping migration under control, the policy gradually became more relaxed and flexible and measures were even taken to encourage migration in some circumstances. This change in migration policy can be roughly divided into six phases<sup>20</sup>:

### Ban on Migration (1979-83)

The introduction of mechanisms of competition to the Chinese economy sent out contradictory signals: Incentives were created for economic development and employment in small towns<sup>21</sup>, but at the same time rural migrant workers were sent back to their villages. The Chinese leadership reacted to the first waves of rural-to-urban migration with continued rejection, almost as a reflex of the social control mechanisms of the planned economy. This seemingly paradoxical policy becomes understandable when seen in the context of the socialist distribution system then still in force, which was based on rationing; this entailed handing over ration coupons for food, clothing etc., which were only obtainable at one's permanent place of residence.

### Limited Toleration of Migration (1984-89)

Provided that rural workers were capable of meeting their own living expenses, they were permitted to remain in smaller towns and cities. The Ministry of Labor also encouraged migration from impoverished areas for the purpose of promoting non-agricultural employment.

### Reimposition of Ban on Spontaneous Migration (1989-92)

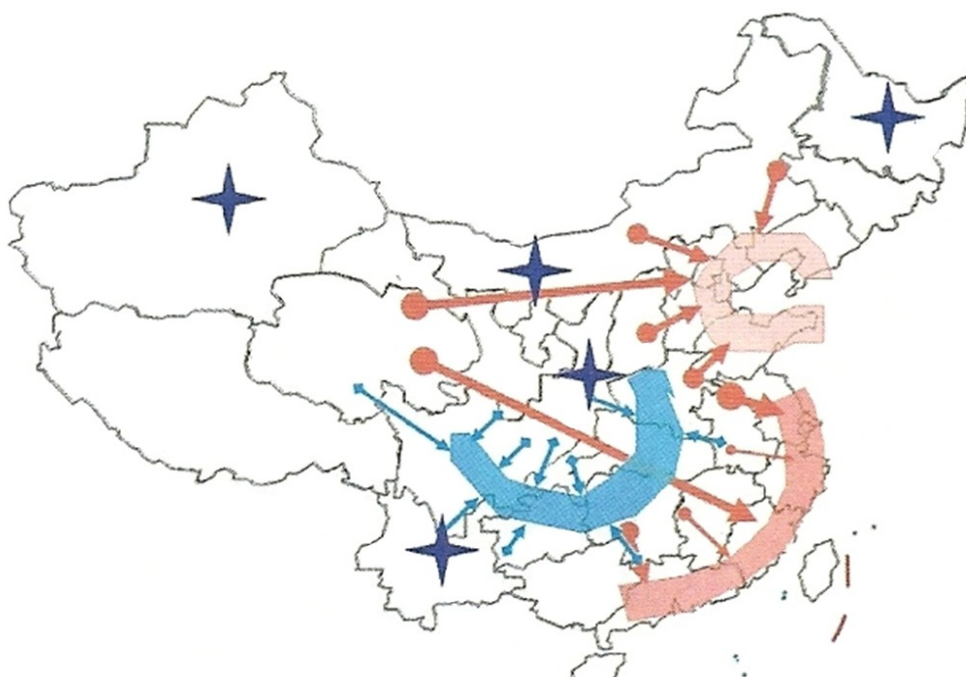
After the crushing of the student protest by military force on Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989, rural migrant workers were not supposed to leave their home villages and were expected instead to accept work on the land or in village and small town businesses. Rural migrants in the cities were to be kept under strict surveillance; this applied both to conditions of employment and to rural workers wishing to settle in the cities. Local governments were instructed that they should no longer issue rural migrant workers with permits to go and work in the province of Guangdong, which was a standard-bearer for the economy and attracted very many migrants to the region. Not even victims of natural disasters were to be allowed, as migrants, to seek work there.

### The Regulation of Migration (1993-2000)

Once the groundwork had been laid for a resumption of the reform course in the early 1990s, a phase of regulated migration was introduced. This was aimed at channeling the flow

of migrants into small and medium-sized towns and limiting the influx into the major cities, especially metropolitan areas like Beijing and Shanghai, in order to avoid putting additional strain on the material and social infrastructure of those cities. The regulations were now no longer restricted to the sphere of employment, but embraced a whole raft of measures concerning migrants' working and living conditions in the cities. For example, in 1995 the government introduced rulings concerning temporary residence permits for the rural population in cities, which were designed to regularize the status of migrants in the cities. Simultaneously, regulations governing the return of mendicants and the homeless to their home villages were extended to include migrants without money, papers or accommodation, who could now be forced to leave at any time. This practice continued until 2003.<sup>22</sup> In general, the government's attitude in the 1990s was essentially based on economic considerations. By the use of cheap rural labor, China aimed to boost its industrialization and competitiveness in the global market; migration policy therefore became increasingly relaxed. At the same time, the opportunities for migrant workers to settle permanently in the cities remained very restricted, so as to keep indirect costs arising from mi-

### Tripartite structure of the future internal migration in China



Source: Guojia (2010, p.6)

It is expected that the future structure of internal migration in China will be a tripartite one. Like today there will be one migration flow along the Chinese east coast with the Peal River Delta, Shanghai and the Yangtze River Delta and Beijing/the Tianjin Region as mega urban clusters (red stripe). In addition, it is expected that there will be a significant migration flow in China's inland regions directed towards Wuhan (Hubei Province) (blue stripe) as well as a third flow towards the emerging mega cities, that is, Kunming (Yunnan Province), Xian (Shaanxi Province), Urumqi (Xinjiang Province), and Harbin (Heilongjiang Province) (blue stars).

gration as low as possible (e.g. for city transportation systems, water and energy supplies, and also for education, health provision and social security).

### Promotion of Migration (2001-2005)

At the start of the 21st century, after the gap between urban and rural incomes had widened to 3.6:1, the intention was that all unnecessary barriers to rural-to-urban migration should be removed, in order to reduce the disparity between city and countryside and to create greater equality in the distribution of wealth. With this in mind, the government resolved, in 2001, to hasten the reform of the *hukou* system. However, in practice any such reform is a complicated and lengthy process, because the *hukou* system is closely interwoven with other institutions such as, for example, the land system<sup>23</sup>, the education system and the system of social security. Abolition of the *hukou* system cannot therefore be achieved by simply issuing a legal decree, but must be accompanied by reforms in these other areas.

### Recognition of the Rights of Migrant Workers (since 2006)

In recent years China's political leadership has made increasing efforts to create a legal basis for the equal treatment of rural migrants with regard to labor law. The 'Proposals (of the State Council<sup>24</sup>) for the Solution of the Problems of Migrant Workers<sup>25</sup> of 1.26.2006 were the prelude to measures aiming at the integration of migrants in the urban environment in which they lived and worked. In 2007, in relation to the reform of the *hukou* system, the Chinese government designated the cities of Chongqing and Chengdu as local experimental zones in which to develop innovative approaches to the integration of rural and urban systems of administration in the fields of work, land, social welfare and services. In 2008, for the first time three migrant workers were appointed as deputies in the National People's Congress<sup>26</sup>. At the same time, the global financial crisis of 2008/09, with its tangible effects on the Chinese export industry, brought home to the Chinese leadership the weakness of an economic strategy that is oriented unilaterally toward manufacturing for export and is consequently dependent on the state of the world market. Then, after 25 million migrants had lost their jobs, expansion of the domestic market and strengthening of domestic consumption became cornerstones of a reorientation of economic strategy by the Chinese government, with more weight

being given to innovation, investment in research and development, and better qualified staff. A further objective of this strategy is to encourage the rise of a broad middle class<sup>27</sup> and so make a contribution to the stability of Chinese society as a whole. Together with a higher wage level, such a reorientation of economic strategy requires the creation of comprehensive social security systems as a necessary precondition of increased consumer spending among migrants. The central government has recognized the need for a unified and flexible social security system and, with the passing (in 2011) of a social insurance law that combines individual insurances such as sickness, accident, pension and unemployment insurance, together with maternity protection, has taken an important step toward its realization, yet implementation and additional funding at the local level is making painfully slow progress. And while the central government is keen to promote equal rights and to strengthen the protection of migrants' employment rights, the city governments, which are under pressure on account of their debts and are engaged in an increasingly fierce economic competition with each other, and which furthermore have had to take on additional responsibilities with the decentralization of the administration system, are anxious to keep the costs of immigration as low as possible and to accept only the best and most highly qualified workers. This has resulted in 'incomplete urbanization' (as the Hong Kong city researcher Chan Kam Wing has called it),<sup>28</sup> i.e. the cities only want to accept the migrants as workers, not as citizens with an equal right of access to public goods and services.

### Migrants in China's Cities: Informalization of Working and Living Conditions

With the lowly status conferred on them by their rural origins, migrants must therefore survive in the cities without the privileges and advantages that are taken for granted by the city dwellers. Thus they have become a group in the city that is restricted, regulated and controlled<sup>29</sup>. They have to face the prejudice of the urban citizens, who look down on them and fear them as potential criminals, while at the same time taking advantage of their services in many different ways. The self-image of city dwellers as modern citizens, with a higher standard of living and an urban *life style*, is to some extent only achieved by contrast with a negative view of the migrant population. The result of this situation is that the life of migrants in the cities is characterized by informal arrangements that are creative and precarious in equal measure. We propose to illustrate this with regard to employment, housing, education and health provision.

#### Employment and Income

The majority of rural migrants are informally employed, either in the informal sector or in informal employment relationships in the formal (public or private) sector of the economy.<sup>30</sup> As they are frequently employed without any contract being signed, migrants find it very difficult to claim their rights, e.g. when their wages are not paid or when

**Table 2: Monthly income of rural migrant workers in Chinese cities (in yuan), 2010 and 2011**

Monthly Wage	Average	Eastern Regions	Central Chinese Regions	Western Regions
2010	1,690	1,696	1,632	1,643
2011	2,049	2,053	2,006	1,990

Source: [http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjfx/fxbg/t20120427\\_402801903.htm](http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjfx/fxbg/t20120427_402801903.htm), accessed 6-24-2012

they want to demand compensation for an accident at work or work-related illness. In addition, in most cases they have no insurance cover against sickness or accident, and receive no pension.

For many years the average monthly incomes of migrants did not rise at all. Many of them were well below 1,000 yuan<sup>31</sup> per month. The average monthly wages of city workers were considerably higher. Only in recent years, against the background of local labor scarcity and an increasing number of (in some cases) unconventional protest actions<sup>32</sup> by migrant workers, have wage levels risen significantly. Such rises are not, however, sufficient to open up long-term prospects in the cities.

In 2011, with earnings of 2,015 yuan a month, migrants in dependent employment earned significantly less than self-employed migrants, whose incomes were, on average, 2,684 yuan a month. In the areas of transportation and communications and in the construction industry monthly wages are higher than average (2,485 and 2,382 yuan respectively); by contrast, in the hotel and catering trade (1,807 yuan), in the service sector (1,826 yuan) and in the manufacturing industry (1,920 yuan) they are relatively low.<sup>33</sup> These figures show that the better paid occupations are those which employ chiefly men, whereas female migrants are concentrated in the low wage sector.<sup>34</sup>

## Housing

The type of accommodation available to migrants in the cities is dependent on the nature of their job. Construction workers sleep in container cabins at the building site, while factory workers are accommodated chiefly in company-owned dormitories, segregated according to gender. Domestic staff and nannies sometimes live in private households. Proprietors of small businesses sleep in their warehouses, factories or business premises. A growing number of migrants, however, especially married couples or families with children, rent private accommodation. Migrants find affordable private accommodation in the rural outer suburbs of big cities or in what are known as 'urban villages'.<sup>35</sup> These are villages that have merged with cities as the cities have expanded in the process of urbanization. Whereas the formerly rural households in these 'urban villages' have been given an urban *hukou*, the migrants who live in rented accommodation in the 'urban villages' continue to be registered with their rural *hukou*.

There is scarcely any affordable living accommodation for migrants in the inner city districts on account of large-scale redevelopment projects. Nor are there many opportunities for better off migrants to acquire property in the city.

## Schooling for Migrant Children

The growing tendency for whole families to migrate together has also led to increased demand for school places for the approximately 35 million migrant children in the cities (2005). However, the majority of the migrant children – some 58 million – remain behind in the country, usually with the grandparents.<sup>36</sup> This is increasingly recognized as a social prob-

lem. Until 2005 migrant children were either not allowed to attend public schools in the cities or were charged very high fees to do so; in response to this, in the 1990s migrants began to set up informal schools themselves, especially elementary schools, for their offspring. The majority of teachers in these schools and the teaching materials they used came from the migrants' regions of origin. However, these schools and kindergartens were not recognized by the Chinese ministry of education; they were tolerated but existed in a gray area. In 2005 the National Congress revised the law on compulsory education,<sup>37</sup> thus providing a legal basis for the integration of migrant children in the urban school system. Despite this improved legal situation, public schools charge fees and create other barriers, fearing that their school could suffer a decline in standards and fall behind in the rankings. Furthermore, there are considerably more elementary schools than middle schools for migrant children, so that the children often have to return to their regions of origin if they want to attend middle school. All this restricts their future prospects from the outset.

## Health Provision

Another contributory factor in the marginalization of rural migrants is the dual health system, whereby migrants are tied into the collective sickness insurance scheme for the rural population that was established in 2003. The benefits of this scheme are very limited and for the migrants they are only available at their place of origin in the country, not at their place of work in the city. In city areas with high concentrations of migrants – such as the 'urban villages' – small clinics and health centers have come into being, which are designed to fill this gap in health provision for migrants. But these usually informal health care services lack professional expertise and are risky for the patients (for example, the doctors may be unlicensed and counterfeit medicines may be administered)<sup>38</sup> and are therefore not popular with the migrants. If they fall ill, migrants often prefer to adopt a wait-and-see attitude rather than making use of the informal health care offered them by service providers whose trustworthiness they find difficult to assess.<sup>39</sup> A further complicating factor is that migrants are concentrated in areas of work with high accident rates. Apart from accidents that can be identified as clearly work related and are adequately compensated, they are required to pay practically all the costs of health examinations and treatments themselves, which they are generally unable to do. Not infrequently, after an emergency, migrants are forced to break off necessary follow-up treatment in the hospital because of financial constraints.<sup>40</sup> Accidents and serious illness are among the main reasons why migrants and their families fall into absolute poverty.

## Summary and Conclusions

On the whole, Chinese internal migration makes a substantial contribution to the improvement of rural household incomes and to that extent should be seen as an important way out of rural poverty. In 2005 the total remittance transfers by migrants amounted to 30 billion US\$,<sup>41</sup> which is many

times greater than all the official development aid<sup>42</sup> to China (2 billion US\$) in the same year. Even though the effect of remittances on rural development is a matter of dispute, as only part of it is put to productive use, this does highlight the contribution that migrants make to poverty reduction and thus illustrates the role played by Chinese internal migration in the politics of development. However, it has also become clear that labor migration has its price: The downsides of the migrant's life include dangerous and unsafe working conditions, long working hours, no contract of employment, unpaid wages, a high accident rate and the risk of occupational diseases. To these we could add a rudimentary, inadequate insurance system, families separated for long periods of time, inadequate educational opportunities for children and various forms of discrimination in the cities.

Since the start of the 21st century the Chinese government has been reacting to these abuses, in particular the problem of non-payment of wages or excessively low pay. Under pressure from the public, in 2003 the system of detention pending the forcible return of migrants to their home villages was abolished. Institutional reforms regarding social security and the *hukou* system are aiming to put an end to the dual city/country structure once and for all. These efforts are in conflict with the interests of local governments, city administrations and privileged holders of an urban *hukou*. The cities, which are responsible for financing the public services, but must share their tax revenue with the central government, attempt to keep the extra cost of infrastructure and supply systems caused by migration as low as possible. The result is that unequal access to scarce public resources like education, health provision and subsidized housing remains unchanged.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In 1987 there were 15.2 million internal migrants in China (1.5% of the total population). By 2010, their number had risen to 221 million (16.5% of the total population) (Major Figures 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Globally, the number of international migrants rose from 99.8 million in 1980 to an estimated 200 million in 2005 and 214 million in 2010 (Koser 2007, p.5; Guojia 2010, p. 18; IOM 2010, p.29).

<sup>3</sup> This policy brief does not cover rural-rural migration, urban-urban migration as well as urban-rural migration. All of these three forms of internal migration do – for one reason or another – play a role of minor importance: rural-rural migration is not very attractive because better wages are not very probable; urban-urban migration is comparatively uncomplicated because city dwellers have an urban household registration and are therefore included into the urban social security system. Furthermore, environmentally induced migration and resettlement (e.g. from poor areas or due to infrastructure projects) as well as internal migration as a result of natural disasters are not referred to in the frame of this policy brief.

<sup>4</sup> The number of internal migrants is determined through surveys of the Statistical Office and more precisely in the census that takes place every ten years.

<sup>5</sup> During the Land Reform (1949-52) private ownership rights to land were allocated. The land was then collectivized in the early 1950s up to the mid-50s. Already in 1958, when the household registration regulations were introduced, private land ownership had ceased to exist, thus giving rise only to collectivized and state-owned land.

<sup>6</sup> In this context, spontaneous means that the initiative to migrate came from the rural population itself. The opposite would be forms of state-initiated migration, e.g. in the frame of political mass campaigns or development projects aimed at reducing poverty in the mountain regions etc.

<sup>7</sup> Wang (2010), p. 339.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. note no. 22.

<sup>9</sup> Wang (2010), p. 342ff.

<sup>10</sup> Zhou/Li (2010), p. 68.

<sup>11</sup> Major Figures (2011), pp. 59-61.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. also Gongan (2008), p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Direct-controlled municipalities have the highest rank in the Chinese administrative system, that is the rank of a province. There are only four such cities: Peking, Shanghai, Tianjin and Chongqing.

<sup>14</sup> Zhongguo (2010), p. 26.

<sup>15</sup> The eastern regions comprise Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei, Liaoning, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, Shandong, Guangdong and Hainan.

<sup>16</sup> The central Chinese regions include Shanxi, Jilin, Heilongjiang, Anhui, Jiangxi, Henan, Hubei and Hunan.

<sup>17</sup> The western regions comprise Inner Mongolia, Guangxi, Chongqing, Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Tibet, Shaanxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia and Xinjiang.

<sup>18</sup> Guojia renkou (2010), p. 37.

<sup>19</sup> Guojia renkou (2010), pp. 38/39.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Huang and Pieke (2003), Schnack and Yuan (2010), pp. 124-150.

<sup>21</sup> Small towns below county level

<sup>22</sup> The so-called 'Three-without population' could be immediately arrested and transferred to local detention centers pending expulsion or sent back home. Relatives and friends had to pay a 'ransom' so that the arrested migrants were released from detention. This practice developed into a lucrative source of income for the local security agents and attendants. It came to be publicly criticized in March 2003 when the 27-year-old graphic designer Sun Zhigang was beat to death in such a detention center in Guangzhou after his only 'misdemeanor' had been not to carry valid documents when he got into a control and was arrested. This event was taken up by the media and caused considerable public outrage. With the support of dedicated attorneys the regulation which allowed for custody pending deportation of rural migrants was abolished on June 20th, 2003.

<sup>23</sup> Up to the present day, there is no private land ownership in China. In urban areas, state-owned land prevails, in rural areas there is predominantly collectivized land. Land use rights are traded, not ownership rights.

<sup>24</sup> The State Council is the central administrative body of the People's Republic of China, it is headed by the Prime Minister.

<sup>25</sup> 'Guanyu jie jue nongmingong wenti de ruogan yijian'

<sup>26</sup> The National People's Congress is the parliament of the People's Republic of China.

<sup>27</sup> Zoellick (2010).

<sup>28</sup> Chan (2010), p. 77.

<sup>29</sup> Xu (2009).

<sup>30</sup> Wu (2011), p. 170.

<sup>31</sup> In 2003, 1.000 Yuan equaled approximately 103 Euros.

<sup>32</sup> This is demonstrated by the following example: "In 2007, young Chen, with the help of some fellow countrymen, came to Xiamen where he found a job as construction worker. After two months of work he still had not received his salary. Accompanied by more than twenty other construction workers he went to see his employer in order to take him to task. The employer, however, wanted to pay the salaries only after completion of the whole construction project. After this disappointment, Chen and his colleagues gathered on a highly frequented road and stopped traffic. Twenty minutes later, the police arrived and demanded the workers to leave the road so that the traffic jam could be dissolved. But the workers were not willing to leave without having received their salaries. After another half an hour had passed, some representatives of the employment authorities arrived and informed themselves about the situation. At 7 p.m. the employer paid Chen and his colleagues 24.000 Yuan – and the traffic could flow again." The logic driving this action corresponds to a Chinese proverb: "Making a lot of trouble leads to a quick solution, making a little trouble leads to a slow solution, making no trouble at all brings no solution" Li (2010), pp.192/193 (translated from German to English by the editorial staff of focus Migration).

<sup>33</sup> [http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjfx/fxbg/t20120427\\_402801903.htm](http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjfx/fxbg/t20120427_402801903.htm), accessed 6-24-2012

<sup>34</sup> However, it holds true for China (as well as for other countries) that there is still only very little research on qualified migrants (Kofman/Raghuram 2009).

<sup>35</sup> Gransow (2007).

<sup>36</sup> According to research of the Chinese Woman's Federation from 2008, there were nationwide 58 million children that had been left behind in the countryside by their parents (China Daily, 5-31-2012).

<sup>37</sup> The nine-year long compulsory education comprises six years of primary school and three years of lower middle school.

<sup>38</sup> Bork, Kraas and Yuan (2010), pp. 72-93.

<sup>39</sup> Gransow (2010), pp. 24-25.

<sup>40</sup> Xiang (2005), p. 162f.

<sup>41</sup> Murphy (2006), p.5.

<sup>42</sup> Official development aid (ODA)

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China Labour Bulletin:

[www.clb.org.hk](http://www.clb.org.hk)

Culture and art museum of Chinese rural-urban migrants in Beijing

[www.dagongwenhua.org.cn](http://www.dagongwenhua.org.cn)

Gongchao [strike movement]: website on class conflict in China

[www.gongchao.org](http://www.gongchao.org)

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