

Reproduction-Driven Labor Migration from China

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Unskilled labor out-migration from China has changed little since the late 1990s. Every year, about half a million workers leave for contract jobs overseas.¹ Ninety percent of them migrate to countries in Africa and Asia to work so-called “3-D” jobs: dirty, difficult, and dead-end.² Despite the significant increase in average monthly earnings in China—from USD 83 in June 2000 to USD 1,071 in December 2019—out-migration did not decrease in the same time period.³ Even more curiously, migrants were willing to pay up to USD 5,000 in the 2010s for a two- or three-year contract job, which amounts to a migrant worker’s one-year salary. Compounding the cost, migrants often have to pay a USD 3,000 “security bond” that is reclaimable after returning to China upon completion of their contracts, provided that they did not violate their contract terms.

Why do workers pay so much to leave China, a rising global economic center, for dead-end jobs overseas? Labor out-migration from China, I suggest, has become “reproduction-driven.” Instead of being compelled by unemployment or poverty, people migrate to accumulate savings quickly to buy houses, get married, pay for their children’s education, and arrange medical and social care. These activities sustain and enhance life on a daily and generational basis, and constitute part of what Marx and Engels termed “social reproduction.”⁴ These tasks are time-sensitive. While jobs in China can yield some savings, overseas work speeds up the process because working hours are longer, payment is more predictable, and daily personal consumption is minimized. It is of course nothing new that labor migrants remit earnings home to pay for education and medical costs, but what makes reproduction-driven migration distinct is that duties of

¹ The number for 2020 dropped to 0.3 million, most likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. See “Statistical Communiqué of the People’s Republic of China on the 2020 National Economic and Social Development,” National Bureau of Statistics, February 28, 2021, http://www.stats.gov.cn/zjtjc/zthd/lhfw/2021/lh_hgjj/202103/t20210301_1814216.html.

² Between 1995 and 2019, on average 65 percent of Chinese workers overseas worked in construction and manufacturing, and 15 percent in agriculture, forestry, and fishing. See China International Contractors Association, Annual Report on China’s International Labor Collaboration, 2004-2019.

³ National Bureau of Statistics, “China Monthly Earnings,” 2021, cited in CEIC, accessed March 7, 2021, <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/china/monthly-earnings>.

⁴ Friedrich Engels, Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State, Marxists Internet Archive, accessed April 28, 2021, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/origin_family.pdf.

social reproduction have become projects that one is expected to complete by a certain age, to a certain standard, and with significant financial inputs. In the past, additional income earned from migration would be spent on expanding the village house in one's hometown. Now, migration income earned overseas has become the primary vehicle to maximize savings in order to buy urban property, which has become a necessary condition to secure a marriage in the countryside.

The emergence of reproduction-driven labor migration results from broad socioeconomic changes in China—critically, the monetization of reproduction activities. People's reproduction needs, ranging from housing to medical care and education, before the 1990s, had been supplied through direct state and/or community welfare provisions that were attached to one's employment or residence, without involving monetary transactions. But these provisions were withdrawn in the 1990s, and reproduction needs have become consumption items requiring the expenditure of large sums of money. Once reproduction became a matter of investment and consumption, costs kept rising, creating tremendous pressure, especially on the cash-poor population. These conditions have given rise to three characteristics that distinguish reproduction-driven migration from classical labor migration. First, reproduction-driven migrants are more individualized. Second, they are more willing to “invest” in migration. Third, they migrate in response to the pressure imposed by reproduction needs rather than the availability of job opportunities, which means once the need to reproduce arises, reproduction migrants are eager to go overseas as quickly as possible, independent of traditional considerations of job availability.

In what follows, I first describe how migrants experience social expectations regarding reproduction as a temporal pressure, which makes overseas contract jobs a feasible choice for some. This is followed by a description of the distinct features of reproduction-driven labor migration. I then trace the rise of this type of migration to social and policy changes in China since the late 1990s, particularly how housing, care, education, and marriage arrangements are monetized. Finally, I propose policy recommendations to alleviate the pressure of reproduction-driven migration. My analysis is based on field research conducted in Liaoning and Jilin provinces in northeast China, in both urban and rural sites, between June 2004 and November 2017.

Migration for Speedy Savings

Xiao Gang, a pedicab driver in a town in northeast China, told me that he was determined to go to South Korea within a year. “I will never save enough *qu xifu qian* (literally ‘the money for getting a bride’) here,” he explained, “At home we are careless with spending. We spend according to our mood. We go out to have meals with friends. One meal costs RMB 200 nowadays.” Overseas jobs do not pay higher salaries but can yield higher savings more quickly. In a foreign country, migrant workers have little time for socialization and consumption as they often live in a physically “encapsulated”

life under tight control.⁵ Furthermore, overseas jobs generate more savings because of much longer working hours.

“In Japan [the employer] won’t allow you to sit idle. You always work. Working means you are earning!” said Hai Tao, an energetic man in his mid-thirties, and the manager of a recruitment company associated with a county labor bureau in Jilin. Hai Tao told me how he persuaded a construction worker to go to Japan:

I told him that he can make RMB 6000 a month in Japan. He said that he was already earning that amount in China. That is true. A top-level worker can make as much as RMB 300 a day here. Then I asked him, how many months can you work at home a year? Barely six months! [because of the long winter in northeast China and the precarious subcontracting system]. I said to him: You have to ask yourself how much cash you have in your hands at the end of each month, and how much you have in your bank account when you should be married. After talking about this and that, [the point is] he has no savings!

When I started my field research in 2004, many migrants and would-be migrants planned to invest their future overseas earnings in small businesses, such as opening a shop, buying a car to rent out as a taxi, or purchasing equipment to organize a home refurbishment team. By 2010, however, far fewer were contemplating business plans. They were more concerned with matters such as finding a spouse, paying off debts, and buying apartments for themselves or for their children, even though some of them were still in primary school.

Reproduction needs are time-sensitive. One cannot delay a child’s education or medical care. Furthermore, property prices, marriage costs, and medical expenses are ever-rising. The life-cycle time (e.g., the desirable marriage age) and the market time (e.g., price inflation) are related. A man above thirty years old in rural China has to pay a much higher bride price than a man in his twenties. Similar age-related cost hikes happen when paying for education, too. People emphasized to me that if they failed to send their children to good primary schools now, they would have to spend much more later for the kids to catch up with others in life opportunities. Time is money. Migrants pay the USD 8,000 migration cost not only for a job, but for the opportunity to start saving quickly. Recruitment agents who fail to place migrants within a few months lose clients.

Migration used to be a means to earn additional income to improve reproduction conditions. Now, the cost and necessity of reproduction directly drive migration. This change is illustrated in the relation between migration and the real estate market in Qing county, Liaoning province. When I arrived for the first time in 2004, there was consensus

⁵ In Japan for instance, most migrant workers live in dormitories attached to factories, and some are not allowed to go shopping more than once a week. See Biao Xiang, “Transnational Encapsulation: Compulsory Return as a Labor Migration Control in East Asia,” in *Return: Nationalizing Transnational Mobility in Asia*, ed. Biao Xiang, Brenda Yeoh, and Mika Toyota (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 83-99.

that migrants' remittances had driven up the housing prices. Properties in the Qing county seat were more expensive than in neighboring counties because the county had a large number of migrants. By the 2010s, the dynamic reversed. Residents no longer complained that migrants drove up housing prices. Instead, people talked about why some of them had to go overseas to work and quickly save money in order to buy a flat in the county seat before it became unaffordable. As purchasing urban property becomes the norm, migration has become an extraordinary means to adhere to social conceptions of "acceptable" living conditions.

New Migration Patterns

Compared to labor migration caused by poverty, reproduction-driven labor migrants come from more varied socioeconomic backgrounds. While classic labor migration often creates a mechanism of "cumulative causation" that turns migration into collective community action, reproduction-driven migration is individualized.⁶ While the general categories of reproduction duties are common across households—getting married, giving birth, purchasing a house, paying for their children's education, and taking care of the ill and the elderly—everyone has different needs in terms of what the duties entail and when they arise. Who eventually decides to migrate, when, and where to, is shaped by individual circumstances.

Reproduction-driven migrants rarely identify themselves as laborers. They aim to earn enough money within a short period of time, which enables them to live a totally different lifestyle. They are less likely than traditional labor migrants to join unions or initiate collective bargaining with their employers. This does not mean that there are fewer conflicts in the workplace, however. Recruitment agents complained to me that the increasing diversity of migrant backgrounds—for instance, failed businesspeople who turn themselves into international labor migrants—made it harder to control them overseas. In fact, according to the agents, tensions in the workplace have increased in the major destination countries—Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Macau. Still, conflicts often burst out as individualized and sporadic clashes, rather than organized contestation.

The final difference between previous migration patterns and reproduction-driven migration is that social pressure and rising costs drive some of these new kinds of migrants to remain away from home for an extended period of time. In classical circular labor migration, migrants who seek to earn supplemental income for reproduction needs go home once their contract expires or the agricultural busy season starts, regardless of how much money they make. Some reproduction-driven migrants have difficulty returning, however, because they feel socially displaced when failing to meet reproduction expectations. There has been a noticeable increase of repeated migration from northeast China over the last fifteen years. People who have just completed one contract now pay to migrate again, something I had never encountered before 2010. There are also migrants who are perpetually "suspended" between China and their destination

⁶ Douglas S. Massey, "Social Structure, Household Strategies, and the Cumulative Causation of Migration," *Population Index* 56, no. 1 (1990): 3-26.

countries because they can never save enough to meet the ever-rising cost of living in China.⁷ Migrants keep moving to satisfy family reproduction needs, as well as to avoid the humiliation resulting from the failure to fulfill the reproduction duties expected of them. These new migration patterns are not a function of changes in the demand for labor at the destination, or of fluctuations in employment opportunities at home. They are instead caused by significant changes in social reproduction, namely how people maintain their individual and family life. These changes are institutionally induced, which I shall disentangle below.

The Four Mountains: Marriage, House, Education, Medical Care

When explaining why they choose to work overseas, migrants often refer to “three heavy mountains” (*sanzuo dashan*).⁸ These “mountains” are housing, education, and medical care. For male labor migrants, marriage is an additional fourth mountain that is no lighter than the others. Around 70 percent of labor migrants are men according to statistics from Liaoning province in the late 2000s.⁹ The stigma attached to unmarried men in China (*guanggun*, the “bare sticks”) is well known. This stigma is ingrained in migrant workers themselves, especially those in Japan, who see the low Japanese marriage rate as a sign of moral perversion, and sometimes attribute to this the inhumane experiences that they suffered as migrant workers. The social expectation for universal marriage creates widespread anxiety when coupled with the acute awareness of China’s sex imbalance: 115 males to every 100 females aged 20 to 24 years old (2019).¹⁰

To increase their competitiveness in the marriage market, male migrants have to offer more. To secure a marriage in a county town in the late 2010s, the groom must provide housing and pay a bride price of RMB 100,000. Other research conducted in a city in northeastern China finds that the bride price increased from an average of RMB 600 in 1977 to the standard of RMB 288,888 in 2016 (the number 8 is supposed to bring

⁷ Jamie Coates describes that Chinese migrants in Japan feel perpetually unsettled, even though they have succeeded in their migration projects, partly because the expectations on their contributions to family life continue rising. See Jamie Coates, “The Cruel Optimism of Mobility: Aspiration, Belonging, and the ‘Good Life’ among Transnational Chinese Migrants in Tokyo,” *Positions* 3, no. 27 (2019): 469–497.

Miriam Driessen points out that those who migrate to fulfill their reproduction duties paradoxically miss critical time to perform their family roles. This puts them in a “double bind,” and makes it hard to stop migrating. See Miriam Driessen, “Chinese Workers in Ethiopia Caught Between Remaining and Returning,” *Pacific Affairs* (2021), forthcoming.

⁸ The “Three Heavy Mountains” originally referred to foreign imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism, which were toppled once-for-all by the socialist revolution. See Mao Zedong, “Speech at a Conference of Cadres in the Shansii-Suiyuan Liberated Area,” *Marxists Internet Archive*, accessed March 7, 2021,

https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-4/mswv4_35.htm.

⁹ No national data about the migrants’ gender composition is available. See “Labor Outmigration Statistics, Liaoning,” 2006, 2007 and 2008, Liaoning Provincial Labor Bureau.

¹⁰ “National Data, Sex Ratio,” Chinese National Bureau of Statistics, accessed April 14, 2021, <https://data.stats.gov.cn/search.htm?s=%E6%80%A7%E5%88%AB%E6%AF%94>.

good luck), though what counts as a bride price varies from region to region.¹¹ Additional research in a northeastern village documented bride prices rising from RMB 200 in the 1950s to RMB 28,500 in the 1990s.¹² Grooms are also expected to contribute funds for a car, furniture, jewelry, and wedding banquet—costs that total about RMB 300,000 according to my field data.

“No girl will marry you unless you have a flat in [the] county seat nowadays,” the father of a would-be migrant in a village told me, “Girls with good ‘conditions’ (tiaojian, or looks, age, and socioeconomic background) will also ask about the exact location, how big [the flat] is, and even the condition of the amenities in the condo.” China reformed its welfare-oriented urban housing system in 1998, partly to develop its real estate market to stabilize the economy after the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Between 1999 and 2018, the average price per square meter of newly built flats in China jumped from RMB 1,758 to RMB 8,539.¹³ In Liaoning, the price doubled in ten years: from less than RMB 3,000 in 2007 to RMB 7,000 in 2018.¹⁴

Unmarried young men migrate to save enough money to afford properties in the city. Married men—and women—migrate to pay mortgages. The balance of personal home loans increased by a factor of 16.1 between 2004 and 2018.¹⁵ The ratio of mortgage to household disposable income rose from 16.2 percent to 47.6 percent during the same period.¹⁶ Migrants go overseas to “work for banks”; they have to work hard and save because they are “slaves to their house [mortgage]” (fangnu).¹⁷

Education

Lin Wei, a thirty-three-year-old woman working in a garment factory in Japan, wanted to send her seven-year-old daughter to a primary school in the county seat—this was why she had decided to become a migrant worker. But her husband insisted that the village school was good enough. This was unacceptable for Lin Wei: “Only buxingde (incapable or problematic) families send children to the village school now. Uncaring parents, or [those] who really have no money. Now my husband is one of them!”

¹¹ Ziyi Yin, “From Intergenerational Deprivation to Capital Display: Observation and Reconstruction of the Changes in Urban Bride Price” (M.A. thesis, Northeast China Normal University, 2017).

¹² Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949–1999* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

¹³ National Bureau of Statistics, “China CN: Commodity Bldg Selling Price: YTD Average: Residential,” CEIC, accessed March 7, 2021, <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/china/nbs-property-price/cn-commodity-bldg-selling-price-ytd-average-residential>.

¹⁴ National Bureau of Statistics, “China’s Property Price: YTD Avg: Existing House: Liaoning,” CEIC, accessed March 7, 2021, <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/china/nbs-property-price-monthly/property-price-ytd-avg-existing-house-liaoning>.

¹⁵ Hengda Research Institute, “China Fertility Report 2020,” *The Paper*, accessed March 7, 2021, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_9539003.

¹⁶ Hengda Research Institute, “China Fertility Report 2020.”

¹⁷ Miriam Driessen, “Migrating for the Bank: Housing and Chinese Labor Migration to Ethiopia,” *The China Quarterly* 221 (2015): 143–160.

Under the stress of constant quarrels with her husband on WeChat, she snapped and got involved in a fight with her employer. She ran away from the factory and came to a shelter set up by a labor non-governmental organization, where we met. Lin Wei told me her plan: once she settled her back pay with her former employer, she would go home, rent an apartment in the county seat, and bring her daughter there. Indeed, rural-to-urban relocation for the promise of a better education constitutes much of the reproduction-driven migration inside China.

While urban schools supposedly offer a better education than rural schools, they are much more expensive. It is now common practice for preschool children in rural China to attend kindergartens in nearby towns. The vast majority of kindergartens in the countryside are privately owned and require monthly tuition.¹⁸ From 2012 to 2021, private kindergarten tuition increased from less than RMB 650 to over RMB 1000.¹⁹ Some private kindergartens, including those in Jilin province, already charged nearly RMB 1000 per pupil every month in 2017. Kindergarten is of course only a starting point. According to a survey by Sina Education in 2017, average households spent 26 percent of their annual income on education during a child's preschool years, 21 percent of their yearly income from kindergarten to high school, and 29 percent of their income for each year of college.²⁰

Healthcare

Those who are most willing to pay high fees to go overseas quickly often have family members in need of major medical treatment. Lu Gang, a thirty-two-year-old man who looked much older, said that he would go overseas at any cost because his father had late-stage cancer. By the time we met, the treatment had lasted for more than a year and had exhausted all of his family's savings. Lu was willing to pay RMB 70,000 to go to Australia, where he was told wages were higher than the usual destinations. He wanted to work as a truck driver despite his very minimal English: "I drove trucks before. Driving trucks you can pick up odd jobs. I can earn more."

The burden of medical care is vividly captured by a riddle that circulated widely on Chinese social media in the late 2010s: "Looking from a distance it is like heaven, looking up close it is like a bank [making money], inside it is like a jail [capturing visitors]. What is it?—A hospital!" China's per capita healthcare expenditure increased from RMB

¹⁸ The proportion of public kindergarten pupils nationwide dropped from 95 percent to 44 percent from 1997 to 2019. See Hengda Research Institute, "China Fertility Report 2020," accessed March 7, 2021, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/CVejh_jt23RcMZGsiJYfNg. See also Ministry of Education, "2019 National Educational Development Statistical Bulletin," accessed March 7, 2021, http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/sjzl_fztjgb/202005/t20200520_456751.html.

¹⁹ CEIC, "China's CN: Service Charges: 36 City Avg: Nursery Fee: Private Kindergarten," accessed March 7, 2021, <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/china/price-monitoring-center-ndrc-36-city-monthly-avg-service-charges/cn-service-charges-36-city-avg-nurse-fee-private-kindergarten>.

²⁰ Sina Education, "2017 White Paper on Chinese Family Consumption on Education" [2017中国家庭教育消费白皮书], accessed March 7, 2021, 3, <https://max.book118.com/html/2018/1106/8105131011001132.shtm>.

173.2 in 2000 to RMB 1,902.3 in 2019.²¹ There are two unusual features behind this rise. First, medical expenses increased steadily by more than 20 percent per year in the 2000s, unrelated to general inflation.²² Second, medical costs rose at the same time as the government increased investments in public health. According to the World Health Organization, the share of out-of-pocket expenditure to total health expenditure by individual patients decreased from 60 percent to 36 percent between 2000 and 2018.²³ At the same time, the absolute amounts increased from USD 77 to more than USD 334 in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms.²⁴ In fact, government investments made medical care more costly. A classic case of regulatory capture, hospitals, pharmaceutical companies, and drug distributors turned public investments into a source of profit. They purchased expensive equipment and medicine, and then over-prescribed them to patients.

Li Chen, a returnee from Japan, took care of her mother with lung cancer in 2017. “The doctors said that [my mother] should do this-and-that test. My mother always said, ‘Forget it.’ But how can we say no to the doctor?” The medicine cost RMB 14,000, and tests cost another RMB 6,000 every month. These figures were kept secret from Li’s mother as this expense would be as devastating as the cancer itself. After Li had several major altercations with her employer in Japan and her recruitment agent in China, she decided to never work overseas again. This put the family in an especially difficult situation. They agonized over how to repay their ever-growing debt. After our meetings ended, I occasionally received messages from Li that she was selling household goods as part of an e-commerce enterprise. But she seemed reluctant to tell me how she was doing and where she was.

The four heavy mountains—marriage, housing, education, and healthcare—are basic human needs. However, they have become mountain-like burdens because of their monetization. The free provision of goods and services that are essential for sustaining life is no longer available. Goods and services have become commodities whose prices are constantly rising. Those without enough money to purchase such commodities, for instance housing or education in the city, are socially displaced. This places tremendous pressure on the vast majority of the population, but especially on low-income families. Peasants with very little liquid cash have suffered even more. As one labor recruiting agent put it, “peasants don’t see cash coming in, but they see cash going out all the time.” Working overseas is a way to earn cash in a concentrated manner. The monetization of reproduction spurred a shift in migration patterns out of China. Under social pressure to fulfill monetized reproduction duties on time, migrants pay high fees for low-end

²¹ National Bureau of Statistics, “China’s Consumption Expenditure per Capita,” CEIC, accessed March 7, 2021, <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/china/expenditure-per-capita/consumption-expenditure-per-capita-health-care-and-medical-services>.

²² Xueguo Wen, *Blue Book of Medical Reform: Report on China’s Medical and Health System Reform (2014-2015)* (Beijing: Social Science Literature Press, 2015).

²³ “Out-of-Pocket Expenditure (percent of current health expenditure) – China,” World Health Organization Global Health Expenditure Database, accessed March 7, 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.XPD.OOPC.CH.ZS?locations=CN>.

²⁴ “Out-of-Pocket Expenditure (percent of current health expenditure) – China,” World Health Organization Global Health Expenditure Database.

jobs overseas in order to accumulate savings as quickly as possible.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

This article began with a puzzle, that over the past two decades, low-skilled labor out-migration from China continues even as wages in China increased and earnings from overseas remained stagnant. I argue that the answer to this puzzle lies in the fact that labor out-migration from China after 2000 is increasingly driven by migrants' needs to satisfy the duties of social reproduction: forming families, purchasing property, and providing education and healthcare. These reproduction activities—sustaining individual and family life—require substantial financial resources. Work overseas does not necessarily pay better than work in China, but it provides more opportunity to quickly and predictably accumulate savings to meet time-sensitive needs.

The root cause of reproduction-driven migration is the monetization of critical preconditions of social reproduction, such as marriage, housing, and education. The monetization of reproduction means much more than simply the rising cost of consumption goods. Rather, it indicates a fundamental shift in how critical resources are distributed and how people's lives are organized. Monetization turns the basic needs of life into commodities that one must pay for. Life in turn becomes a competition for material goods and social status: one feels compelled to purchase high-end housing, education, and medical care for the sake of maintaining one's social standing, even though the expensive items are beyond one's means and genuine need. Monetization creates a self-perpetuating cycle: the cost of reproduction rises, service providers turn public subsidies and investments into a source of profit, and consumers are forced to pay for high-cost services. This ironically results in welfare provision contributing to the rising cost of care which, in turn, makes the costs of reproduction rise further. Ultimately, this leads people to pay intermediaries high fees to secure positions as migrant workers so they can save money to pay for expenses. Migration driven by reproduction-related pressures has contributed little to migrants' skills acquisition or capital formation. Such migration helps to improve migrants' material living conditions, yet its costs are high in terms of financial expenses, mental pressure, and health implications.

The rise of reproduction-driven out-migration from China shows clearly that labor migration is not simply a function of job market supply and demand, or of income disparities. We must take into consideration family planning and reproduction-related financial considerations of migrants and the prevalent social norms of what constitutes a "good life." As I have demonstrated, these are not purely cultural matters, but are profoundly shaped by institutional arrangements underlying the commodification of reproduction. Conventional development-oriented strategies, such as generating employment opportunities and increasing income levels, will not reduce reproduction-driven migration. Nor will increasing welfare investments be sufficient, as welfare provisions will increase purchasing power and in turn, increase costs. The monetization of reproduction itself must be reversed. To accomplish this, first, the Chinese government must regulate the property market more tightly, for instance by capping transaction prices and freezing

rents, thereby reining in skyrocketing housing prices. Second, the government should increase direct subsidies to public schools—especially those in the countryside—to close the gap in performance between public and private schools. And third, the government should reform the drug distribution system to lessen out-of-pocket medical expenses and prevent hospitals from making profits through over-prescription. These three steps can help dampen and reverse the monetization of social goods and provide relief for workers relying on out-migration to stay competitive in the reproduction race.

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