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Take A Number Peasants, Urbanites and the Greatest Migration

By Alexander J. Brenner

MARCH 15, 2004

BEIJING, China—The curious sign in the window read “Household Management, Marriage Ceremonies.” Spotting a prospective foreign client, the agency’s manager materialized on the doorstep. “Need a nanny?” he asked.

I had circled back on my bike after a group of young women loitering outside the small storefront had caught my attention; through the doorway I could see many more women packed inside. Next to the door was a detailed list of the agency’s myriad domestic-help and wedding-related services, including “will arrange for churches; bridal sedan chairs; marriage ceremonies aboard a helicopter.” There was no price given for helicopter nuptials; I saw that nannies, however, cost “six to 100 RMB/hour.”¹

“One hundred RMB an hour,” I remarked to the manager, surnamed Zhang. “That’s an expensive nanny.”

“We can get you one for six RMB an hour,” he assured me. As I later found out, the high-class, 100 RMB-per-hour nanny also tutors your kid in Chinese and other school subjects.

Much to Manager Zhang’s annoyance, one of the women standing outside approached me and began engaging me rather aggressively—so aggressively in fact that he stepped back and just watched. It became clear this woman wanted to work for me very, very badly. She was older than the others, probably in her mid-50s, quite rotund and with a heavy accent. It turned out that she was from the southern province of Jiangxi and had worked in the coal industry; I couldn’t determine if she had retired or was *xiagang*, let go from a state-owned enterprise. Speaking in a heavy Jiangxi accent, she kept repeating that her own daughter lived in Guangzhou, and she was thus free to spend every last ounce of her time and effort on my children.

“Actually, I don’t have any children,” I admitted.

“That’s OK. I clean very well. I can cook. I can do the laundry. I work very well.” She leaned closer, and nodded in the direction of the other women inside the shop. “I’m not like them. They’re from the countryside. I was in a city work unit. I can cook anything.”

“I don’t doubt it,” I replied. Her plump physique indicated *someone* was doing some good cooking.

“Alright, then how about it? I’ll work for you. I’m very good. I’m not from the countryside. I can start right now.” China is a land of hard sells,

¹ 8.27RMB=US\$1.00

but this was one of the hardest sells I'd encountered.

"Oh," I said, "I'm sorry. I've just arrived and haven't thought about this yet."

"That's OK," she replied. "Go home and talk about it with your wife and then come back and ask for Ms. Lu from Jiangxi."

"Actually, I don't have a wife," I said.

Ms. Lu visibly brightened.

"How much money do you make?" she demanded. This is in fact a common question in China, where salaries are deemed to be in the public domain. Asked suddenly in this context, however, I was a bit taken aback.

"Oh, in fact, I don't have a fixed salary," I stammered. "I do research in China. It's a kind of a writing fellowship—"

"My daughter likes to write, she's good at writing," Ms. Lu interrupted. It apparently didn't matter how much money I made; I was a white person and white people are all rich anyway. "You must contact my daughter, she really likes to write." Had I said, "I'm here on a fishing fellowship" I suppose the daughter would have turned out to be an avid fisherwoman.

Ms. Lu promptly produced from her handbag four laminated photos of her daughter and shoved them into my hands. Most of the younger women from the shop had surrounded us and were giggling; by now it was clear to all that I was about to be married off of Ms. Lu's daughter. And there she was in the photos, posing in various scenic spots where Chinese pose, such as on the banks of a lake with a pagoda in the background.

"That's her in Shenzhen. That's her in Guangzhou,"

said Ms. Lu, emphasizing that the photos were taken in cities despite the greenery of the backdrops. It was unclear what Ms. Lu's daughter did in these cities, but she was in them. Message: Not a country girl.

Ms. Lu was obviously waiting for my commentary. I didn't know what to say.

"Uh, umm, your daughter is very pretty."

Whoops, wrong comment. I glanced up at Ms. Lu, who had a "Splendid! Then it's all arranged!" smile spread across her face.

"She lives in Guangzhou. She likes to write. I'll give you her phone number."

Ms. Lu, already planning her trip to Disneyland with her little Eurasian grandchildren, began to write down contact information for herself and her daughter. It would have been rude not to take the numbers, so I did.

"Thank you so much. I really must be going. I'll think about this and may be back in touch," I said. Manager Zhang was moping in the doorway. It was unclear what fee he would receive with Ms. Lu arranging directly for both my domestic help and my marriage. Maybe he could at least convince us to go for the helicopter wedding package.

I biked off feeling discouraged. I had left this woman hoping she was on the verge of a job with a rich westerner, and maybe acquiring a son-in-law too—California here we come! I had a feeling that I would arrive home shortly to find Ms. Lu in the kitchen whipping up a vegetable stir-fry and all my dirty laundry washed and ironed. Ms. Lu's daughter might well be waiting in the bedroom. The bizarre thing is that, had it been my intent, Ms. Lu could



(Right) Some off-duty domestic help hanging out in the agency doorway. (Above) Manager Zhang works the phone while his ladies wait for work.

probably have had this all arranged in a matter of days.

* * *

My encounter with Ms. Lu offers a glimpse of a key attitude that shapes the Chinese psyche: “peasants bad; foreigners good.” Plow-pulling peasants are backward, ignorant and poor, while laptop-totting foreigners are modern, educated and wealthy. As I later confirmed with Manager Zhang, Ms. Lu was from a mining area in Jiangxi province, most likely in the middle of nowhere and most certainly not one of Asia’s cosmopolitan centers. Nevertheless, she had worked for a state-owned enterprise and considered herself several cuts above your average farmer. As I will discuss over the course of the next several reports, Ms. Lu’s behavior exemplifies the goals of most self-improving Chinese: to distance and differentiate themselves, both mentally and physically, from peasants, and to connect and liken themselves, both mentally and physically, to foreigners. In breaking free from any association with peasants and in seeking contact with foreigners, Ms. Lu personifies the modernized, globalized economy and society that have emerged in China over the last two decades.

Recall, however, that there is some dramatic role reversal occurring here. During the years of Maoist autarky, the general message was “peasants good, foreigners bad.” The Communists came to power on the back of a peasant revolution, and the Party vocabulary placed farmers alongside workers as leading forces in its social hierarchy. Foreigners, meanwhile, were the ones put out in the pig pen: Europeans, Japanese, Americans and Soviets all eventually proved themselves swine, be it of imperialist, capitalist, and/or revisionist natures.

As mentioned in my last report on the Chinese middle class (AJB-2), the pendulum has swung from extreme anti-foreign sentiment toward a full-on embrace of the “modern” Western lifestyle, a process exemplified by the furnishing of one’s home entirely with Ikea furniture. In future reports I will examine in more detail how and why China’s globalization-led development is pushing its citizens to strive, on levels both conscious and unconscious, to become more and more like foreigners. This report and the next, however, will focus on the necessary first step in the country’s modernization: the slow death of China’s peasant identity, represented most dramatically by the “suicide” of a peasantry that is leaving the farm *en masse* and transforming itself into a new transitional breed, the migrant.

Despite the pro-peasant propaganda of the Maoist years, cities were in fact favored so that farmers frequently received the short end of the economic stick—and were sometimes literally left to eat sticks, as during the Great-Leap-Forward-inspired famine of 1959-61, when tens of millions died in the countryside. And urbanites, who have always looked down on their rural brethren, were no more respectful of peasants then than they are now. Nevertheless, the Communists had sincerely sought to spread

the fruits of the revolution to the countryside, most notably through the land reform of the early 1950s. Despite its disastrous consequences, the Great Leap Forward had been part of Mao’s attempt to jump-start rural development through industrialization. Most importantly, while there existed gaps in well-being between country and city throughout the Maoist era, overall inequality declined from pre-1949 levels. By the late-seventies, China had achieved at least part of its socialist goals, boasting one of the most equal distributions of wealth in the world.

What China’s population enjoyed in the late-seventies would of course be better described as an “equal distribution of poverty.” Deng Xiaoping set out to change this state of affairs, brandishing the slogan “Poverty is not socialism” (*pinkun bushi shehui zhuyi*) to herald his plans for economic liberalization. And then there was that other government phrase designed to explain, and provide cover for, Deng’s market reforms: “Let some get rich first” (*rang yi bufen ren xian fuqilai*). These two slogans have proved the keys to the last 25 years of China’s development. The good news is that hundreds of millions have been lifted out of poverty as the economy grew at a fantastic pace. The bad news is that the urban and coastal areas that “got rich first” haven’t bothered to look back, and inequality has returned to its pre-Communist levels. Recent data suggest that if trends continue, China will soon possess the world’s most extreme wealth gap.

Which brings us to a central irony: In terms of basic improvement in the quality of life, there has never been a better time to be a Chinese peasant; in terms of social status and relative economic position, there has never been a worse time. Whereas previously, China’s peasants hadn’t had many means of comparison, now they’re just wealthy enough to have televisions that broadcast to them—through everything from talk shows to advertisements to soap operas—just how far and how fast their urban counterparts rise — and, as a result, just how poor they remain.

Ever since the power transfer to the new leadership was completed a year ago, President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao have been working to reorient government policy to tackle the urban-rural wealth gap. A major document released on February 8 shows their success in pushing this issue to the fore. The so-called “Document Number One” exhorts “party committees and government at all levels” to “deepen the rural reforms, increase peasant incomes, intensify support and protection for agriculture, strive to achieve a relatively rapid increase in peasant incomes and reverse as soon as possible the trend for the gap in urban and rural incomes to widen all the time.”

Major speeches at the National People’s Congress this month have reinforced this new focus, with Premier Wen announcing that “Resolving the three problems of agriculture, rural villages and farmers is the priority of priorities of the work in front of us today.” No one is saying

how long it will take to “resolve” these problems. It will be a tremendous task to reorient mindsets indoctrinated over the last dozen years to pursue breakneck growth toward the less-than-sexy goal of boosting farmers’ income. Announcing this shift from a lectern in Beijing is akin to the captain ordering an oil tanker sailing full speed ahead to stop and make a quick U-turn.

* * *

In a one-party system plagued by extremely weak rule of law, the official worship of GDP-growth since the early nineties has inevitably been shadowed by its evil twin, official corruption. It should thus come as no surprise that the “peasant bad, foreigner good” mentality so prevalent in political and economic thinking has also offered a cover for profiteering. For example, among the various rationales given for the appropriation of valuable farm land in areas surrounding cities, one popular reason is the need to set up development zones to attract foreign investment to spur economic modernization. As a Jiangsu province official told the *South China Morning Post*, “One of the most important achievements of officials is selling a large amount of land to foreign companies. But behind the rise in foreign investment is the sacrifice of local farmers’ interests. In most cases, they can’t be fully compensated for giving their land over for industrial use.”

In fact, the problem isn’t that peasants “can’t” be fully compensated—it’s that no one ever had any intention of doing so. Too often, the real impetus behind land transfers comes from corrupt local governments angling to make a killing as buy-low-sell-high middle-men. Realizing the enormity of this problem, last year the central government had the Ministry of Land Resources begin probing an estimated 128,000 cases of illegal land use—and as if these numbers aren’t sufficiently mind-boggling, these investigations revealed that the land resources minister himself had benefited from improper real estate deals (he was removed last fall). Despite these efforts, the illegal land use issue isn’t close to being resolved; this year the government is launching yet another round of investigations into continuing abuses.

The way land transfers have played out share certain similarities with the removals of “backward” Native Americans to make way for “civilized” white settlers, a group that both rode and propelled a wave of investment in railroads and other industries, much of it from overseas. Like China today, the US of the late-19th and early-20th centuries had become the world’s fastest growing economy and leading recipient of foreign direct investment. “The only good Indian is a dead Indian” was the general attitude then. “The only good peasant is a displaced peasant” seems the mentality among many



greedy local Chinese officials. Certainly, expulsion of Native Americans expanded the GDP of the freed-up territories. We would also expect converting farm land to industrial use to swell the overall economic pie in China. But all this points to the critical question: who is eating the pie?

The top leaders seem finally to have realized this question matters, as evidenced by the focus on boosting rural incomes and reining in inequality at the National People’s Congress. However, land-reform experts feel that Beijing’s announced reliance on subsidies and tax cuts for farmers is only a band-aid solution, and suggest that the only fair way for peasants to protect, grow and ultimately eat their own pieces of pie is first to grant them long-term, inviolable property rights. In theory, peasants already legally control their land through marketable 30-year leases. But as research by the US-based Rural Development Institute has shown, few peasants are even aware of these rights—and local governments do as they please anyway. Simply carrying through with the implementation of the laws now on the books would convert China’s 135 million hectares of arable land into marketable assets worth about 4 trillion RMB (almost \$500 billion) to their peasant owners.

Will this latest push from Beijing mean a sustained and ultimately successful fight to protect farmers’ property rights from rapacious officials with hearts set on their new Audis? It’s impossible to predict how the coming battle for the rural pie will evolve, and I will explore this question from the field in future reports. At base, however, the government’s goal isn’t to make the countryside a swell place to live for China’s 800 million peasants. There are certainly good reasons for promptly assisting the country’s struggling and dissatisfied farmers—a desire to head off potential social instability not

least among them. But everyone acknowledges that ultimately, the way to raise rural incomes is to make the agricultural sector more productive, which means far fewer farmers working the land. Like other developing countries, China sees its path following that of the West, where ever-smaller percentages of the workforce remain engaged in agriculture.

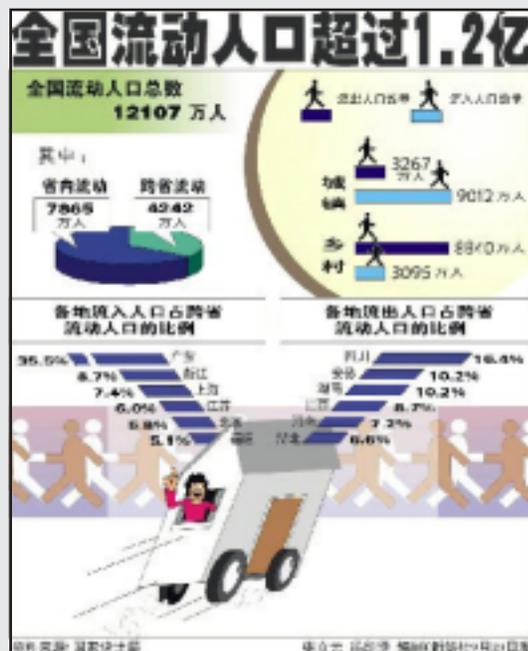
Stagnating rural growth has been an added factor pushing millions toward the cities and factories, but the call to boost farm incomes is of course not a tactic to counteract urbanization and industrialization. Rather, it is part of a strategy to make these processes and their long-term outcomes more equitable and manageable. For example, a farmer who can earn enough money to accumulate substantial savings is a farmer who can one day move to a city and open a shop or restaurant, who can afford the schooling that will give his children a better chance in

the urban economy, etc. China's future lies in the cities. In 1980, three-quarters of Chinese lived on the land and one quarter in urban areas. Given current trends, by the year 2020 it is estimated that this ratio may have almost flipped. Whether they yet realize it or not, a vast number of today's peasants are migrants-in-waiting.

* * *

How many migrants are there today? As the chart below shows, the last detailed census count of the "floating population" (*liudong renkou*) estimated the total at 120 million. However, it's easy to see how this statistic or any of the updated estimates on migrants could be called into doubt. To give some examples just from my neighborhood, several times a week I buy fruit at a shop run by migrant vendors, a friendly couple from Anhui province with two daughters. I thought I had met the whole family long ago—only to find out recently they also have a two-year old son who stays with relatives on the outskirts of town to avoid trouble with the district authorities. Or take the migrants from Henan who collect recyclables in my neighborhood on their flat-bed tricycles. Early this month, as I chatted with a group of them playing cards during lunch break, one of them informed me that China's population is in fact 1.5 billion. This total is 200 million higher than the official figure of 1.3 billion (the State Family Planning Commission claimed last year it will keep the mainland's population below 1.33 billion through 2005). When I asked this gentleman to explain the discrepancy, he replied: "Well, the population has to be higher. We don't report our kids. I've got two I didn't report"—he pointed at a colleague—"and he's got three he didn't report." While official statistics make allowance for undercounting, it wouldn't be surprising if the country's total population, and the number of migrants in particular, were higher than government estimates.

"National Floating Population Total Surpasses 120 Million," reads the chart's title. The data is drawn from China's national census in 2000, the most detailed baseline for current estimates on migrant populations. The figure of 121,070,000 migrants counted in 2000 was calculated based on people who had lived for more than six months in locations other than the one indicated on their official household registration (*hukou*). The pie chart at upper left shows that 65% of migrants (78.6 million) have relocated within their provinces, while 35% of the total (42.4 million) have crossed provincial borders. The graph at upper right shows numbers leaving (man walking right)



and entering (man walking left) cities and towns—32.6 million out, 90.6 million in—and villages and countryside areas—88.4 million out, 30.9 million in. These numbers fail to break down considerable movement between urban areas on the one hand and within rural areas on the other, but they show that that 73% of migrants had moved from homes in villages and countryside areas, while 74.4% of migrants had settled in cities and townships. At bottom left are destinations of migrants as a percentage of total inter-province migration: 35.5% of migrants who left their home provinces went to Guangdong province, followed by Zhejiang, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Beijing and Fujian. The graph at bottom right shows the origins of migrants who left their homes: 16.4% of inter-province migrants were from Sichuan, followed by Anhui, Hunan, Jiangxi, Henan, Hubei. New estimates from the start of this year put the total number of rural workers in the urban areas at 99 million, a yearly increase of about five million. The number of farmers moving to urban areas is expected to begin rising at significantly faster rates, with an estimated 13 million a year in the next several years. (Chart from Xinhua, November 17, 2003. Sources: National Bureau of Statistics of China, Department of Population, Social Science and Technology.)

ly long ago—only to find out recently they also have a two-year old son who stays with relatives on the outskirts of town to avoid trouble with the district authorities. Or take the migrants from Henan who collect recyclables in my neighborhood on their flat-bed tricycles. Early this month, as I chatted with a group of them playing cards during lunch break, one of them informed me that China's population is in fact 1.5 billion. This total is 200 million higher than the official figure of 1.3 billion (the State Family Planning Commission claimed last year it will keep the mainland's population below 1.33 billion through 2005). When I asked this gentleman to explain the discrepancy, he replied: "Well, the population has to be higher. We don't report our kids. I've got two I didn't report"—he pointed at a colleague—"and he's got three he didn't report." While official statistics make allowance for undercounting, it wouldn't be surprising if the country's total population, and the number of migrants in particular, were higher than government estimates.

As discussed in my last report, booming growth in the cities and coastal areas since the early nineties has been in-



One of the migrants from Henan province who collects trash and recyclables in my neighborhood, breaking for a midday nap on his flat-bed tricycle in the alleyway outside my house.

separable from a globalization process that is turning the country into the “workshop of the world”—a workshop staffed by migrant labor. Therefore, when considering future global economic trends, more important than the number of Chinese who have already migrated is the number of those who have yet to do so. One theory holds that the Chinese still on the farm are a kind of linchpin for the world economy. As Deutsche Bank economist Peter Garber proposed at an IMF forum last fall, the “fundamental global imbalance” affecting trade flows is not, as many US politicians would have us believe, the nominal dollar-RMB exchange rate. Rather, “the fundamental global imbalance is in the enormous excess supply of labor in Asia now waiting to enter the modern global economy.” Garber expects that over the coming two decades about 200 million Chinese will need to be integrated into the world economy, a low-end estimate but nonetheless “an entire continent worth of people, a new labor force equivalent to the labor force of the EU or North America... The speed of employment of this group is what will in the end determine the real exchange rate.” (The real exchange rate, which takes the ratio of price levels in two economies into account, is the true measure of what one unit of currency X can buy when converted into currency Y, and is thus basic to determining trade flows.)

Naturally, the migrants manning—or, more often, woman-ing—China’s export machine have been influencing international trade for a good decade already. And because migrants serve as the cheap human glue binding China into the global economy, they have become a contentious symbol. One of China’s few outspoken critics of globalization is Han Deqiang, a professor at Renmin University and author of a book denouncing China’s membership in the WTO. As a member of the “New Left,” he doesn’t suggest returning to central planning or try-

ing to isolate China from the world, as some Old Left remnants still advocate. His main complaint, as he explained to the French daily *Libération*, is “the manner in which China interacts with the world. Are we doing so with dignity, or as a beggar? In my view, our interaction lacks dignity. We are in this world as a migrant worker, existing on the margins, like an exploited country.”

Han is offering up the standard neo-Marxist, center-periphery argument about the global economy, where a core of industrial nations and their corporate agents invest in and exploit developing countries. Mainstream economists, not to mention the Chinese government, counter that this foreign investment is a gold-plated conduit bringing the jobs and technology that have helped stimulate the economy and spread prosperity to millions of Chinese. But either way you look at the issue, equating China’s current role in the world to

that of a migrant worker is accurate: more than anything else, it is the cheap labor China brings to the table that defines the country’s role in the global economy.

We’ve mentioned the migrants filling the coastal export factories and building the infrastructure that lures foreign investment. The ability of China’s urbanites to flock to Ikea and buy Buicks, however, is also linked to the incoming flood of peasants. Migrant construction labor has supported the real-estate craze that has seen many urban Chinese upgrading their lodging. Rising spending power in the cities also benefits from many service-sector prices that barely budge. When I first came to Beijing in 1998, a haircut cost me \$1.20—and thanks to a bottomless supply of migrant hairdressers, the haircut I got last week still cost me \$1.20. Urbanites also have access to the same ever-cheaper “Made in China” manufactured goods American shoppers have been snatching up at Wal-Mart. Migrants contributed to the low-infla-



tion environment underlying the American boom of the nineties, and they have played the same role inside the domestic economy in recent years. As China integrates further into the global economy, migrants will continue to be protagonists of their country's development story—and it is thus truly distressing how little appreciation they receive in an urban society so heavily dependent on their contributions.

* * *

Minutes after stepping onto the platform at Guangzhou's massive railway station, the peasant from Henan province finds himself face to face with a strange and wondrous sight: a 20-foot-long, barely-clad young woman, reclining across a billboard advertisement for lingerie. Enraptured by this alluring lady, the peasant sets down his bags and falls into a dream-like trance, emerging five minutes later to discover his luggage long since gone.

This anecdote was carried in the Chinese press, undoubtedly to humor the urban readership. You can just see some white-collar Beijinger howling with laughter as he reads the account to his wife over breakfast: "Those idiotic peasants! Aren't they just SOOO funny!" While I admit there is comic value here, the tale is of course disheartening. For all too many, this anecdote serves as a distilment of the migrant experience: naive peasant seduced by the siren call of the urban, feel-good life—only to be robbed of his illusions.

Migrants of course aren't quite so innocent; they know what they are getting into. They don't think they are going to step off their train or bus one day and strike it rich the next. They know that they are going to the city to do the jobs no one else wants to do, ranging from the utterly strenuous—performing heavy labor on construction sites—to the utterly menial—standing in elevators pushing buttons for middle-class apartment residents—to the utterly invasive—working as prostitutes.

Still, it's natural to dream, to assume one will work one's way up, to believe one's possibilities are greater than they in fact turn out to be. I couldn't help thinking of the lingerie billboard anecdote when I met Li Jing, a 17-year-old waitress at a small local restaurant. She arrived in Beijing for the first time a few months ago, just prior to the lunar new year. She, too, happened to be from Henan, where her parents grow corn in summer and wheat in the winter. After finishing junior high school, she spent a year taking care of her ill grandmother. Then she heard through a friend's sister's friend in Beijing that there was an opening at a restaurant here. When her mother urged her to go, she at first resisted the idea. I asked why she changed her mind.

"There was nothing happening in my village, and I realized that in the city I could study and learn some things (*xue dian dongxi*). And anyway, once I started to reconsider, my mom changed her mind and said, 'don't

go.' And then I definitely made up my mind to leave."

"So now that you've been here for two months, how do you feel? Are you having the chance to learn anything?"

"No. It's so busy here, there's no time to study anything."

As migrants discover, their urban employer isn't hiring them to help them get ahead, he is hiring them to help himself get ahead—self-improvement is not in the cards. Li Jing now makes a monthly wage of 300 RMB, not even \$40. While housing and meals are covered (the entire staff lives upstairs; most shops and restaurants house their migrants in dormitories of some kind), even as an entry-level salary this seems extraordinarily low to me. When I asked if she had been told how long it would be before she would get a raise, she said no, and that she herself hadn't even asked.

Here is a 17-year-old with no experience beyond her farm and country schoolhouse, plunked down in a huge city. She has come to make money, but she doesn't even know how to ask what her salary will be. She said she wants to stay in Beijing, but admitted she had no idea regarding acquiring resident status, and hadn't really even thought about it. If migrants like Li Jing aren't entirely innocent, you certainly couldn't call them sophisticated either.



Waitress Number 015, displaying her work badge number.

Ms. Li was wearing a plastic name tag, but instead of saying "Li Jing," the badge simply announced the name of the restaurant—as if she had surrendered her identity and had already been branded with the name of her new "master." Larger Beijing restaurants, some of which may have hundreds of chefs and waiters, don't bother giving their staff individualized name tags either, but rather distribute badges with work numbers (*gongpai*). When we interact with persons in most service jobs in the US, we generally deal with a named individual; for example, in America the flight attendant announces, "Hi, I'm Cynthia, and I'll be your purser today." In China, however, we meet a number instead: the conductor welcomes us onto his train car with a little speech that ends: "and if you have any questions please feel free to ask me, Number 0647."

Recently at a busy Korean barbecue restaurant I met Waitress Number 15. Waitress Number 15 was posted at my table to grill small pieces of lamb and then wrap them up in lettuce leaves along with a sauce and slices of raw garlic and chili peppers. While she was from a village in a mountainous area of northeastern Jilin province, she otherwise was a duplicate of Ms. Li: just out of high

school, farmer parents, been in Beijing not quite three months, hoped to stay on. As she prepared each individual piece of lamb, we had the chance for a real conversation. She waxed lyrical about the fresh air in the mountains around her home; she promised she would start sending money back to her parents once she got a raise over her current monthly salary of 500 RMB.

With a few questions, Waitress Number 15 had transformed into Jiang Huan. How many other customers had asked her her name, I wanted to know. She immediately remembered the other “four or five” people who had done so—out of the 1500-plus clients she had served during her 12 weeks on the job (averaging 20 clients a day, one day off a month). Ms. Jiang will remember me too. Partially this is because I’m American, undoubtedly among the first foreigners with whom she’d ever had extended interaction. But I know she’s already added me to that very short list of people who wanted to know her name.

Names matter in China. People pay to have professional auspicious-name-experts choose auspicious names for their newborn children. It seems like all Beijingers carry name cards, and that they are constantly exchanging them with each other. But while urbanites negotiate their cities armed with names and name cards, migrants realize they have no use for name cards because no one cares what their name is. In Mandarin, to be famous is to be *you-ming*, literally, to “have-name.” In cities, migrants have no *ming*; they are numbers, at best.



A migrant carting kids from Beijing back out to her home in the suburbs (she claimed only one of the two was her own). I rode alongside her long enough to learn she was from rural Hebei province, and that she didn't care if she ever went back.

Farmers leaving their close-knit rural communities to become human cogs, replaceable inputs in the impersonal city—such has often been the case with urbanization. Never, however, has there been a case of urbanization quite like the one taking place in China. Over the coming years hundreds of millions of peasants will be trading in their plows for—for what? For a number? Or for a name?

How quickly migrants are granted names—by which I mean real acceptance in urban society—by the government as well as by their fellow citizens—will have major implications for China’s development. Just as the speed of migrants’ integration into the global economy will help determine trade flows, the manner of their integration into the Chinese urban fabric will unavoidably affect everything from social stability to the pace of political reform to energy and resource consumption—all issues with direct international ramifications. When hundreds of millions shift their weight inside China, the whole nation can tilt. It’s everyone’s problem. □

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