

The State Connection in China's Rural-Urban Migration¹

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This study explores the role of China's rural local state-owned and urban state-owned units in its rural-urban migration process. Most studies on Chinese migration have focused on migrants moving from rural to urban areas through informal mechanisms outside of the state's control. They therefore treat the Chinese state as an obstructionist force and dismiss its facilitative role in the migration process. By documenting rural local states' "labor export" strategies and urban state units' employment of millions of peasants, this article provides a corrective to the existing literature. It highlights and explains the state connection in China's rural-urban migration.

Labor is . . . a special kind of commodity. What we do is to fetch a good price for this special commodity.

Labor bureau official from Laomei county, 1996

If we want efficiency, we have to hire migrant workers.

Party secretary of a state textile factory in Shanghai, 1997

China's rural-urban migration has received much attention from the scholarly community in recent years. Numerous empirical studies of the migration process have focused on the villagers who circumvented state control and migrated to urban areas via private recruitment or informal networks of kinship and communal ties (Roberts, 1997; Solinger, 1999; West and Zhao, 2000; Xiang, 2000; Zhang, 2001). While some authors have mentioned state sponsorship as one of a variety of migration channels, most have given a short shrift to the role of the Chinese state or portrayed the state as a

¹The author would like to thank Daniel Kelliher for his advice throughout this project. He would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers from the *IMR* for their constructive comments, and the following individuals for reading and critiquing earlier drafts: Ron Aminzade, Anita Chan, Raymond Duvall, Jim Glassman, Allen Isaacman, Barrett McCormick, Kevin O'Brien, Jean Oi, Kathryn Sikkink, Dorothy Solinger, Michael Sullivan and Jonathan Unger. He acknowledges the support provided by the post-doctoral fellowship from the Center for East Asian Studies at Stanford University (2002–2003) that made revision of the paper possible. Finally, the author owes a debt of gratitude to all the Chinese interviewees, including many people from the Laomei (disguised name) labor service company. All of their names have been disguised to protect their identities.

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0197-9183/05/3902.0150

negative or obstructionist force intent on blocking the rural dwellers' access to cities. According to this view, massive rural-urban migration in China had started with a decline in the state's power early in the reform, and it continued in spite of lingering migration control by the state.

This view resonates with our knowledge of the Chinese state's historical practice of restricting population movement within the country. In the pre-reform era, the state held peasants back from the cities through a variety of stringent and harsh mechanisms that included household registration, food rationing and urban employment control (Chan, 1994; Guang, 2001). Thus, a softening of control by the state in the above areas during the reform had a cataclysmic effect on the surging peasant migration (Zhou, 1996; Du and Bai, 1997:27–31; Roberts, 1997; Zhao, 1998:166–170). To the extent that a majority of these migrants relied on informal rather than state-sponsored channels, this view is also justified in drawing our attention to the importance of economic and societal forces unleashed by the reform.

However, dwelling extensively on its obstructionist role, or leaving the state out of the picture, neglects the systematic and facilitative actions by various state actors in promoting rural-urban migration during the reform. Millions of Chinese peasants went through, rather than around, state agencies and found work in the urban state industries during the reform. The prevailing view on the state's irrelevance or obstructionism needs to be accompanied by a close look at the "positive" state connection in the migration process (*see* Solinger, 1999). Besides, underlying the conventional view was a monolithic notion of the Chinese state that did not differentiate among the constituent state units or institutions. Such an undifferentiated view of the Chinese state often led scholars to emphasize the restrictive central state policies or the discriminatory urban state practices toward the migrants, but it ignored the migration-promoting action by the local rural state and urban state enterprises.

This study aims to provide a corrective to the conventional view by focusing on the active effort by the rural local state in promoting and facilitating peasant migration to the urban-based state work units. It seeks to demonstrate that initiatives by the local state and recruitment by the state-owned units shaped the migratory path for millions of Chinese peasants. For these peasants at least, rural-urban migration was as much a state-directed as a market-based process.² Implicit in my discussion of the local rural state's

²Two caveats are in order here. One is that the focus of this article is on how the local Chinese

partnership with urban state enterprises is a conception of the Chinese state as a heterogeneous entity rife with internal conflicts. Highlighting the state connection will allow us to explore intra-state conflicts in China that have only sharpened during the reform. Here I agree with those scholars who have long argued that the Chinese state is best regarded not as a unified structure, but as an institutional ensemble that articulates a set of complex and often-times conflicting apparatuses and practices (Walder, 1986; Shue, 1988; Oi, 1989; Perry, 1994; Lieberthal, 1995; O'Brien, 1996). The outcome of the state action, then, "should be understood as the emergent, unintended complex resultant of what rival 'states within the state' have done and are doing on a complex strategic terrain" (Jessop, 1990:9).

The data for this study is drawn from several sources: field notes and interviews with rural migrants, labor officials and urban managers from seven months of fieldwork in China in 1996–1997 and from two follow-up visits in June 2001 and December 2002; primary documents as well as secondary Chinese-language material on labor policy and migration; and official statistics on the state-sector employment of rural workers. My principal fieldwork sites included rural Laomei county located in the central part of Anhui province and the cities of Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou that were among the main destination sites for China's rural migrants, including those from the Laomei county, Anhui province.

The first part of the article explores the role of the rural local state in organizing the migration of a significant number of peasants. I start with a participant observation of a team of officials from Laomei visiting the migrants from their area in Shanghai in 1996. I then situate the Laomei experience in a national context by analyzing a multitude of practices by rural officials throughout the country to promote the out-migration of peasants from their areas. I end this section with an explanation of the rationale behind the various practices, focusing on the rural officials' self-understanding about migration and local development. In the second part, I turn to the destination end of migration and examine the employment of

state and state-owned units promoted and facilitated the migration of a large number of peasants into urban factories. I make no claim that these state agencies and enterprises constituted the main avenue of peasant migration. The other is that my focus here is on the local rural state and the state-owned work units. I thus leave aside discussions of the role by the central state and urban administrative authorities in the migration process. The central state and urban authorities were at best ambivalent about the influx of rural migrants, but they refrained from prohibiting all of them.

rural workers by the state-owned work units in the urban areas. I discuss different categories of rural workers in the state sector and explain how their transfusion into state enterprises was intended to help the state enterprises overcome the deficiency of state planning in the 1980s and to enhance their market competitiveness in the 1990s. In conclusion, I draw attention to the state connection in China's rural-urban migration and illustrate the heterogeneity of the reformist state with a field observation about the behavior of Laomei officials.

THE RURAL LOCAL STATE AND LABOR EXPORT AS DEVELOPMENT

On a cold morning just days before the Chinese New Year in 1996, four labor bureau officials from Laomei, a rural county in Anhui province, met with twelve migrant women in Shanghai for what had then become an annual assessment of the situation of the Laomei migrants working in Shanghai's factories.³ The four officials were on their last stop of a whirlwind "labor export" tour covering several southern and coastal cities. The women, all middle-aged, represented Laomei migrants from over a dozen factories in Shanghai. The labor bureau had designated these women as "team leaders" (*lingdai*) whose responsibility was to counsel and supervise the thousand-strong, mostly female workers transported by the bureau to work in Shanghai's factories. At the meeting, the twelve women provided the officials with a variety of information about the status of the Laomei workers – their working conditions and compensation levels, past incidents of conflict with the Shanghai managers and workers, their turnover rate, and, perhaps most importantly for the officials, the likelihood of them returning to work in Shanghai after the holiday season. As the meeting drew to a close, Director Wu of the labor bureau exhorted all the representatives at the meeting to redouble their effort to keep their teams stable in the coming year. He concluded the meeting by saying: "We need to keep the Shanghai base, the state enterprise base and push outward to other areas and enterprises in the region and seek new partners in exporting labor services from our county."

Located in the middle of China's central eastern province of Anhui,

³Through arrangement with the Laomei labor bureau, I participated in a series of meetings between the officials, Laomei migrant representatives and state managers in Shanghai in January 1997. I followed up such meetings with many hours of interviews with the officials, migrant representatives and their managers.

Laomei county had about 760,000 people according to the 1990 census. About 70 percent of its adult working population was employed in agriculture. In the mid-1990s, there was an estimated surplus of labor of about 100,000 in the county. Since 1985, when the first batch of contract workers left the county, the local officials had been arranging "labor export" (*laowu shuchu*) to various cities through the county's labor bureau and its subsidiary labor service company (*laodong fuwu gongsi*, hereafter LSC) for over ten years. By the late 1990s, over 30,000 peasants from Laomei had gone to work in cities through the arrangement by the county's LSC. Most of these migrant workers ended up working in the state enterprises, and one third were still under contract validated by the LSC in 1997. Shanghai, China's largest city less than four hundred miles away, received its first batch of peasant workers from Laomei in 1986. Over the years, the city's state enterprises had employed thousands of Laomei workers arranged by the Laomei LSC. Owing to a concentration of industrial enterprises in the city, Shanghai remains a most popular destination for Laomei's migrants today.

Laomei was not alone in having an active local state involved extensively in the rural-urban migration process. Nor were Shanghai's state enterprises unique in employing large numbers of rural workers during the reform, as will be detailed in the next section. The Laomei-Shanghai connection suggests an institutional partnership at the level of rural state and urban enterprises that had led to the migration of millions of rural workers to cities during the reform. The number of migrants sponsored by the local rural state was especially high in the first half of the 1980s. One national survey done in the mid-1980s put the number of "organized migrants" (*i.e.*, migrants organized or sponsored by local state agencies) at 36 percent of the total number of rural migrants (Yu, 1987:26–31). The importance of local state sponsorship had decreased somewhat in the 1990s as informal channels of migration opened up for many peasants. This was especially the case for those with a destination in the private or informal sectors. Official statistics recorded that 16 percent of all first-time migrants in 1998 were organized by official labor departments, which seemed to be on the high side (State Statistical Bureau, 1999:128). But, insofar as formal employment in the state sector was concerned, a significant proportion of the rural migrant workers continued to be arranged through the local state agencies in the rural areas. A 1997 national survey by China's official trade union found that government units at the county level or below organized the migration of 20.6 percent of the rural workers for China's urban industries and indirectly assisted the latter in recruiting another 21.3 percent (*see* ACFTU, 1997).

The local state's early and continuous involvement in rural-urban migration during the reform was partly due to its ties with urban industries forged in the past. In the pre-reform days, many rural government units (*e.g.*, the communes) regularly sent peasants to work in the urban state enterprises as temporary workers (Blecher, 1983, 1988). They often, if not always, acted as subcontractors who selected the peasant workers, assigned them to work in specific locations, and even paid them with rural work-points. In those days, the urban work units typically remunerated the rural government rather than the peasant workers themselves for the labor service.

The pre-reform interbureaucratic arrangements were discontinued after the abolition of rural communes in the early 1980s. But many rural state officials started to initiate new ties with the urban state enterprises through their own efforts. Much ingenuity and energy would go into setting up a new kind of rural-urban connection. Consider the following excerpt from an internal report from the Laomei labor officials describing their initiatives:

We first did thorough research on the availability of our own local labor resource. We then surveyed networks of Laomei natives living outside the county and analyzed the demand for labor in other areas. We searched far and wide, and compiled a list of industrial and commercial organizations and their annual reports. We even tried to collect telephone books from some big and medium-sized cities. . . . We then sent 3,000 letters at three different times to relevant work units and organizations nationwide, and another batch of more than 300 letters to Laomei natives working outside the county. On top of all that, we sent our cadres all over the country to gather information, make new friends and contacts with potential employers and acquire experience, all in an effort to 'sell ourselves' (*mai ziji*)" (Laomei Laodong Fuwu Gongsi, 1993:2-3).

Owing to such initiatives, Laomei officials pioneered what they called a "full-service" (*quancheng fuwu*) labor export system early in the 1980s that was reminiscent of, yet different from, the pre-reform practice (Laomei Laodong Fuwu Gongsi, 1996). Under this system, the county labor bureau replaced the commune as the principal sponsor of temporary workers from the county. It no longer acted as the subcontractor for the peasant workers, who were now required to enter into direct labor contracts with the employers. Instead, it focused on advertising, recruiting, training and transporting these workers in addition to certifying their contracts. For the group hiring of female workers, the labor bureau sent extra personnel, *i.e.*, middle-aged team leaders, to accompany them to the work site and supervise them in the factory dorm.

Enterprising Laomei officials were certainly among the most pro-active in promoting "labor export" from the local area. But throughout the country

in the 1980s and 1990s, rural officials at all levels of government embraced migration as a strategy for local economic development. One township official in Laomei told me that he “couldn’t wait for the surplus labor to go to the cities or other places to find work . . . because they can at least earn some money outside whereas they would just be extra mouths to feed if they stayed home” (Interview, August 1996). As was the case in Laomei county, officials from another county in Anhui province formed a “leadership committee” in order to organize systematically the export of local labor service (Zhang, 1990). By the mid-1990s, the provincial officials had convened several specialized meetings whose objective was to promote migration. At each meeting, these officials urged their subordinates to redouble the effort to export Anhui’s labor to other areas (Author interviews, July 1996 and February 1997).

Such local initiatives were most common in areas where neither agriculture nor rural industries were well developed. Many land-locked rural counties and provinces in central and western China declared “labor export” as a key development strategy for their areas in the 1980s and 1990s (Hare and Zhao, 1996). In Guizhou province, a relatively poor region in southwestern China, officials had set up a provincial-level agency as early as in 1988 just to organize labor export to nearby Guangdong province (author interview, July 1996). In Hunan province, a brief news report on the success of some local peasants in Guangzhou inspired officials from one mountain region to promote out-migration so as to “alleviate poverty and achieve prosperity” (Jiang, 1995:56–58). These Hunan officials publicly declared labor export as a developmental goal and handed down migration quotas for the lower-level officials. By the mid-1990s, they had established over 300 well-staffed labor export stations throughout the region. Sometimes, the rural officials could be so pressured by the need for out-migration that they were willing to promise anything in order to get their workers out of the rural areas. In one extreme case I encountered during my interview, officials from one county in Sichuan province agreed to provide both the investment and raw materials to a Guangdong employer in 1985 in exchange for simply taking along some rural workers from their county to work in Guangdong.

In the inland areas like Anhui, Guizhou and Hunan, labor export was often regarded as a primary means of local development. It had been likened to a costless training program for peasants to acquire new ideas and skills or a smokeless industry that would increase the financial strength of inland areas (Interview, September 1996). Officials from these areas encouraged out-migration, but they also welcomed the return migrants because the

returnees were regarded as likely to “start new enterprises and enrich the local area . . . with an enlightened mind and new skills acquired from the developed region” (Dai, 2002:4).

In addition to doing things at home, many rural officials had gone on frequent information-gathering and promotional trips to the cities. In the cities, they took on the role of official sales persons for their regions' excess labor resources. A good part of their time was spent on smoothing relations with city officials and on persuading city employers to recruit workers through their particular agencies. Guangdong province was a popular destination for such official visits in the 1980s and 1990s. Its labor bureaus reported receiving numerous official delegations on labor export missions from the surrounding provinces. By the mid-1990s, many migrant-sending provinces so aggressively promoted migration to the coastal cities and provinces (mainly Guangdong) that the latter urged restraint and demanded help in holding back rural migrants.

Besides such promotional trips and specific labor export programs, rural officials had also worked closely with their city counterparts to establish “labor bases” (*laowu jidi*) in designated rural areas. The purpose of setting up such bases was to regularize the transfer of labor from one particular rural area to selected cities and/or sectors. It was hoped that such bases could help reduce the poverty level in the poor rural areas by generating employment opportunities. Labor base agreements were typically drawn at the request of city officials who were either concerned about an urban labor shortage or eager to score points with the central government's poverty-alleviation program. For example, when city construction companies faced recruitment problems in the mid-1980s, the Ministry of Construction enlisted the help of rural officials and established over 30 rural labor bases in ten provinces. Local officials hosting such bases were given the responsibility of training and supplying mostly manual workers to the urban construction companies. It was thus no coincidence that the number of peasant construction workers would increase to 20 million and make up 90 percent of the manual labor force in the urban construction industry by the late 1990s (ACFTU, 1997: 94). Some urban government units, especially the labor department, were also motivated by the central government's poverty-alleviation programs in the 1990s to set up labor bases in particularly poor regions (Interviews, 1997, 2002).

In general, rural government officials held the view that out-migration was conducive to local development. Indeed, officials in some areas did not hesitate to publicly declare migration a main developmental strategy for the

local economy. Their rhetoric and practice, however, suggested that their self-understandings about “local development” contained at least three layers of meaning, ranging from a reference to the national goal of market reform to narrow bureaucratic interests. At a very general level, many officials understood local development as following the central government’s reform agenda of creating a market economy, including a national labor market. Local development was about doing one’s part in facilitating “free” labor exchange between the rural and urban areas. Just as Laomei officials viewed labor as a commodity to be circulated for the best price, the local officials from Guangdong approved of migration because it promoted “an optimal combination of labor and other resources” in a manner that linked the countryside to the city (Boshan Quwei, 1994:46).

At a more tangible level, rural officials would point to the beneficial effects of migrants’ remittances on the rural economy. As in the case of international migration, domestic migrants’ remittances were regarded as an important source of development finance (Ratha, 2003:157–175). Peasant households spent the remittances on a variety of things, including house construction, farm inputs, daily livelihood and family obligations (Du and Bai, 1997:134; Murphy, 2002:91). The volume of migrant remittances had grown over the years, and had become a quite significant source of local state revenue in the 1990s. Taking Anhui province as an example, migrant remittances were estimated to have reached 7.5 billion yuan in 1992, two billion yuan more than the provincial government budget that year (Zhou, 1994:45).⁴ In 1994, the remittances by Anhui migrants made up close to a quarter of their households’ net income. The comparable figure for another rural province, Sichuan, was about 20 percent. In particular, researchers found that these remittances had become a major source of the peasants’ cash income (about 50%) or general welfare and that their contribution to household finance was the greatest in the least-developed areas (Du and Bai, 1997:130–133; Rozelle, Taylor and DeBrauw, 1999).

Last but not least, it was in the financial interest of rural state agencies to sponsor the migration of as many peasants as possible. For many rural officials, the meaning of “local development” would not transcend the replenishment of the local state coffer. Increasingly in the 1990s, many local governments derived a significant portion of their supplemental or extra-

⁴In 2002, 6 million migrant workers from Anhui were reported to have earned over 24 billion yuan outside of the province. According to the same report, migratory employment accounted for 30 to 40 percent of the peasant’s annual net income in some areas (Zhang, 2003).

budget revenue from various mandatory fees and services related to migration. For example, the Laomei labor bureau collected about 750,000 yuan simply from issuing migration permits (*wugong zheng*) in just two months around the Chinese New Year in 1997. That sum was about ten times the total budgeted wage amount for the LSC staff in 1997 (Laomei Laodong Fuwu Gongsi, 1996:3). According to the county officials, the Anhui provincial labor bureau netted a much larger amount of 8.5 million yuan from issuing permits in 1996 (Author interview, January 1997).

Bureaucratic interest, along with the rural officials' perception of local developmental needs, had thus led many county governments to set up labor service stations (*laodong fuwu zhan*) down the administrative ladder to the township level after 1994. Anhui province alone boasted more than 1,400 such stations in 1996, about twenty stations for each county. In many destination cities, the provincial labor bureau opened more than a dozen branch offices after the mid-1990s. Many more such stations were established and staffed by the county-level government units (Author interview, February 1997). Spread across rural townships and urban districts throughout China, these local stations constituted a dense network of local state support for the rural-urban migration by connecting peasants to the urban employers.

MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE STATE-OWNED UNITS

Having looked at the crucial role of the rural local state in sponsoring and organizing the migration of a large number of peasant workers in China, I now turn to examining the state connection at the migrants' destination, the urban state units. The state-owned units used to dominate the Chinese economy. They formed a critical part of the Chinese state apparatus by combining administrative and productive functions. Indeed, one might label the interlocking system of state-owned industries and their supervising ministries as China's productive state apparatus and view it as an integral part of the Chinese state.

It was among the urban state employers that rural officials found the most willing partners at the beginning of the reform. This was partly due to the fact that the former were similarly accustomed to bureaucratic channels of labor recruitment. In the 1990s, the state-owned industries had undergone several rounds of reform that gradually separated the productive units, *i.e.*, the enterprises, from the supervising state bureaucracies. But, generally speaking, they were still subject to more government control than the non-

state sector even in the 1990s. This was especially the case in the area of personnel and employment decisions (Zhao and Nichols, 1996).

The extent of the state enterprises' employment of rural workers varied by region and by industrial sector. One would expect to find a large number of rural workers employed by the state industries in regions traditionally dominated by the state economy (Knight, Song and Jia, 1999). But even in other regions, the state sector could still account for a significant proportion of the rural workers. For example, Chinese researchers found in 1996 that about 14 percent of the rural migrants from Sichuan and Anhui ended up working in the state sector (Du and Bai, 1997:100). In terms of sectoral concentration, researchers found that the state industries in textile, mining and construction employed proportionally more rural workers than did other industries (Solinger, 1998). A 1997 national survey by China's official trade union showed that rural migrants comprised 8–14 percent of the workforce in the above mentioned areas and agriculture-related industries (ACFTU, 1997:1275).

One needs to keep in mind that, overall, a relatively small proportion of all rural migrants ended up working in the state sector rather than in the private or informal economy. The low overall percentage, however, understates the significance of rural migrants in the state sector in several ways. First, the state sector's hiring of peasant workers preceded the massive surge of rural-urban migration in the late 1980s and 1990s. It had an early demonstration effect on other urban employers as well as on aspiring rural migrants. Second, the absolute number of peasant workers employed by the state-owned units still numbered in the millions throughout the reform. In 2000, the state-owned units employed at least 3.4 million rural workers according to official statistics (State Statistical Bureau, 2001:29). They employed about 7.7 million at year-end in the peak year of 1994 (State Statistical Bureau, 1995:33). Official statistics were likely to underreport the real number of migrant workers in the state sector because of nonreporting by the employers and the reporting of peasant workers under other categories like temporary or out-of-plan workers.

Finally, the overall significance of migrant workers for the state-sector economy went beyond their numbers. To the state managers, the transfusion of these workers into the state economy helped them to achieve two larger objectives in the first and second decades of the reform: helping the state-owned enterprises overcome the constraints of state planning in the 1980s and enhancing their competitiveness vis-à-vis the non-state sector that already had access to flexible and cheap rural labor in the 1990s.

China's state enterprises had a long history of employing rural workers. The so-called "peasant worker" (*yigong yinong*) system was created in the 1950s, and it was revived on the eve of reform after a period of interruption during the Cultural Revolution from 1965–1975 (Blecher, 1983:734). In the early 1980s, state enterprises employed over 9 million temporary, mostly rural, workers who made up 10 percent of the regular workforce (Walder, 1984:45). As formidable barriers to migration still existed in those days (*e.g.*, the household registration system, the near-monopoly on jobs by the state sector in the cities), informal migration remained a trickle, and millions of peasants would not have gained a foothold in the city without active help from urban state employers. It was only after the mid-1980s that the migrants employed in the private and informal economies began to exceed those in the state and collective sectors by any significant number. In this sense, the state sector was the harbinger of things to come: they encouraged the rural-urban flow of labor early on during the reform and showed the way for the non-state employers who were interested in hiring peasant workers.

One may assess the full extent of the state sector's employment of peasant workers by analyzing several categories of statistics from 1978 to 2000. Some of these statistics had gaps for some years, and definitional changes would further complicate the problem of analysis. But a careful examination of all these numbers would reveal a composite picture of the full extent of the state sector's employment of rural workers. Consequently, we could gain a comprehensive understanding of the role played by the state employers in China's rural-to-urban migration.

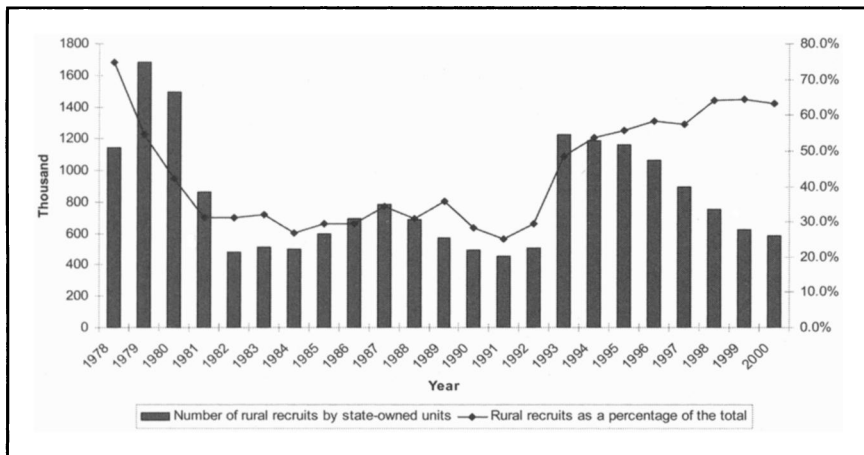
The first set of statistics was about the number of annual recruitment from the rural areas by the state-owned units (*see* Figure I). These rural workers were hired with the approval of the government's labor bureaus and planning agencies. Considered "in-plan" (*jihua nei*) hires, these workers were generally regarded as part of the state units' permanent work force.⁵ Most, if not all, of these rural workers were allowed to change their rural registra-

⁵The opposite of "in-plan" was "out-of-plan" (*jihua wai*). The in-plan/out-of-plan categories were created before the reform and were eventually phased-out in the 1990s. When these categories existed, only the "in-plan" workers were regarded as part of an enterprise's permanent workforce. But since the state plan would almost inevitably miscalculate the actual labor need at an enterprise, the employer was sometimes allowed to hire additional personnel outside of the plan. Hence the term "out-of-plan." As a rule, the "out-of-plan" hires still needed approval by the labor bureau, but they were not regarded as part of an enterprise's permanent workforce.

tion to an urban one, a significant fact that distinguished them from most other rural workers who had to retain their rural residence status.

Figure I presents data on the number of annual rural recruits by state-owned units from 1978 to 2000. On average, the state enterprises recruited around 830,000 in-plan workers each year from the rural areas during this period. In percentage terms, the rural recruits accounted for about 45 percent of the annual hires by the state-owned units, excluding college students, retired military personnel and transfers mandated by the government. Since 1991, an increasing proportion of the annual state recruits came from rural rather than urban areas (*e.g.*, from 25% in 1991 to 63% in 2000), granted that the total number of new hires by the state sector began to decline after 1993.

Figure I. Rural Recruitment by the State-owned Units, 1978–2000



Source: State Statistical Bureau, *Zhongguo laodong tongji nianjian*, 1993–2001

In addition to regular recruitment channels, tens of thousands of rural residents changed their household registration from rural to urban through the so-called *nongzhuanfei* process. *Nongzhuanfei* literally means “changing from agriculture to nonagriculture.” It referred to a bureaucratically-managed process whereby qualified rural residents were given urban registrations because of school, marriage, urban land acquisition and/or employment (Chang and Zhang, 1999). Most, if not all, *nongzhuanfei* migrants ended up in the state sector, yet official statistics on rural recruitment or rural

workers usually did not include these migrants. In the 1990s, over one million rural residents acquired urban status each year under *nongzhuanfei* (see Table 1).

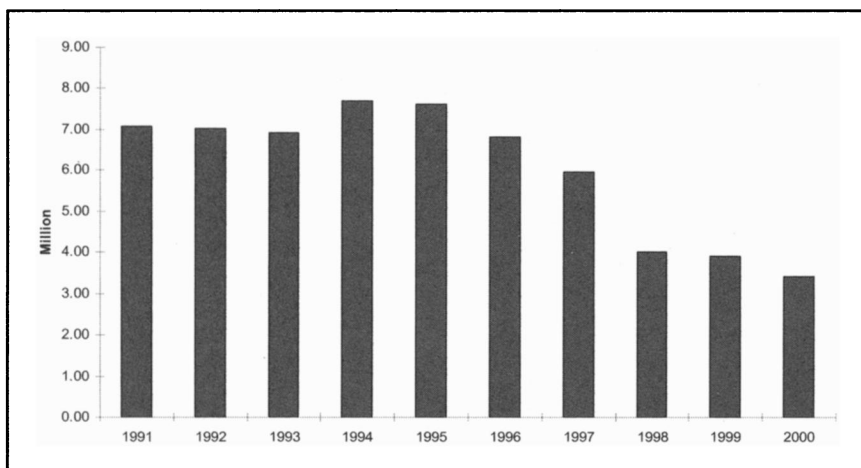
TABLE 1
NUMBER OF NONGZHUANFEI MIGRANTS (1,000)

	Number of nongzhuanfei migrants
1989	1,003
1990	678
1991	656
1992	1,358
1993	1,265
1994	1,259
1995	1,388
1996	1,202
1997	1,326
1998	929
1999	870
2000	1,003

Source: China Statistical Bureau, *Zhongguo Laodong Gongzi Tongji Nianjian*, 1990; *Zhongguo Laodong Tongji Nianjian*, 1991–2001.

Another set of statistics reported the total number of rural workers employed by the state-owned units on the last day of the calendar year. Unlike the in-plan hires mentioned above, these rural workers retained their original household registration and did not enjoy the same status as regular urban employees. The year-end statistics represented a snapshot picture of the state sector employment of rural workers at one point in time, so they did not necessarily include temporary or seasonal workers hired and released during the year. On average, the state-owned units had about 6 million rural workers at the end of each year from 1991–2000 (Figure II). As Figure II also shows, the total number of year-end employment of rural workers peaked in 1994 at 7.7 million. It began to decline somewhat after 1997 when all state employers came under great pressure to cut their labor forces in general and to restrict hiring rural workers in particular. Proportionally, the state sector still accounted for 38 percent of all rural workers employed by all formal economic sectors (*i.e.*, state, collective and other ownership units) in 2000.

Finally, the statistics above did not include a large contingent of rural workers on temporary or out-of-plan assignment in the state sector. Both out-of-plan (*jihuawai*) and temporary (*linshigong*) workers were considered short-term hires with a status inferior to that of regular employees. The difference between the two types of workers was more terminological and

Figure II. Number of Rural Workers in the State-owned Units at Year-end

Source: State Statistical Bureau, *Zhongguo laodong tongji nianjian*, 1992–2001

reflective of historical practices than substantive. Chinese officials preferred the term out-of-plan before 1993 because planned quota was used as the benchmark to evaluate a state enterprise's employment situation. Shortly before 1993, they introduced the plan-neutral category of temporary workers, which eventually replaced the out-of-plan designation. For the years when the government kept both sets of statistics (1988–1993), the out-of-plan workers designated a slightly more formal category than the temporary workers, as the former were still likely to have received the official approval from the labor bureau whereas the latter could be hired by the enterprise managers on their own.

Table 2 presents data on the out-of-plan and temporary workers employed in the state units.⁶ The state-owned units in China employed about 9.4 million out-of-plan workers on average each year from 1978 to 1993. In regions that experienced high growth in the 1980s and 1990s, out-of-plan hiring was even more pronounced than in other regions. According to one

⁶Not all “out-of-plan” and temporary workers came from the countryside, but rural migrants generally made up more than one third of the workers in both categories in 1990–1992 according to official statistics. Regional variation can be significant. In Beijing, for example, rural workers accounted for 69 percent of the city's “out-of-plan” workers and 78 percent of its temporary workforce in 1992. The comparable numbers for Shanghai were 21 percent and 40 percent for the same year (State Statistical Bureau, 1993:301–309).

report from Guangdong, the out-of-plan workers made up 39 percent of all the new recruits by the state enterprises in the province in 1985 (Ji, 1986: 19–20). Another study by the Shanghai labor bureau found that one third of the city's state and collective enterprises (over 10,000 in all) employed about 172,000 out-of-plan workers from outside the Shanghai area in 1990 (Shanghai Laodong, 1990:40–41). In Beijing, the number of out-of-plan workers in the state sector reached 363,000 in the early 1990s (Beijing Statistical Bureau, 1993:48–49).

TABLE 2
NUMBER OF OUT-OF-PLAN AND TEMPORARY WORKERS IN THE STATE-OWNED UNITS (1,000)

Year	Out-of-Plan Workers	Temporary Workers
1978	9,040	
1979	9,120	
1980	9,690	
1981	9,970	
1982	10,020	
1983	9,470	
1984	8,760	
1985	9,990	
1986	10,570	
1987	10,580	
1988	10,418	3,362
1989	9,478	3,252
1990	8,840	3,534
1991	8,721	3,979
1992	8,470	4,287
1993	6,906	6,128
1994		5,433
1995		5,347
1996		5,060
1997		4,746
1998		4,127
1999		3,560
2000		3,322

Source: State Statistical Bureau, *Zhongguo Laodong Gongzi Tongji Ziliao*, 1978–87; *Zhongguo Laodong Gongzi Tongji Nianjian*, 1989–90; *Zhongguo Laodong Tongji Nianjian*, 1991–2001.

Besides the out-of-plan workers, rural migrants also made up a significant proportion of the category of workers designated as temporary workers. The state-owned units hired such workers ostensibly to cover short-term labor needs, but many ended up employing them for multiple years at low pay without any guarantee of job security. In Beijing, state-owned units employed more than half a million temporary workers in 1996 under a newly created category that also included the city's out-of-plan workers

(Beijing Statistical Bureau, 1997:80).⁷ For the country as a whole, the state-owned units employed between three to six million temporary staff and workers (*linshi zhigong*) annually from 1988 to 2000.

The upshot of the above analyses is that, altogether, tens of millions of rural workers were recruited into different categories of employment by the state-owned units each year throughout the reform. These workers constituted an important stream of China's rural-urban migration in the 1980s and 1990s. The absolute number of rural workers in the state sector decreased somewhat in the late 1990s, which was partly a reflection of the overall decline in state sector employment during the same period. But, proportionally, state-owned units still accounted for a significant portion of rural workers across all ownership types in the formal economy. And they continued to recruit more ordinary workers from rural than from urban areas in the 1990s (*see* Figure I).

Why were the state-owned units in cities interested in hiring workers from the rural areas? The obvious answer of low cost may not apply to both decades of the reform. During the first decade, a market-based pricing mechanism was still not in place for the state-owned units. State managers had to spend more time fending off labor bureau officials than their business competitors. They turned to rural workers in the 1980s primarily in order to overcome rigid control imposed by the labor planners. After 1992, the state retreat and market ascendance provided a new set of motivations for the state managers (Naughton, 1992). Their primary purpose in employing rural migrants was the enhancement of enterprise competitiveness. Labor cost considerations thus became more important in the 1990s than in the 1980s. So were nonprice factors that could contribute to the disciplining of the workforce.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, many state managers turned to the countryside for labor supply to circumvent rigid labor planning. Labor allocation traditionally had been a prerogative of labor bureau officials rather than state managers. The former exercised a tight control over the labor quota (*zhaogong zhibiao*) in order to control the size of the overall workforce in the state-owned units. This practice, however, hindered the state managers' ability to hire workers according to production needs. In the fast-growing regions, the labor quotas handed down from the labor bureau often fell far short of the actual labor need every year in the 1980s.

⁷Beijing combined the categories of out-of-plan and temporary workers into one category of temporary workers after 1993.

In 1985, for example, state enterprises in Guangdong were allowed a meager 2.9 percent increase in their labor force while production grew 26 percent from the previous year (Ji, 1986:19). Faced with this situation, many state managers had to hire additional workers “outside” of the state plan, namely temporary and out-of-plan workers, in order to meet the needs of production. Since the urban residents generally shunned employment as temporary or out-of-plan workers, state managers brought in large numbers of rural workers.

Rigid labor planning left another legacy from the pre-reform days that created an opening for rural workers during the reform. For decades, China practiced the so-called “fixed labor” (*guding gong*) system whereby urban residents were guaranteed work but were denied interunit or internal mobility on the job unless sanctioned by the labor bureaus. As a result, a large number of urban “fixed workers” accumulated in low-end, front-line or undesirable industrial jobs on the eve of reform. When the government started to introduce limited mobility in the early 1980s, there was a rush to the exit by these urban workers. Inside many enterprises, front-line industrial workers sought to reclassify their jobs (*bian gong*) to become administrative or support personnel. Across enterprises, workers deserted undesirable industrial sectors *en masse* (e.g., mining, dock work, apparel, silk, textile, sanitation, railroads and construction) to get into state-run commerce and service sectors.

For example, Guangzhou experienced what one analyst called a “sudden, unexpected labor shift” in 1984–85 when over 10,000 state enterprise workers quit their industrial jobs for service-sector positions in the private or collective industries (Staff Reporter, 1985). One district in Shanghai reported losing 17 percent of its transportation workers to voluntary exit in 1983 (Zhao and Qian, 1984:18). This had led labor officials to decry a sudden increase of “labor commodity consciousness” among the urban workers in those early years of reform (Zhou, 1986:13). The trend of urban worker exit continued through the late 1980s, and was particularly acute in regions that had experienced fast growth in the non-state economy. For example, a fast-growing city in Guangdong reported that 10 percent of the city’s “permanent” workers quit their state-sector jobs in the textile, silk and apparel industries in 1988, which left a gaping hole in the staffing levels of state-owned enterprises in the city (Foshan Labor Bureau, 1988:22–23).

Thus, in the first decade of reform, the state employers turned to peasant workers in order to overcome the cumulative effect of the past “fixed labor” system and to circumvent continued labor quota control by recruiting

out-of-plan workers. The distinction between the in-plan and out-of-plan workers provided a key institutional basis for the emergence of a segmented urban labor market after the 1990s. Unlike in the case of many developing countries with a continuously-running capitalist economy, the origins of labor market segmentation in China could be traced back to state control of residence status and labor migration under socialism (Piore, 1979; Mazumdar, 1983; Fan, 2002). As Cindy Fan (2002) pointed out, such control often rested not on just one policy (*e.g.*, out-of-plan workers) but on an array of state institutions (*e.g.*, residence control, job classification, etc.) that were interwoven with one another and, eventually, with non-state institutions (*e.g.*, education, native-place ties, etc.) as well. As a result, rural workers came to concentrate in a few industries and select occupations within these industries permitted by labor planners.

As market reform progressed into the 1990s, the labor bureaus gradually relaxed control on enterprise labor allocation, finally ending the practice of labor quota control in 1993. In theory, after 1993, state managers could hire anyone they wanted according to production needs, but they still faced significant constraint in laying off regular urban employees. At this point, the cheapness and flexibility of rural workers emerged as a main attraction to urban employers. "We are forced to use migrant workers because of cost and efficiency reasons," as one state manager in Shanghai put it in an interview in 1997 (Author interview, January 1997). On wages alone, hiring rural workers could mean substantial savings for an enterprise. According to one estimate, Guangdong's out-of-plan workers received a little more than half of the salary paid to regular urban workers in the mid-1980s (*see* Ji, 1986:20). Another report in 1995 determined that Beijing's state enterprises could reduce their payroll expenses by approximately 40 to 50 percent if they hired rural rather than urban workers (Chen, 1996:31–32). Given that the urban employers did not usually provide rural workers with any fringe benefits, the overall cost of employing them must have been even lower than what the nominal wage difference would suggest here.

Thus, state managers increasingly appreciated the "value" of rural workers as cheap labor. When they could, they began substituting, rather than simply supplementing, their urban workforce with peasant labor in the 1990s. It was not uncommon to see urban state managers vigorously reducing their regular labor force through early retirement (*zao tui*), long-term furlough (*chang jia*) or internal lay-off (*xia gang*) and contracting more and more rural workers. This, of course, marked a dramatic turn of fortune for the regular workers. According to one report from Yichang, Jiangxi

province, the city's state enterprises "laid off twenty percent of regular workers" at a time when "cheap (rural) workers made up sixty percent of their entire workforce" in 1993 (Chen, Xu and Zhang, 1995). An ironic situation thus developed in many Chinese cities in the late 1990s when enterprises would be laying off "excess" workers, but would be recruiting at the same time. This was one reason why growing urban employment in the 1990s did not really deter continued rural-urban migration.

Besides low cost, rural workers also appealed to the state managers for nonwage reasons. They were generally young and eager to work. Their sense of entitlement to urban amenities and benefits was not as strong as that of the urban workers. Their contract typically included provisions for clean-cut termination of employment relations at the end of the contract term, thus eliminating the possibility of any residual welfare claims against the employers by the laid-off workers. Being from outside the city, they also lacked critical local community support that they could draw on to resist managerial imposition. All this meant that rural workers were not only cheaper, but they were more disciplined and pliable in the eyes of the state managers than were regular urban workers. They thus represented a truly flexible labor force for state enterprises at a time when the latter were experiencing considerable uncertainty in a period of fast-evolving reform.

The peculiarity of state-sponsored migration might have mitigated the harshness of migratory employment for many rural workers. Compared to the migrant workers employed by numerous small private and collective enterprises – many of which were funded by small overseas capital – rural workers in the state enterprises were provided relatively decent conditions of work and accommodation (Chan, 2001). This was partly due to the fact that the state-owned units were closely watched and regulated by the urban authorities. But the rural state's involvement must have also curtailed egregious abuses of the migrant workers by adding another layer of home local government protection. For example, by virtue of their sponsorship of migration for some of the rural workers, officials from Laomei county could occasionally take up issues regarding the workers' welfare and intercede with state managers on behalf of the rural workers. According to the same officials, this would have been out of the question with a private enterprise that generally treated migrants as "hired hands" with no special recourse to rural government mediation.

The above discussion explored various categories of state-sector workers who came from the rural areas. It aims to show the importance of China's state-owned units in the country's rural-urban migration. Altogether, state

managers recruited and employed tens of millions of rural workers in the 1980s and the 1990s. As my analysis suggests, these managers had distinct reasons for employing such workers in the two decades of the reform period: they hired migrant workers at first to get around the constriction of rigid state planning and, later, to enhance their competitiveness in the marketplace.

As China continued to liberalize all aspects of its economy, including the labor market, one would have expected state managers to recruit even more rural workers to supplement, or even substitute for, their core urban workforce. But this had not happened by the late 1990s because municipal governments everywhere became very concerned about the growing urban unemployment problem. So, at the same time as the central state pressed for more market-oriented reform, the municipal governments erected new barriers for their state-owned enterprises to employ rural migrant workers. They adopted a variety of measures that ranged from outright exclusion of migrants from certain job categories, pressure on specific managers to discontinue the hiring of rural workers, and financial incentives for the enterprises to recruit from among the unemployed urban population rather than from the rural areas (Beijing Shi Laodong Ju, 1995; Beijing Shi Wei Yan Jiu Shi and Beijing Shi Lao Dong Ju, 1998; Sun *et al.*, 1998; Li, Hu and Hong, 2001). Institutionally speaking, China's labor market remained highly stratified in the 1990s, with rural migrants occupying the bottom rung of the urban industrial occupational ladder.

To what extent these new restrictive measures will be successful in the long run will depend on the compliance of state managers and rural state officials discussed in this study. But if interviews with them in the late 1990s were any indication, those restrictive municipal measures are unlikely to have any long-term effect on reducing the momentum of rural-urban migration. One manager from a state-owned enterprise in Shanghai readily admitted: "We often have to lie to labor bureau officials and hire illegal 'black workers' [*heigong*]" (Author interview, January 1997). As for the local rural officials, they did not hide their disdain for the policy of "orderly migration" often used by the municipal authorities to justify the restriction of rural-urban migration. " 'Orderly migration' is a hoax," one official from Laomei explained. "Provincial labor officials use it to take over the labor export business and make more money. Urban officials use it when they want to keep us out of the cities" (Author interview, September 1996). Having found an accomplice in Shanghai's state managers, the Laomei county officials were determined to forge ahead with their plan to transport more peasants from

their area to Shanghai's factories in the late 1990s. In light of these remarks and practices by state managers and local officials, it would not be a stretch of the imagination to predict that those restrictive measures would soon be undone from within, if not from without, the state apparatus.

CONCLUSION

This article casts a spotlight on the state connection in China's rural-to-urban migration. I have examined various practices by the rural local state that were critical to the migration of millions of peasants and their employment by the urban-based state-owned units in the first two decades of reform. This article thus provides an important corrective to a growing literature on China's internal migration that has largely focused on its informal character and portrayed the state as an antithetical or obstructionist force to migration. By examining the nexus between the local rural state and urban state units, I demonstrate how they had played a constructive role and facilitated China's internal migration process. The migratory paths of tens of millions of Chinese peasants were thus paved by state action.

This is not to say that market forces were any less important in determining China's rural-urban migration. Indeed, even in those cases where one could clearly identify the state actors responsible for the migration and for the employment of rural workers, one could detect the growing importance of market consciousness about labor cost and bottom-line financial interests in motivating the state's action. The rural officials began to conceive of peasants as a "special kind of commodity" eminently exploitable for the purpose of local development in the 1990s. In the meantime, the state managers were increasingly driven by cost and efficiency considerations in their hiring decisions. Indeed, market pressure had started to crack the Chinese state's integrity as different constituent parts of the state apparatus responded to contradictory market signals and authoritative directions. But, by the same token, a splintering state may just be the kind of institutional matrix that could best facilitate growing rural-urban migration.

This last point was brought home to me during the final days of my field trip in Shanghai in 1997. Soon after his meeting with the migrant "team leaders" described earlier, Director Wu from the Laomei labor bureau paid a visit to the Anhui provincial liaison office in Shanghai. Wu was most courteous toward the official from his home province, but he was tight-lipped about his itinerary in the city. Nor did he inform the official of his plan to send more rural workers from the county to Shanghai next year.

“Had I mentioned the plan,” he whispered to me on the way back from the visit, “the provincial office will no doubt demand a cut from the deal.” He was all the more careful this time because he had been reprimanded once before for bypassing the provincial bureau in arranging labor export deals directly with Shanghai’s enterprises. The next day, the Laomei officials contacted more state managers and discussed bringing more rural workers to their factories next year. He did not observe the usual protocol of informing Shanghai’s labor officials either. This time he eschewed them at the request of Shanghai’s state managers because the latter had recently come under pressure from the municipal authorities to hire workers from among the city’s unemployed population rather than from the rural areas.

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