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# Migrant Workers and Elimination of Risks in Chinese Modern Transformation

JIA Nan, GUO Qiang\*

Institute of Humanities Research, East China University of Science and Technology, Shanghai 200237, China

**Abstract** Firstly, risks in Chinese modern transformation are discussed from the perspective of gap between urban and rural areas and mobility of rural laborers. Secondly, the significant role of migrant workers in elimination of risks in Chinese modern transformation is analyzed from two aspects, namely rural migrant workers pursuing equal economic and political status (identity and household registration) when working in cities. Finally, it is concluded that migrant workers play a key role in Chinese modern transformation.

**Key words** Migrant workers, Modern transformation, Risks, China

At present, China is undergoing a huge social transformation from traditional society to modern society. This modern transformation<sup>[1]</sup> takes establishment of modern civilization and order as the objective. In western society, there is intermediate class that plays a decisive role in establishment of civilization and order, while in China, no such intermediate class exists to undertake this historical mission. Nevertheless, with efforts in economic and political fields, the huge-scale migrant workers emerging during Chinese social transformation are undertaking this historical mission. Their pursuit of equal political and economic status not only changes Chinese mental world, but also deeply transforms China's social presence. In addition, their efforts eliminate risks in Chinese modern transformation, and influence and depict building of modern Chinese society and establishment of civilization and order.

## 1 Risks in Chinese modern transformation

"In traditional society, at early stage of modernization, the stability depends on whether rural upper class elements that possess land not only can control countryside, but also can control cities. If farmers agree to and participate in existing system, it will provide a stable foundation for this system. If they object to this system, it will become carrier of revolution"<sup>[2]</sup>. The course of Chinese revolution indicates that the Chinese Communist Party won the Anti-Japanese War and Chinese Liberation War just because it successfully won support of farmers and rural areas. Practical experience of over three decades of reform and opening up reflect that farmers and countryside have huge power of influencing political and social development course.

However, in the course of modernization, farmers often are bearers of most costs for economic development, while their inferior position impairs their ability of sharing results of economic development. Meanwhile, too fast urbanization may

create certain impact on urban order and social stability. "The price farmers pay is greatly higher than the price workers pay for improving their respective economic conditions. Compared with rigid class structure in rural areas, cities have more opportunities to change their economic and social status. It is just for this reason that farmers migrate to cities. Rapid urbanization resulted from this leads to social unrest and political instability in cities." In the course of transformation from traditional society to modern society, especially growing countries, appearance of by-product of modernization "gap between urban and rural areas" is inevitable. The original order between urban and rural areas is broken, while modern transformation changes nature of cities and the balance between urban and rural areas. In fact, the break of this order means conflict between traditional and modern aspects. Such conflict will affect the building of new order between urban and rural areas. "The difference between urban and rural areas is the disparity between the most traditional and modern parts in the society"<sup>[3]</sup>. If the conflict between urban and rural areas lasts and fails to be effectively solved, the gap between urban and rural areas will certainly lead to national and social instability. Such gap is an outstanding political characteristic of rapid social and economic changes in modern transformation, and also a basic reason for social and political instability.

To solve the risk of this social instability due to labor flow, the best method is to forbid flowing. Nevertheless, forbidding will lead to widening of gap between urban and rural areas, and consequently increase the conflict between urban and rural areas. For developing countries, to achieve political stability during the transformation from traditional to modern society, the elimination of modern risks is of extreme importance. This risk elimination relies on inland farmers and gentry classes. In contemporary China, it depends on farmers and migrant workers, especially migrant workers, the function of whom is just like intermediate class of promoting "course of western civilization" described by Elias. In spite of difference from environment of western modern transformation, Chinese modern transformation still follows some general laws, on the basis of which it has

many special characteristics due to conflict between traditional and modern aspects of Chinese society. At the background of Chinese environment, this conflict generates a huge scale of migrant worker group. On one hand, they are workers and farmers. On the other hand, they are neither workers nor farmers. They have jobs of workers and status of farmers. However, jobs of workers cannot provide them decent life in cities, while status of farmers limits their further development. In any case, birth of migrant workers indicates that farmers are unwilling to be tied by land and they have pursuits of progress and development.

## 2 Migrant workers and elimination of risks in Chinese modern transformation

**2.1 Migrant workers' pursuit of equal economic status—working in cities** Migration of migrant works between urban and rural areas does not simply mean regional change of migrant workers. In the course of this migration and movement, it contains their pursuit of equal economic status. Such pursuit of equal economic status not only changes migrant workers themselves, but also makes them edified by urban civilization and modernity, and promotes the course of Chinese modernization and transformation of social modernity.

Economists and sociologists have made many assumptions and models to explain migration of farmers from rural to urban areas. Unfortunately, many models take farmers as the object. In these models, it seems that migration of farmers is passive and it appears that farmers are onlookers of this great event in the course of economic development. In fact, however, farmers' migration to cities is a rational decision based on careful consideration and comparison. Yet, it is this small decision that finally affects both the economic development and the course of modernization. Farmers' action of pursuing economic benefits is not an unconscious action. Even it is deemed as unconscious action, it also contains modern nature of pursuing equality and freedom. Actually, opportunity cost for farmers' going to and working in cities can be divided into material and spiritual aspects. First, material aspect mainly refers to farmers' farming income. Second, spiritual aspect means farmers' lack of kindness and friendship after leaving hometown and familiar people. Besides, farmers' identity is often negated and limited, and sometimes they have to stand superciliousness, discrimination, or even humiliation of some citizens<sup>[4]</sup>. In this situation, if we only assume that their decision of "working in cities" is made on stimulation of survival rationale, it may become another kind of "impact – response". Therefore, to find out actual reason for farmers' pursuit of working in cities, we should never ignore entity and independence of farmers and migrant workers.

At present, most Chinese scholars believe that rural surplus labor going out to work is their rational action and also reflects the long-standing issue of income gap between urban and rural areas. At the early of farmers going out to work, it mostly reflects the rational selection for survival. The absolute income gap between urban and rural areas, namely the driving force of

economic income, is the major motive force for migration of rural laborers<sup>[5]</sup>. With increase of times and extension of period for employment out of home, the rational economic and social selection is more and more prominent and employment opportunity is increasing. Rapid growth of income is the first reason; expectation for improvement of living conditions is the second reason; and hope to provide more education opportunity for better development is the third reason<sup>[6]</sup>. In addition, superior living conditions in cities have a greater influence on rural laborers' decision on migration, and migrant workers hope to receive humanistic care<sup>[7]</sup>. From above analyses, it can be seen that migration of farmers to cities is firstly for economic reason, specifically is migrant workers' demand for equality and freedom.

The reason for urban migration of migrant workers can be divided into three stages<sup>[8]</sup>. The first stage (from 1978 to 1988) is a stage of rational selection for survival. The second stage (from 1988 to the beginning of the 21st century) is a stage of rational economic and social selection. The third stage (since the beginning of 21st century) is a stage of overall development of migrant workers. Comparison of these three stages indicates that in the first stage, the transfer of rural surplus labor is mainly "locally" flowing to local non-agricultural industries and township enterprises. This is a kind of release of survival pressure under constraint of rural population and resource when both traditional urban and rural management model and management system are extremely strong, and the basic reason for transfer is mainly a rational selection for survival. In the second stage, apart from rational selection for survival, reasons for transfer also includes rational selection for economic income, as well as rational selection for various social protection of rights and interests. In the third stage, reasons for transfer of migrant workers have new development and include more factors. Migrant workers pay close attention to how to transfer urban benefits to migrant worker group. Their concern is not only survival, but also further development. Besides, their purposes include safeguard of their rights and interests, equal development opportunity of work and study, improvement of development ability and share of development achievements.

In Chinese institutional environment, farmers become migrant workers in the course of migration to cities. As a group or even a class, migrant workers obviously want to pursue equal status. The result of such pursuit plays a certain role in bridging the economic gap between rural and urban areas. The process of migrant workers flowing into cities and pursuing equal economic status is also a course of resocialization of modern civilization. At the same time of migrant workers achieving their modernity, they also promote Chinese modern transformation.

**2.2 Migrant workers' pursuit of equal political status—identity and household registration** From the comparison between change of farmers and migrant workers and reform of China's household registration system, we can see that apart from pursuing equal economic status, migrant workers also pursue equal political status. On one hand, the economic and political macro-environment influences farmers and migrant

workers. On the other hand, this "bottom group" also makes effort to change China's social structure and presence and influences Chinese modern transformation.

China's household registration system results in privilege and isolation of different types and regions of registered residence and different scale of permanent urban residence certificate, and leads to difference in level of rights, income, status and social reputation. In the household registration system, migrant workers become inferior groups in cities. Their conflict with government and urban residents is provoked, which becomes a major reason for urban instability and directly influences economic development of cities<sup>[9]</sup>. In addition, the household registration system leads to unequal opportunity. As soon as a child with agricultural household is born, his starting line will be rather different from those with non-agricultural household. Once the equal opportunity of right cannot be guaranteed, economic efficiency and social development will be influenced, and this situation must be corrected. As Okun says "certainly, I am willing to believe the unequal opportunity reflected by most unequal income and wealth can be effectively corrected in the existing institutional structure, as if it is unnecessary for conservatives to correct and radicals are willing to believe that correction of conservatives is useless. So I hold that such effort is a real and valuable attempt."<sup>[10]</sup> In this "attempt", we must pay close attention to entity and initiative of migrant workers.

The Household Contract Responsibility System started in the 1970s greatly raises agricultural production efficiency. Nevertheless, such factors as decentralized operation of land, backward of agricultural science and technology, reduction of comparative benefit of land, and huge agricultural population restrict the transformation of traditional agriculture to modern agriculture. Cities become the first objective of migrant workers fighting for their economic rights and interests. In this situation, the combination of farmers with industrialization becomes the key to further reform of rural areas or even the whole country. Unfortunately, due to institutional inertia, farmers' political reasonable demands (or deserved rights) fail to be satisfied; their expectations of going to cities, working in cities and completely changing backward situations of rural areas cannot be realized; and rising of township enterprises is just a flexible way of satisfying such demands. Rising of township enterprises reflects farmers' pursuit of equal economic status and also implies farmers' demands for equal political status, and the ultimate point is the demand for equal political status. In the great background of economic system reform started from the 1980s, it achieves development of rural economy, increase of farmers' income, and advance of agricultural modernization. Then, it is required to reduce population engaged in agricultural population and transfer surplus population to other industries. Consequently, there is demand of change of the household registration system.

In the 1990s, marketization of labor force is manifested in the special form of "Migrant Worker Tide". To make these migrant workers incorporate into mainstream society, the reform

of household registration system permits farmers to migrate to cities. This requires confirmation and guarantee of appropriate system, such as *Regulations on Farmers' Obtaining Transitional Blue-stamped Residence Permit*, *Provisions on Security Administration of Urban House Tenancy*, *Provisions on Avoiding New Families Living Apart during Talent Flow*, etc. In June, 2001, the State Council approved *Opinions of the Ministry of Public Security on Promoting Reform of Household Registration Management System in Small Cities and Towns*. In October 1st of the same year, it chose over 20 000 small cities and towns as pilot areas to promote the reform of household registration system. Promulgation and implementation of these policies and provisions are closely connected with farmers' (migrant workers') pursuit of equal political status.

The "Shortage of Migrant Workers" following "Migrant Worker Tide" is an active counterattack and response of migrant workers for long time of discriminatory treatment. This is a real reflection of some deep problems during Chinese social transformation. It is a rational selection of migrant workers. Investors enjoy investment interests in eastern areas, while migrant workers have no way but to suffer from extremely low wages, consequently the actual income falls and it is hard to improve labor treatment<sup>[11]</sup>. The "Shortage of Migrant Workers" is a fight of migrant workers when their rights and interests fail to be guaranteed.

Facts of many years of reform and opening up indicate that system rigidity and reform hysteresis can be rectified through active practice of some farmers. Meanwhile, constant change happens inside migrant workers. With improvement of education and skills, new migrant workers have more pertinent selection and much higher pursuit. They take a careful calculation and strict budget for costs of working outside hometown and consider this working outside hometown as an opportunity of changing living situations and having a better development<sup>[12]</sup>. They not only care their economic rights and interests, but also pay close attention to their political rights and interests and equal status of identity. At the same time of influencing Chinese modern transformation, they also take advantage of this modern transformation to reconstruct their living and thinking ways.

### 3 The key to Chinese modern transformation: migrant worker class

The course of transformation from Chinese traditional society to modern society is a course of building Chinese modernity. "Chinese modernity exactly refers to modern civilization and order of China. Resources for its building certainly include Chinese cultural tradition. We are to build a modern civilization and order featuring Chinese culture."<sup>[13]</sup> Chinese cultural character is not shown by high buildings and large mansions in cities, but by a combination of Chinese traditional culture, spirit and modernity, and will be carried and built by all Chinese people. Truly, due to their inherent disadvantages, Chinese farmer class is slower than other classes in the initial stage of modernity. However, advanced elements (migrant workers) of farmer class

urban and rural development are mainly manifested as big city bringing along big suburbs, forming a pattern of "big horse pulling small carriage". Therefore, the general thought of Chengdu stresses more on "urban and rural integration" in industry, factor, public service, and management, to promote integrated urban and rural development in a relatively balanced way.

For Chongqing City, the comprehensive supporting reform of integrated urban and rural development is carried out in 82 000 km<sup>2</sup> wide area. Big city drives big countryside. Plus a big reservoir area, 7 million urban population brings 25 million rural population, forming a basic pattern of "small horse pulling big carriage". The motive force of central city to rural areas is not adequate, and the mechanism of "industry nurturing agriculture" and "city supporting countryside" is to be further improved. Therefore, general thought of Chongqing has broken away from the constraint of integrated urban and rural development only through improving the relation between urban and rural areas. It is believed that economic basis is an important factor of integrated urban and rural development. We should reinforce gathering function of central downtown through industry upgrading and opening up, to promote integrated urban and rural development.

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are accepters and disseminators of modernity and play a role in localization and legislation of modernity in China during acceptance and dissemination. It is through those migrant workers that modernity is disseminated from cities to countryside and from coastal areas to inland. Just like middle class that plays a significant role in "Civilization Course" of Europe, migrant worker group will hold an important position in dissemination of Chinese modernity. This position is not only determined by current system and social environment, but also decided by historical development trend.

As individuals, migrant workers play a minor role in transformation of Chinese social modernity. However, as a group or class, function of migrant workers is inestimable for Chinese modern transformation, because they bring advanced experience of modernity to rural areas and promote more farmers to obtain modernity. During rise of citizens and working class in twentieth century, middle class finally takes up major position of civilization. Similarly, migrant workers and farmer class they represent will determine their positions in the course of modern transformation, and promote the achievement of Chinese modern transformation at the same time of completing their entity building.

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