



Core units: Exemplars – Year 8
Illustration 4: Migration within China

Internal migration within China

In China, there is a clear pattern of internal migration from the rural areas to the urban areas and, with the exception of Xinjiang (in the extreme west), from the central provinces to the eastern provinces. Chinese internal migration has been the biggest movement of people anywhere on earth in the last 100 years. It is estimated that China has over 150 million official internal migrants.

People migrate to improve their lifestyles and because they are encouraged to do so by their government. In China many more people want to migrate within the nation than the government will allow.

Impacts of migration

When populations migrate there is a changed demand on infrastructure in both the place they emigrate from and the place they immigrate to. There are shifts in demands for roads, hospitals, doctors, amusement parks, schools, public transport, housing, child care, power generation, shops, police, telephones and employment. The Chinese are attempting to plan the growth of their major cities and so have laws which limit internal migration.

Comparing Australia and China

In Australia, 87% of our population lives in cities while in China it is closer to 30%. A demographic (population) movement in China like we have experienced in Australia has the potential to cause massive disruption unless it is carefully managed. The scale of the potential problem can be seen when we compare the two nations:

- Australia has a population of almost 23 million; China has a population closer to 1.3 billion (1,300 million)
- the only Australian cities with populations over one million are Sydney (4.6 million), Melbourne (4.2 million), Brisbane (2.2 million), Perth (1.8 million) and Adelaide (1.2 million). Together, these cities make up 14 million people – the same as the population of China's single largest city, Shanghai
- we have five cities with a population over one million but China already has over 60 cities this size. It also has five cities that have a population of over 10 million.

Australians are a very mobile people. We are used to the idea that we move from one place to another. It would be quite surprising if in your class there were no students who had immigrated from overseas, interstate or intrastate. Moving is a matter of personal choice and is made for a variety of reasons. People move for work, for family, for climate or simply to find a better life style. They decide to move, and they shift. While they might have to think about selling and buying a house, finding a new job and learning about a new area, Australians do not have to worry about laws which may prevent them from moving at all. This is not the case in China.

Rural-urban divide in China

Why, then, is there such a pull to the cities in China?

Life is better in cities

Differences in living standards between rural and urban China are so large that the migration will continue to be seen as a solution for many people. In almost every measurable aspect of life it is better to live in a Chinese city than in the country:

- life expectancy is higher in cities than in rural areas.
- 34% of rural children under one year of age die compared to only 14% in the cities
- 14% of children in rural areas are malnourished compared to only 3% in cities
- annual household income in the rural areas is almost half that of the cities
- ownership of cars, televisions, computers and white goods (for example, washing machines, refrigerators, clothes dryers) is much less in the rural areas
- illiteracy is much higher in the countryside
- few rural people are able to be educated beyond high school and those who look to a university education for their children are desperate to move to cities

Conditions in rural areas

The update of modern farming methods across China has also resulted in a massive oversupply of workers. Millions of people in the country districts are either unemployed or (more commonly) underemployed. Lacking work at home, and unable to increase their income, they look to migration to the cities as an answer.

Differences between provinces

Across China there are significant differences between provinces, and as a general rule, the further from the east the greater the rates of health problems, illiteracy, unemployment and poor access to electricity and communications.

There has been a mass migration from the central provinces to those on the east coast. The eastern provinces host the largest cities and offer opportunities for employment in factories which produce goods for export to the rest of the world. The eastern provinces are, as a result, also wealthier. The central provinces provide cheap labour to the eastern factories but most of the workers are denied the right to settle permanently in the east or take their families with them.

China has yet to work out the best system for dealing with the migration issue.

The hukou system

People moving to cities in China from country areas must be 'registered' and buy a permit. The household registration system is called 'hukou' and is used to control the flow of migrants. The cost of the permits vary but for cities such as Beijing they are quite expensive and even a six-month permit can cost up to a year's average income. Some permits allow permanent migration but most do not. Permanent residence is given to those who are highly educated, have special skills or have immediate family already resident with legal status.

Temporary residents

Most migrant workers are limited to between six months and 12 months legal residence in major cities. They are considered to be temporary residents and referred to as 'liudong renkou' or 'floating

population'. While in the cities they remain officially residents of rural homes and have restricted legal access to urban facilities. Having no permanency and being denied the rights of city dwellers causes problems with almost every aspect of life. Good quality housing, for example, is hard to get and rents are high.

Working conditions

Urban workers in China have similar rights to workers in Australia with paid public holidays, pensions and maternity leave. Hukou workers do not. They are paid on an hourly basis and do not have paid meal breaks. They lack unemployment support if they lose their job. They are usually expected to work weekends. Their wages are kept low because there are so many others willing to take their place.

Social conditions

Breaking the law can mean being deported with no chance of coming back to the cities. If hukou need a hospital, for example, they either have to pay a lot more than the city dwellers or return to their home province for free treatment. It is very difficult for families to legally move to the cities. Places in schools are limited and often children are sent back to their grandparents in rural areas for schooling.

Despite the discrimination against hukou workers millions have moved to the cities. China now has over 150 million official hukou rural migrants living in cities. There is also a very large unregistered population who simply take their chances and stay despite being 'illegal'.

Using migration as a political tool

There is another aspect of internal migration in China which is very different to Australia. The government has used internal migration as a tool to unify the nation by shifting the population balance in provinces which were regarded as security risks.

Minority populations

There are 55 official minority populations in China but together they represent less than 3% of the total population. They may differ from the majority Han population in language, religion, culture, food, housing, family relations and physical appearance. Most of the ethnic groups have good relationships with the Han majority and are quite content to be within the nation of China. Generally these groups are well within the Chinese borders and relatively isolated by the mountainous areas in which they live surrounded by Han. They do not pose a significant threat to border security.

Provinces on the border

There are, however, two very different situations which have worried the central Chinese government. These occur in Xinjiang and Tibet. In both cases the provinces are close to the borders of China, they share a strong culture with those in neighbouring nations, and have expressed a desire for either more autonomy or full independence. The Chinese have encouraged migration of Han into these troubled areas in an effort to guarantee the security of the national borders. The results have been mixed. The Han migration has brought increased wealth and rising standards of living. But at times Han migrants have been too insensitive to the local culture. Violence has often broken out between ethnic groups and has at times been almost out of control.

The migration scheme to ensure loyalty has not yet guaranteed the security of China or the rights of the minority populations.

Xinjiang

In the far west of China is Xinjiang Province. It borders the nations of Tajikistan, Pakistan, India, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Russia, Kazakhstan and Mongolia. Xinjiang is a large province, and at 1.6 million km², is almost the size of Queensland. It is not a gentle landscape. It is also home to an interesting record – not far from the capital city, Urumqi, is the furthest place on earth from any sea! It is also the most earthquake-prone province of China.

Xinjiang has some of China's most impressive mountain ranges and the hottest desert. It is rich in natural gas and oil, much of which is taken from the inhospitable Taklamakan Desert and transported by rail to the rest of China. Despite the arid and semi-arid climate Xinjiang is famous for its exports of fruit. Ingenious methods have been used for centuries to take artesian water from below the deserts to water crops.

Sitting at the crossroads of Central Asia it is not surprising that there are people from many ethnic groups in Xinjiang. Until recently nomads still moved between nations on annual migration. Today, the nomads (such as the Kazakh) can still be found but their movements are more restricted.

Uyghur

The largest ethnic group in Xinjiang are Uyghur (pronounced Wick-er). The majority are Muslim and do not speak Chinese as their first language. Their written language is very different to Chinese script, owing more to Arabic. They tend to have large families. They are less well educated than their Han neighbours and work in traditional farming or small-scale retailing. This group has never been well trusted by the central government in Beijing who fear that they might break away from China if given a chance.

Han migration

A deliberate policy of using migration to change the population in Xinjiang has resulted in the Han increasing from less than 7% of the population to over 40% in the past 50 years. For most of China the overall pattern of migration is to the richer eastern coastal provinces. Xinjiang, however, is still the fourth largest recipient of internal migrants as a result of government policies. The Uyghur people are not yet outnumbered in their province by migrants but they are always conscious of the policy which has placed so many Han in their midst. They feel their religion, culture and lifestyle are not valued and are under deliberate and intentional threat. This is a very negative side to internal migration.

The people who were originally selected for assisted migration were Han veterans of the People's Liberation Army and their families. They were enticed to move west by offers of jobs. They worked on large-scale farms and construction projects. Today, most of the movement west is from highly skilled and well-paid Han workers who come to operate the natural gas and petrol fields. Over 95% of the workers in these industries are Han. They have made individual choices to move west and find registration is very easy. The Han live in modern cities, such as Asku, and are given wages much higher than they would get in the eastern parts of China. Han dominate the highly paid technological, professional and administrative jobs while Uyghurs tend to be more limited to farming or lower-paying retail jobs.

Uyghur education

There have been attempts by the central government to encourage Uyghurs to become better educated and more integrated into Chinese society. For example, a Uyghur student requires fewer marks than a Han in university entrance exams to be guaranteed a place. However, the result of such efforts to date has been an increased migration of young educated Uyghurs into the neighbouring provinces and away from Xinjiang.

Many Uyghurs feel that education and migration has been used to further threaten their culture.

Conflict over inequality

The sense of inequality among Uyghurs as a result of the Han internal migration to Xinjiang has resulted in considerable anger. In recent years this has seen a spate of ethnic conflicts, riots, murders, bombings and street fighting. A high police and military presence is kept in the province. It remains a challenge for the central government to find a way to encourage Xinjiang to develop as a part of China with the full support of the Uyghur population.

Kazakh nomads

The Uyghurs are not the only ethnic minority in Xinjiang. There are still small groups of Kazakh nomads who pass through the mountains on an annual migration. They have lived in this area for thousands of years. They exist by herding yaks, camels and sheep from one pasture to the next across hundreds of kilometres of difficult terrain. They move with all of their possessions. Life is based around the family tent called a 'yurt'. In the past they were entirely self-sufficient, but now that they have swapped camels for motorbikes and cars they have a need for more contact with other groups.

Before the borders of modern China were established they often moved into what are now neighbouring countries but this is no longer allowed.

Kazakh education and culture

As they are in a state of perpetual migration the Kazakhs have found it difficult to send children to schools. The result has been generations who lack formal education and have few skills other than pastoralism. The Chinese government has attempted to stop the annual Kazakh migration and integrate them into the modern economy. The Kazakhs have their own language, traditions, food and way of life. Many are reluctant to give up their migration but are aware that unless they settle in a town life will be more difficult for their children. For them, migration has become a problem and not a solution.

Unfortunately Kazakhs find that they are discriminated against by both Uyghur and Han.