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## Why can't rural-migrant workers escape poverty?

Under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, 'Reform and Opening' created a market-orientated economy and China's market was opened up globally (Dr Xiaobing Wang, module 2, 2023). 'Reform and Opening' changed the trajectory of China's economic growth. For example, in 2009, China produced 34% of the world's clothing exports (War on Want, 2009). The increased demand for exported products led to a need for more factory workers in China. As stated by The Washington Post (2018), China has been divided by an "invisible Great Wall" meaning that, in most cases, rural Chinese citizens decided to migrate to big cities for work, such as Beijing and Shanghai. Since 1980, over half a billion Chinese rural dwellers moved from the countryside to the city for work (module 7, 2023). However, it seems that these rural-migrant workers are still struggling financially, despite spending years working in big cities. Why do rural-migrant workers continue struggling to escape poverty?

The documentary, [\*We Were Smart\*, by Li Yifan](#) focuses on young rural-migrant workers from the mid-2000's. The majority of the workers which were interviewed migrated to big cities between the ages of twelve to sixteen years of age. The interviewees recollect their time within the factories they worked at. They discussed the extensive hours they had to work, with one account claiming that they were made to work twenty-four hours in one shift. Additionally, the working conditions were poor. Although these jobs made their lives miserable, they were stuck in a trap at the hands of the factory companies. If they left, they wouldn't get paid; they had no life outside of the factories due to long working hours and unfamiliarity with the cities; their pay was barely enough to survive on. In search of an escape from the mundane reality of their jobs, many young workers joined the SMART community. The below image shows how a typical SMART member would dress. In their view, the more outlandish, the better.



SMART was not only about physical appearances; it became a lifestyle for many. One former SMART member stated that if the price of a well-paying job was to cut his hair, then he would not take the offer. Even though many youths initially migrated for income to support their families and future, it seems as though SMART became more important to them. Simon Denyer (2018) reports that 56% of rural-migrants felt happier with their urban living than they did with their previous lives, despite still living on the poverty line. This is likely due to the identity they created for themselves rather than the careers they migrated for initially. By 2013, the SMART community became associated with negative connotations by mainstream media, which eventually led to their disbandment. The community still existed by the end of the 2010s but on a much smaller scale. Some members could be found live streaming as an attempt to keep the culture alive. Some moved back to their rural roots and now work in their hometown. Some still live in big cities. However, most of them seemed to have not escaped their low-income lives.

As a young teenager, I remember being extremely tired all the time and I had no idea how to live independently, yet for these China rural migrants, living independently at a young age was normality. The environment these children went to work in is unimaginable, even for an adult. I was aware that there were issues with child labour and poor working conditions in China, but this documentary has shown me from a first-hand perspective just how harrowing the Chinese factory life is. However, I do relate to the wish to discover their own identity. When I was a teenager I would experiment with different hairstyles and makeup in an attempt to create my own identity. For the people on the documentary, it was more important than ever to do this as they felt as though they were just a number in a factory.

There are a few factors as to why rural-migrant workers are unable to create a wealthy living for themselves, despite working so hard from as young age twelve. Firstly, as mentioned in the documentary, their income is so low and many rural migrants send money back to their families every month. In 2009, the average monthly salary for these workers was about £150, which includes overtime (War on Want, 2009). This means that after sending money back to their families, there is barely enough money to feed themselves, therefore they were unable to save any money. The factories could pay so little as a result of urban-rural divide. Urban born citizens have the income based on institutional wages, whereas rural people had no base wage (Li, 2012). This means that even though many rural-migrant workers contributed massively to the economic growth of China, they do not reap the benefits to show this hard work. Additionally, factory companies occasionally refuse to pay the workers, meaning they have even less money to survive. Consumption of goods helped migrant workers keep some form of mental stability (module 8, 2023). However, this consumerism means that the workers have even less money at the end of the month. As shown in the documentary, SMART members would choose to spend their wages on their hairstyle and clothes rather than food. With the little income they received to survive, some workers spent money on goods such as haircuts and dye. Living paycheque-to-paycheque prevents these workers from saving up, keeping them in the poverty trap. However, the main aspect stopping rural-migrant workers escaping poverty is the *Hukou* system. Created in 1958, it prevented people from moving to different areas with the intent to keep farmers in countryside allowing agricultural production to stay at low prices (module 7, 2023). Even though there is a demand for migrant labour workers as a result of 'Reform and Opening', the *Hukou* system is still implemented. This means that. "those who live in the urban sector enjoy many rights and privileges while those in rural areas have far fewer political rights or opportunities to participate in or influence policies that will affect them (Knight and Song, 1999; Wang and Piesse, 2010)" (Li, pp. 5-6). An example of these inequalities is education. Only 30% of Chinese people have a high

school education (module 2, 2023). As stated by Li (2012), schools in urban areas receive a larger amount of monetary support by the government compared to those in rural areas. Due to the *hukou* system children from the countryside are unable to receive their education in the cities. Even though there was some form of education in the countryside, most families could not afford to send their children to school due to inability to pay the tuition fees (Li, 2012). It seems that rural youth found it more beneficial to go to work in the big cities at a young age as they did not have access to education. Without a good high school education these workers will be much less likely to escape the poverty trap. Moreover, if these migrant workers chose to leave their jobs in the big city after years of work, they may not find another job. Unemployed Chinese people with urban Hukou can claim minimum income subsidies, pensions and unemployment insurance—this is not the case for rural people (Li, 2012). The *Hukou* system shows that no matter where rural Chinese live or work, they are always at a loss.

In conclusion, many rural-migrant workers were, and still are, severely overworked and underpaid. Moreover, the *hukou* system means that they have no safety nets. Migrant workers are referred to the ‘floating population’, as they are not rooted in the countryside or the big cities (Li, 2022). These factors could prevent rural-migrant workers from escaping the poverty. But will this poverty trap ever change? Since 2011, the CCP have implemented a ‘National Development Plan for Children in Poor Areas’ which has helped more than 40 million children in China escape poverty (Wang, 2022). This shows that the situation is improving, however the policies which include the *hukou* system have not changed. Even in present day, “those who live in the urban sector enjoy many rights and privileges while those in rural areas have far fewer political rights or opportunities to participate in or influence policies that will affect them (Knight and Song, 1999; Wang and Piesse, 2010)” (Li, pp. 5-6). Therefore, it is still difficult for rural-migrant workers to escape the poverty trap. Without the abolishment of the *hukou* system, rural-migrant workers will forever struggle which means that they will never escape poverty.

## **Bibliography**

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