

OLIVER SLOT

### Is the tide changing for rural-urban migrant workers?

I recently watched the documentary by LI, Yifan (李一凡). 2019. [We Were Smart](#) (杀马特, 我爱你). It looks at the 'left-behind' children of migrant workers who flee to big cities to work in factories where they are exploited under poor, dangerous and high-intensity working environments, with factories often withholding pay in order to keep them from leaving. These groups of highly uneducated and lonely youths found solace in communities bonded together by SMART hairstyles, that made them feel seen by the urban populations that marginalised them.



*SMART hairstyles such as this one often included big styles with dyed hair.*

The documentary contributes to the wider discourse on the rural-urban migration of workers, many of the young workers that found each other through this SMART fashion, were 'left-behind' children of first generation migrant workers who felt that their education was worthless. According to the documentary, 70–80% of young villagers quit school and leave, due to financial pressures and with hopes of finding work and variety in the city. The outcome that faced these migrants however, was not what they had expected and few promises made by recruiters were fulfilled.

After watching this documentary, it evoked an emotional response in me, I sought to see the full extent of the challenges and corruption faced by these migrant workers, and whether they had managed to instigate any change over the years, or whether they, as these SMART groups had been silenced and destroyed.

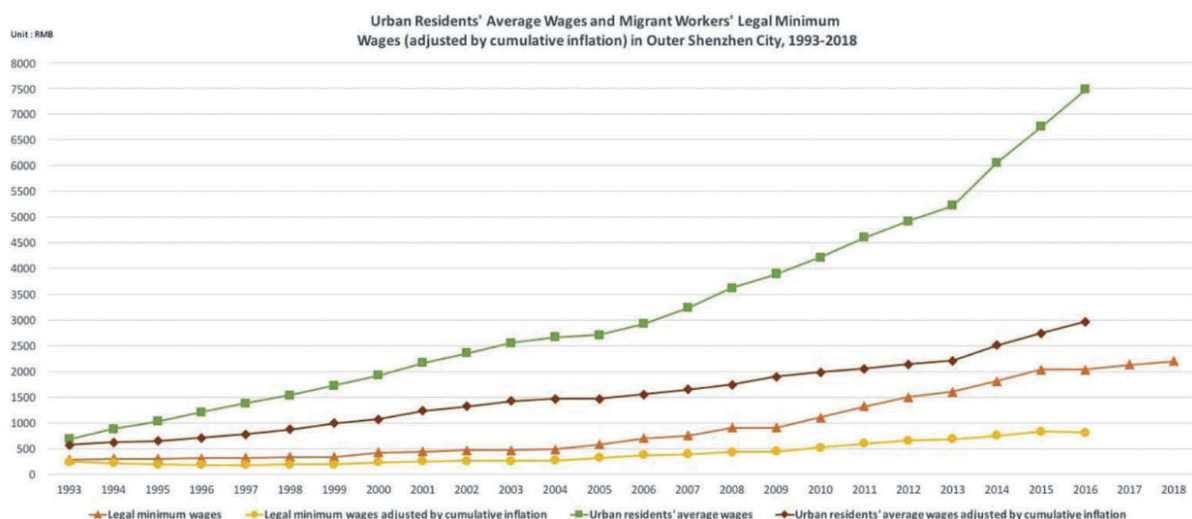
## Challenges facing China's Migrant Workers

Due to a surplus in the supply of cheap labour, with migrants often waiting outside factories to hear about availability, factories could impose tough working conditions and detrimental human rights violations. One instance involves Zhaojie Footwear company, a letter sent to the editor of *Workers' Daily*, the trade union's newspaper sums up the repeated violations of migrant workers reading:

*We are staff and workers of Guandong's Zhaojie Footwear Company. The company docks our pay, deducts and keeps our deposits, beats, abuses, and humiliates us at will. (Chan, 2015)*

The documentary reflected this evidence with anecdotal accounts of widespread corruption and injuries to the workers that often went unnoticed or lead to their dismissal.

Local Government's did not impose the laws that were in place to protect these groups (Gallagher, 2017), with many of the security firms hired by the factories acting as sub-branches of police. Local governments, vying to allure foreign factories, hold the responsibility for law enforcement. Relying on these factories for revenue through taxes and fees, these governing bodies frequently own and lease factory spaces. Consequently, they chose to overlook or manipulate labour laws to favour foreign employers.



*Shenzhen Annual Statistical Yearbooks (Unger & Siu, 2019)*

In this chart, the data illustrates that between 1993 and 2000, the actual monthly earnings of migrant workers (adjusted for inflation) for their initial 40-hour workweek remained around RMB 235. Despite China's GDP experiencing consistent double-digit growth during these years, the real wages of these workers didn't increase and, in fact, slightly declined. Conversely, the graph indicates a nearly twofold increase in the real income of local urban residents in Outer Shenzhen during the same period. According to China's minimum wage regulations, the Shenzhen government was obligated to consider this substantial surge in local

urban incomes when computing the local legal minimum wage. However, it seemed evident that this wasn't the case. The Shenzhen government appeared inclined to lure new foreign investments by maintaining low labor costs. Despite the requirements of national laws, the legal minimum wage in Outer Shenzhen stayed exceptionally low, significantly influencing the wages of migrant factory workers. These laborers worked more than the stipulated 60 hours per week, resulting in a monthly income higher than the 40-hour legal minimum wage indicated in the graph. Nevertheless, the graph exhibits a distressingly stagnant or slightly declining income level for these workers between the early 1990s and 2003–4.

Further, Chan (2015) argues that the hukou system of household registration in China, provides the perfect conditions for forced and bonded labour. As they cannot apply for permanent residency, they must pay for temporary residency and their work permits in one lump sum, this price is often too high for the workers' to pay and the factory must cover it taking the deposit out of their pay and keeping them in a bonded relationship with the factory. This leads to further corruption as shown in the documentary, as the workers cannot afford to quit despite toxic working conditions due to lack of money. This perpetuates a lack of freedom for the workers and a cycle of loneliness, with many eager to find happiness and partnership but unable to meet bride-prices or earn enough over what they send home to sustain a happy life.

Wanning Sun in his article for the *East Asia Forum*, summarises the emotional cost many migrant men encounter, similar to the documentary.

*Policy discussion of the marital problems of rural migrant men assumes that there is a link between sexual frustration, crime, moral disorder and social instability. These narratives fail to understand a gender- and class-specific kind of masculine identity that is characterised by emotional pain, desperation and low self-esteem. Situated at the sharp end of China's inequality, these men typically harbour modest dreams of finding a life partner, starting a family and living with more dignity and less discrimination.*

This highlights the need for change for these groups as the mental cost is so high.

### **How is the tide changing for migrant workers?**

Due to shortages in labour and greater relief to rural families, the tides have begun to change with working conditions improving and higher wages introduced as factories competed for labour. The official statistics for 2016 indicated a 6.6% increase in the average monthly income within the urban-based migrant labor force compared to the preceding year (China Labour Bulletin, 2018). Despite uncertainties in future trends, the threefold rise in real wages over the previous decade suggests that while migrant workers remain in a state of relative poverty, they no longer face extreme destitution. This improved financial situation allows them to make increased purchases and exhibit more individuality. Importantly, this increased income level enabled more migrants to move their families to urban environments. This aligned with temporary residency permits becoming easier and cheaper to obtain.

However, it's noteworthy, as depicted in the graph above, that the actual wages of migrant workers failed to keep pace with the salary hikes and improving living standards of the urban-born populace. Many migrant workers were acutely aware of this considerable and widening income gap between themselves and the urban population, and the escalating sense of relative deprivation among migrant workers fostered dissatisfaction and discontent.

Further migrant families still face huge problems with education of their children. The majority of these individuals encounter immense difficulty in securing opportunities for their children to pursue education beyond primary school within urban educational institutions. Only a minority managed to facilitate their children's completion of junior high school. This prevailing situation persisted despite indications in official media suggesting the government's acknowledgment of the severe disruption to family life experienced by tens of millions of migrant workers and the resulting discontent. Consequently, in 2016, a directive from the central government mandated the inclusion of migrant children in urban public schools. Even before this decree, some smaller cities had been striving to expand their urban centers and had already permitted migrant children to attend public schools for free, up to the first nine grades, on equal footing with local children (Kipnis, 2016).

However, a significant shift in the actions of migrant workers is becoming apparent, particularly in Guangdong. Despite the challenges related to education, an increasing segment of workers in Guangdong is choosing to settle down. Moreover, even among those who do not intend to settle permanently, a growing number recognize the advantages of resisting managerial control concerning fundamental work conditions. A call for a voice in their employment future and the pursuit of improved work benefits have surfaced among workers during the 2010s, running parallel to the exit strategy. A notable instance was the widely covered strike at a Honda auto-parts factory near Guangzhou in 2010. During this protest, workers demanded higher wages, improved working conditions, and the establishment of factory trade-union branches (Deng, 2016). In the past, these workers often experienced feelings of isolation and lacked access to vital information. However, in today's context, nearly all of them own mobile phones, which they frequently utilize to stay in touch with other migrant workers. This connectivity enables them to stay updated about prevailing wages and working conditions in factories where their friends and relatives are employed. Additionally, they remain informed about any concessions that have been achieved.

Whilst the corruption and exploitation that was exhibited in the documentary is certainly decreasing, there is still a huge number of 'left-behind' children, and though the tide is changing for migrant workers there is still much work to do to rectify the inequality of freedom these migrant workers still endure day-to-day, beginning with education.

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