

Chinese Rural and Migrant Workers' Survey 2008-2010

Summary

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For three consecutive years between 2008 and 2010, the China Labor Study Group conducted a rural survey. The Chinese edition was published by Globalization Monitor in 2011. During this period the China Labor Study Group trained dozens of rural migrant workers, who were returning home for the Chinese New Year holiday, as interviewers to conduct interviews with their fellow villagers.

Rural migrant workers still maintain strong links with their home villages even if they rarely plough the fields (increasingly so for the young generation) or when they have already spent years working in cities. Under the household registration system, the stigma of their status as peasants is still with them and their children, as this status is life-long and hereditary, unless they can pay a big sum of money to buy an urban household registration. They are denied basic welfare and education for their children in the cities, hence they are unable to sink roots there. Whenever they cannot get a job they always have to return to their home village and rely on, if even temporarily, their small plot of land for survival. In 2008 when the economic crisis broke out, more than 30 million jobless rural migrants returned to their home villages. Previously they had left their villages for the cities because their small plots of land simply could not support their families in the first place, but now they had to return home when the cities could no longer provide them jobs. Even if they get jobs in the cities in normal times, their villages remain their ultimate home because their families still stay behind. What is ironical for them is that even if they have already worked in cities for more than a decade, their identity as workers is still temporary while their "peasant" identity remains permanent. In this way, rural migrant workers are simultaneously and fundamentally affected by both rural villages and cities. One cannot understand rural migrant workers without first knowing the conditions in their home villages. Learning more about the rural area is important if one wants to learn more about rural migrant workers, simply because it is where rural migrant workers' home villages are located and they are deeply concerned about their villages and committed to improving them. With this in mind we decided to conduct a rural survey. The contradictory status of rural migrant workers constitutes the best link between cities and rural areas that we can have access to.

The 2008 Survey

During the 2008 Chinese New Year holiday dozens of rural migrant worker volunteers conducted a rural survey in their home villages when they returned home. A total of 130 questionnaires were distributed and 75 effective questionnaires were returned to us. The interviewers came from 11 provinces. 70% of them were married. The theme of the survey was:

1. How far were government policies of giving material support to rural communities implemented at a grassroots level?
2. The present situation of the peasant economy and its difficulties.
3. The administration of village affairs through Rural Committees.

Since 2006, the Central Government has embarked on a rural policy which aims at reducing peasants' tax burden while allocating more resources to agriculture and the rural area. It was summarized as "taking less and giving more", so as to right the wrongs of the past policy of taking away too much from peasants while giving them nothing in return. In the period before 2006 the Central Government imposed an agricultural tax on all peasant households. Although it was not a real burden, it was just a small part of the total taxes and levies which peasants paid. Most of the taxes were imposed by township governments and village committees and bankrupted a lot of households, resulting in tax riots and instability in rural areas. This forced the Central Government into rethinking its rural policy. In 2005, it announced the "socialist new rural construction" policy for the first time. In 2006 it waived the agricultural tax. This was followed by the Central Government's allocation of 330 billion yuan to rural investment in 2006 and 390 billion yuan in 2007 respectively. At the same time, the government also waived the book and tuition fees of rural students, building from scratch some kind of social safety net, and the modernization of infrastructure there.

Our survey shows that 90% of interviewees responded that the agricultural taxes were effectively waived. For taxes levied by township governments and village committees, however, 60% responded that they were waived. Compared to the year 2005, 79% responded that their tax burden was reduced in 2008.

If the government is now taking less from the peasants, the policy of giving more seems to be less effective. When asked "did your village receive infrastructure investment fund", 60% responded with a "no". This is more or less in line with the finding of the Status of Rural China 2006-7, published in 2008 by the Social Sciences Academic Press, which discovered that 45% of the respondents said

they either knew nothing or knew very little about the “new rural construction” policy.¹

Whether or not the village committee is democratically elected and controlled by fellow villagers obviously has direct bearing on whether the rural investment fund can really benefit them – there are many reports on how these committees are effectively controlled by township government officials and how the money or a part of it may go end up in the former’s pockets. In our survey 70% responded that their village committees were democratically elected. But when asked about the actual process involved it was clear that their concept of “democratic election” merely means voting, and they have no conception that free nomination of candidates and free election campaign are prerequisites of democratic election. 60% said that candidates were appointed by the township governments. As to the question of “did your village committee make public its book for scrutiny?” 70% said no and 60% were discontent about this.

There has been strong lobbying of the government to privatize farm lands from the liberals and neo-liberals. Li Changping, a rural expert, has argued that most peasants do not want their collectively owned land to be turned into their private land. One of the main reasons is the fact that peasants today are more likely to be in debt to the rural cadres (who more often than not are richer than common peasants), and if there is privatisation of farm land, their creditors will be able to seize their collectively owned land.² Our findings are similar to Li’s. 64% of interviewees disagree with the free sale of land. 42% of those who disagree think the ‘Free sale of land will re-create a polarization of rich and poor in rural areas and means restoring the old system’.

Table 1: Reasons given by respondents as to why they disagree with the free sale of farmland

Reasons	No. of Respondents	%
Free sale of land will re-create a polarization of rich and poor in rural areas, which means restoring the old system.	20	42%
The land belongs to the collective/the state and therefore should not be subjected to sale.	15	32%
The present ownership by collective/state enhances social stability	5	10%
Others	3	6%
No answer	5	10%

¹ p. 71.

² *Shenyan nongcun tudi siyouthua* (Be Prudent about Proposing Privatization of Farm Land), Li Changping, <http://club.kdnet.net/dispbbs.asp?id=629177&boardid=52>

The 2009 Survey

The 2009 spring survey was carried out against a background in which in 2008 the Chinese government officially permitted the transfer of use rights of farmland among rural households, without adopting the policy of privatization of farmland as advocated by many economists. The transfer of use rights of land therefore keeps intact the collective ownership of farmland. The government's policy is simply legalizing what has been practiced for many years, however. Because of the exodus of labor from rural villages to the cities, a lot of households have already transferred their use rights to their neighbors in exchange for a certain amount of rent. The Central Government's move in this direction was motivated by another idea: by legalizing the practice it may promote the concentration of deserted lands into the hands of commercial farmers, allowing the latter to achieve economies of scale and raising income without at the same time overthrowing the collective ownership. One of the purposes of our survey was to find out how far the transfer of the use rights of land could help raise the peasants' income.

The survey was conducted during the Chinese New Year holiday of 2009. A total of 100 questionnaires were distributed with 73 effective questionnaires returned to us. The interviewees came from 54 different counties in 12 provinces. We found that prior to the government's announcement of the policy, 49% of respondents had already either "transferred out" their land use rights to their neighbors or others. For those who needed to get land from their neighbors, only 17% regarded this as a way to become commercial farmers, while 70% did this just as a way of sustaining subsistent farming – either because their lands were too fragmented and too small to sustain their livelihoods (47%) or because farming remained their sole way of making a living (23%). Also worth noting is that 52% of respondents worried that the Central Government's promotion of land transfer would stimulate more land sales resulting in a concentration of land among rich households, only 4% said it would promote the emergence of more cooperatives among peasants which allow "common prosperity".

Another issue which was of interest to us was how far the acquisition of farmland by the village committee followed proper channels and respected peasants' rights as stipulated in the Law on Land Management and the Law on the Organization of Village Committees. Our findings were as follows:

Table 2: Performances of Village Committees over Acquisition of Land

	No. of Respondents	%
Failed to inform their fellow villagers about the plan and purpose of land acquisition	49	67%
Failed to publicize details of compensation	45	62%
Failed to convene villagers' conference	50	68%
Failed to hold voting among villagers over the acquisition plan	63	86%

The 2008 financial crisis in the United States began to impact on China's exports. Thousands of factories were closed in the Pearl River Delta. Eventually it was reported that in that year at least 30 million rural migrant workers returned to their home villages as they lost their jobs. At the time of our survey, the economic downturn was yet to unfold in full. Yet some of our findings are still relevant to the understanding of the impact of the crisis on rural migrant workers and their families. Our findings show that peasant households continue to heavily depend on remittances from family members who worked in cities. Table 3 below shows that 31-50% of the family income of 24% of respondents relied on their members working in the cities, while another 35% relied on their family members working in cities for more than half of their income. This is in general in line with many other similar studies. It also implies that the loss of jobs of rural migrant workers may mean a significant decline in their living standards.

Table 3 : The weight of rural migrant workers' wages as a share of family income (%)

The weight of rural migrant workers' wages as a share of family income	No. of respondents	% of respondents among total no. of respondents
< 10%	14	19%
11%~20%	3	4%
21%~30%	6	8%
31%~40%	9	12%
41%~50%	9	12%
51%~60%	6	8%
61%~70%	10	14%
71%~80%	4	5%
81%~90%	3	4%
91%~100%	3	4%
Void	6	8%
Total	73	100%

The 2010 Survey

The 2010 survey was conducted in January during the Chinese New Year holiday. 126 effective questionnaires were collected. The interviewees came from 87 counties among 17 provinces.

Before the economic downturn could unfold in full force it was checked by the Central Government's 4 trillion yuan rescue plan. This helped to stop the wave of plant closures and layoffs. The government also provided new subsidies to encourage small rural business so as to help those unemployed rural migrant workers who had returned home. The purpose of this survey was to find out how far the government's policy had helped the peasants and the rural migrant workers.

Although 69% of the respondents said that the economic crisis did affect families and friends, it seems that it was not very serious, as is shown in tables 4 and 5 below. Although 69% said that they were affected by the economic crisis, the decline in total income was less serious than most people had expected. 35% of the respondents said they saw their family income decrease, 36% said their income were stable, and another 29% said their income actually increased. Our finding also shows that among those who said their income decrease, almost half (48%) said that it reduced between 1-20%, while 34% said that it reduced between 21-40%.

Table 4: Did the economic crisis affect your families or your friends?

	No. of respondents	%
Yes	87	69%
No	38	30%
No answer	1	1%
Total	126	100%

Table 5: Comparing 2009 family total income to those in 2008

	No. of respondents	%
No changes	45	36%
Decreased	44	35%
Increased	37	29%
Total	126	100%

Despite most government's subsidies and policies to encourage small business being considered useful by interviewees, their implementation had been far less effective. Although the respondents in general rated these policies highly, table 6 below shows that a high portion of the respondents did not have a clue about these policies. This was in general quite common because the township governments were not keen on getting the message spread down to the grassroots level. Without knowing how these policies work the peasants or the returning rural migrant workers would not be able to make use of them.

Table 6: Government's policies of which respondents said they did not have clue

	No. of respondents	%
Subsidies for plantation or aquaculture	42	33%
Cheap loans for new businesses	43	34%
Reduction of tax for new businesses	52	41%
Waiving of registration fee for new cooperatives or rural enterprises	76	60%
Opening of teaching courses on technology	54	43%
Promotion of cooperatives	70	56%
Provision of land for production purposes	78	62%
Provision of market information concerning agricultural products	61	48%

This survey seems to indicate that although the rural people did not feel that their lives were seriously affected by the economic decline, thanks to the government rescue package, it was another story when it came to the issue of poverty alleviation. Although reform policies were adopted by the Central Government, their implementation continues to be difficult.