

Internal migration and labor mobility issues and policies in China: How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected the status quo?

Chen Fengbo and Zeng Qianyun

Reforms in China since 1978 promoted growth in many economic sectors. These changes contributed to reshaping labor mobility within the country, including internal labor mobility between rural and urban areas. Large-scale rural migration began in the early 1990s from inland regions to coastal areas and by 2020, had reached almost 300 million (China National Bureau of Statistics 2021).

Liberalization of the Chinese economy and de-collectivization included the relaxation of the Household Registration System, which had previously regulated internal population movement. Most rural young migrated to the city. Some of these interrelationships between the Covid-19 pandemic, internal mobility responses, and migration and mobility policies were studied under the AGRUMIG project activities in China. Figure 1 and Table 1 highlight the three key research sites considered by the AGRUMIG research team.



Figure 1. Research locations for the AGRUMIG project in China.



The rural household income structure totally changed and came to rely heavily on income from the nonfarm sector (Table 2). Migration and labor mobility in China remains monitored and regulated by the central government, although policies have improved rural labor out-migration.

The Covid-19 pandemic had a significant health impact and compressed the labor market. Many factories and industries were closed during the pandemic period. Migrants working in factories may have faced decreases in wages or reduced working hours. The group most affected were temporary rural workers whose main source of income was daily wages. This left them in severe financial hardship, mounting debt, and without effective safety net programs in the short term.

As a result, the pandemic influenced migration and labor mobility policy. For instance, some local governments controlled the flow of rural-urban mobility in early 2020 through actions to motivate some migrants to return to find a job in local districts. This includes enhancing transportation services and improving the overall economic outlook of the countryside by investing in infrastructure.

Findings

The findings point to significant changes in rural areas due to migration. Demographically, those left behind were mainly the elderly, children, and a few young adults. Economically,

there was an inflow of remittances into rural communities from those who migrated for work (Table 3). Table 4 shows that mechanization and investments in labor-saving technologies also increased. For example, direct seeding of rice rather than transplanting is becoming more common. However, this involves shifting to new crops frequently. There have also been substantial land transfers, large-scale farming, and commercial farming development. Extensification, on the other hand, has been accompanied by land abandonment. In terms of social change, the increase in income to rural households has been accompanied by a stronger connection between urban and rural areas, with lifestyles becoming similar.

Problems related to rural migration include a reduction in profitability in agriculture, especially in grain production, and security problems for the elderly and rural people who can no longer rely on their families, especially young family members. In addition, public services, including health and education, have decreased due to the decline in rural populations. Village clinics have become less functional, and village schools are merging. There was also a suggestion that there has been a decline in the quality of life for rural people, particularly the elderly who face the hazards of living alone and struggle to take care of children left behind in their care if they fall sick or experience a physical decline (Table 5; Figure 2). The intergenerational transfer of agricultural knowledge has also diminished as children have less direct engagement in agriculture and the traditional transfer of skills from parents to children has significantly declined.

Table 1. Research sites, samples and rural migration.

Province	Country/city	Village	Number of questionnaires	Number of people migrated per household (person)	Average labor migration time (months)
Guangdong	Maoming	Liantong	39	2.34	8.91
		Dahan	41		
Jiangxi	Xinjan	Wanfu	44	1.33	10.21
		Wushi	50		
Hunan	Nanxian	Zhongqiling	52	1.5	7.08
		Taipingqia	49		

Note: HH = Household.

Table 2. Nonfarm employment income and share.

Province	Guangdong	Jiangxi	Hunan
Country/city	Maoming	Xinjian	Nanxian
Total income per household (CNY)	104,105.10	102,687.84	189,417.50
Average nonagricultural income share (%)	84.42	68.06	45.87

Table 3. Study sites and migration context.

Site	Features of an agricultural economy	Percentage of households with seasonal migrants	Destination for seasonal migration	Percentage of households with long-term migrants	Destination for long-term migrants	Percentage of households with returnees	Percentage of male and female migrants
Maoming, Guangdong Province	Small, fragmented holdings; Hilly terrain; close to Pearl River Delta conurbation and a strong captive market for commercial crops	21.25%	In-province: 96.77% Out-province: 3.23%	62.77%	In-province: 94.87% Out-province: 5.13%	28.75%	Male: 58.29% Female: 41.71%
Xinjian, Jiangxi Province	Hilly terrain; close to Nanchang City; High cash crop potential	12.77%	In-province: 100% Out-province: 0%	63.37%	In-province: 79.09% Out-province: 20.91%	12.77%	Male: 64.80% Female: 35.20%
Nanxian, Hunan Province	Floodplain; Intensive cultivation, particularly of aquaculture; High level of commercial activity	28.71%	In-province: 87.18% Out-province: 12.82%	26.73%	In-province: 67.86% Out-province: 32.14%	44.55%	Male: 67.55% Female: 32.45%

Table 4. Mechanization in rice production in the People's Republic of China.

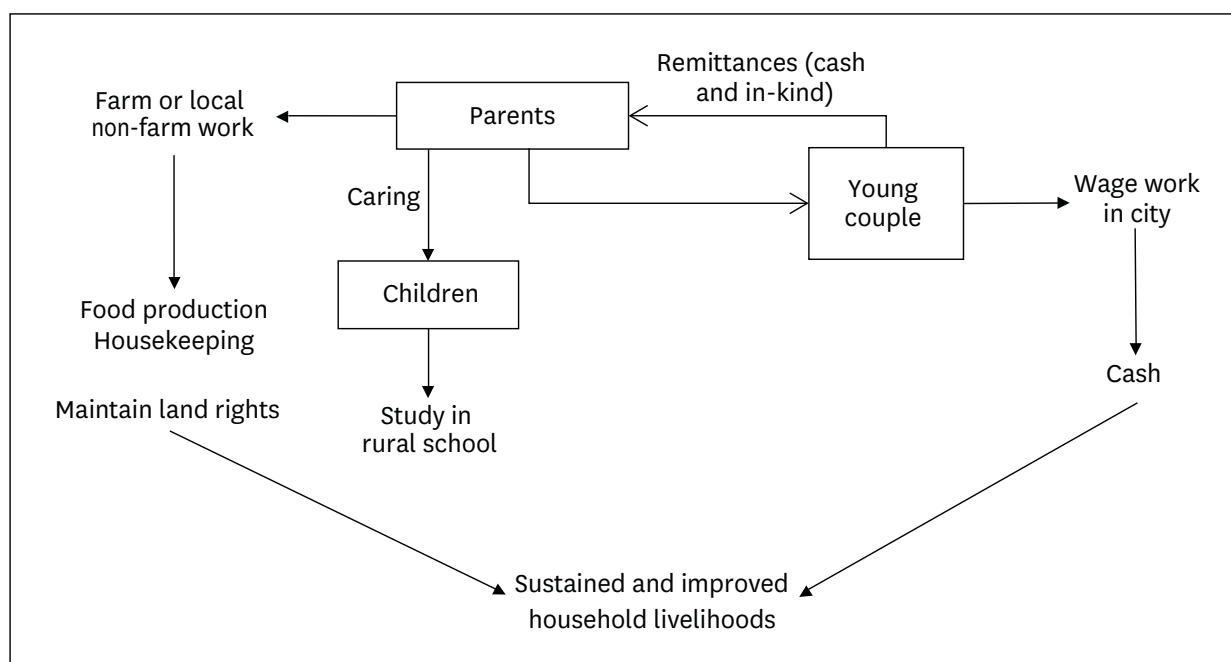
Year	Overall level of mechanization (%)	Overall level of mechanization (%)	Seeding by machine (%)	Harvest by machine (%)
2011	65.07	91.0	26.24	69.32
2019	83.73	98.84	53.89	93.46

Source: China Agricultural Mechanization Yearbook 2012, 2020.

Table 5. Total average remittances and percentage allocated for different purposes by households.

Site	Average remittances received per household (USD)	Percentage (%) allocated for different purposes
Maoming, Guangdong Province	1,779	Consumption (61.78%); medical (27.90%); children’s education (45.55%); agricultural production (32.89%); nonagricultural fixed assets (37.14%); saving or paying off debt (34.25%); loans (20%); other (9.90%) (note: In the field survey, we asked respondents to answer the proportion of the amount of remittance used through various channels).
Xinjian, Jiangxi Province	1,788	Consumption (77.44%); medical (36.91%); children’s education (28.33%); agricultural production (32.21%); nonagricultural fixed assets (33.75%); saving or paying off debt (65%); other (40%).
Nanxian, Hunan Province	1,406	Consumption (64.57%); medical (16%); children’s education (36.61%); agricultural production (17%); nonagricultural fixed assets (17.67%); saving or paying off debt (64.27%); loan (16.50%); other (57.50%)

Figure 2. Divided rural households in the People’s Republic of China.



Source: Fengbo et al. 2016.

There are instances where families of migrants send their children to live in nearby towns, often with a family member, where they can access better facilities and opportunities. This is leading to the merging of village-level primary schools with middle schools in townships.

The hilly terrain around the Maoming research site makes using harvesters and other farming equipment challenging. Seventy-eight percent of households in the Maoming sample reported labor shortages due to out-migration, yet only 28% responded by buying new machinery. One response

to the short supply of labor has been to lease out land, which is then often taken over by larger or more commercial producers who rent additional plots to increase their output.

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the implementation plan released by the Chinese government in March 2020 established interventions linking migration and development under one scheme. The plan aims to enhance rural employment opportunities for returnees and those staying behind in rural areas through optimizing rural entrepreneurial environments and local employment service alternatives to migration.



Harvesting rice with a combine harvester in Huangnitan village, Enping, Jiangmen, Guangdong, China (photo: Chen Fengbo).



Using an unmanned aerial vehicle to apply pesticides to rice fields in Zhu village, Zengcheng, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China (photo: Zhou Cong).

AGRUMIG research findings stressed the need for substantive impact assessments of these employment generation interventions to help improve their functionality. Internal migrants returning to the countryside is often inevitable, particularly if a debilitating injury impedes their earning capacity and their ability to afford life in the city. For example, 18% of returnees in the Nanxian research site had returned home due to poor health or illness.

Overall, the picture of rural migration is one of continued urbanization and industrialization. It has provided opportunities for modernizing agriculture, moving from a peasant economy to the marketization of the rural economy. An inflow of nonfarm income has improved income levels and living standards of rural households, which has been used to invest in human capital.

Policy issues

There have been a number of policy interventions in response to the significant rural-urban migration in recent decades, for example, in the agriculture sector, implementing a grain production subsidy since 2004 and encouraging land transfer. Alongside this, the government has supported the mechanization of agriculture and the use of labor-saving technology. It has also provided financial support to returnees who have engaged in the agriculture sector and the development of e-businesses to sell agricultural products.

At a rural district level, policy interventions have included the implementation of a new medical insurance scheme since 2004, which allows migrants to buy medical insurance in an urban area if they work in formal industrial sectors and a basic pension system undertaken since 2009. The government has also introduced free primary and middle school education since 2006, as well as a minimum living standard system supporting poverty alleviation from 2012 to 2020. Since 2019, a rural revitalization strategy has supported multidimensional development in rural areas, including industrial development, provision of better environments and infrastructure, and stronger rural governance.

The overall outcomes of these policy interventions include more than 90% mechanization of tillage and harvesting, growing popularity of large-scale and commercial farming, 95% of rural residents now buying medical insurance and the provision of basic pensions for the rural elderly. Villages have become cleaner and the environments have improved. Roads and information systems have improved, and most villages now have concrete access roads and tap water networks. The government now provides financial support to village committees, and has taken the responsibility for the wages of village committee members and enabled government employees to work with these committees. The government has announced that absolute poverty has now been eliminated, and e-businesses for agricultural products have been developed with support from the local government.

The interventions below aim to increase the attractiveness of rural areas through employment opportunities for returnees and those remaining in rural China. They also optimize the entrepreneurial environment and local agribusiness employment services within rural areas. However, other interventions, such as those under point B focus on expanding job opportunities for migrant workers in urban areas or helping them return to their urban jobs, while ensuring social security for those most in need.

- A. Government support for returnees: rural employment and Covid-19 in China
 - Plan for Expanding the Scale of Local and Nearby Employment for Migrant Workers Returning to or Staying in Rural Areas (March 26, 2020)
 - Strengthening Employment Stability in Response to the Impact of the Novel Coronavirus Outbreak (March 20, 2020)

- B. Government support for urban migration and Covid-19
 - Strengthening Employment Stability in Response to the Impact of the Novel Coronavirus Outbreak (March 20, 2020)
- C. Government support for rural revitalization
 - Three cleanups, three pull-downs, three regulations
 - Targeted Poverty Alleviation Scheme
 - Strategy Plan for Rural Vitalization (2018–2022)

One of the immediate impacts of these policies has been to reduce rural labor, which may also encourage farmers to abandon agricultural production and move back to the cities in search of employment. While we expect that pre-Covid-19 policies have the potential to be impactful in the short term, programs launched during the pandemic may not be significant. Nevertheless, their assessment in the long term is critical to ensure that resources mobilized for their implementation will be accounted for and whether or not they reached their goals.

References

China National Bureau of Statistics 2021. China Statistic Press. 2022.

China Agricultural Mechanization Yearbook 2012. China Agricultural Science and Technology Press. 2013

China Agricultural Mechanization Yearbook 2020. China Agricultural Science and Technology Press. 2021

Fengbo, C.; Lucas, H.; Bloom, G.; Shijun, D. 2016. Household structure, left-behind elderly, and rural migration in China. *Journal of Agricultural and Applied Economics* 48(3):279–297. <https://doi.org/10.1017/aae.2016.16>



Volunteers assisting in the setting up of testing points in Huangnitan village, Enping, Jiangmen, Guangdong, China (photo: Village Committee of Huangnitan Village).



Temperature screening points set up in villages during the Covid-19 pandemic in Huangnitan village, Enping, Jiangmen, Guangdong, China (photo: Village Committee of Huangnitan Village).

AGRUMIG Policy Brief Series

This policy brief is one in a series of briefs produced as part of the AGRUMIG project.

Authors:

Chen Fengbo and Zeng Qianyun, South China Agricultural University, China

AGRUMIG Project

The project titled **AGRUMIG 'Leaving something behind' - Migration governance and agricultural & rural change in 'home' communities: Comparative experience from Europe, Asia and Africa** proposes an integrated approach to migration governance to address the two-way relationship between labor mobility and changes in agriculture and the rural sector. Migration creates challenges for rural 'sending' communities in low- and middle-income countries, yet it can also be transformative. The project engages in a comparative analysis of seven countries (China, Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Morocco, Nepal and Thailand) to identify the economic, institutional, cultural and agroecological factors which shape these relationships. It will identify the range of governance interventions that can harness migration to stimulate sustainable, gender equitable growth in agriculture, and reduce the distress associated with migration.

Donor: European Union (EU) Horizon 2020 Framework Programme (H2020) under grant agreement number 822730

(Call: Towards forward-looking migration governance: Addressing the challenges, assessing capacities and designing future strategies)

Project website: <http://agrumig.iwmi.org>

For more information on the project, contact: Angela Haynes, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, UK (ah121@soas.ac.uk)

This project is part of the MARIS (Migration, Agriculture and Resilience: Initiative for Sustainability) network (<http://maris.iwmi.org>)

