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The Global Crisis' Impact upon China's Rural Migrants

Sara Hsu, Shiyin Jiang, and Halcott Heyward

Abstract: Towards the end of 2008, as the world economy slowed and export-demand declined due to the global financial crisis, news reports began to appear detailing the return of rural migrants in China to their provincial homes. It was reported that 20 million rural migrant workers were laid off, and social instability rose due to both economic hardship and to the withholding of the payment of wages. Over time, these circumstances have changed, due to both the Chinese government's fiscal stimulus package and to those programmes that have been targeted specifically at assisting the country's rural migrants. As a result, the situation for rural migrants is no longer dire; circumstances have been greatly ameliorated by proactive government policies. To confirm these results, in this paper we look both at the situation across China and briefly at a study carried out in Sichuan province.

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Keywords: China, migration, poverty, financial crisis

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Introduction

China did not directly participate in the massive speculation and accumulation of risky sub-prime derivatives that led to the financial collapse in Europe and the United States of America, but it was strongly affected through sharply slowing exports.¹ Towards the end of 2008, as the world economy slowed and export demand declined, news reports began to appear detailing the return of Chinese rural migrants, the backbone of the export-manufacturing sector, to their provincial homes. Civil unrest and violence sprang up in export-manufacturing regions like Dongguan, where laid-off factory workers clashed with police, and in Chaozhou, where protests were carried out (Oster 2008). It was reported that 20 million rural migrant workers were laid off, and the government's fear of social instability rose due to both the economic hardship and to the inequalities in lay-off patterns, as migrants may be the first to be fired during a downturn (Taran 2009). Over time, though, these circumstances changed, due to both the Chinese government's fiscal stimulus package and to the programs that were targeted specifically at giving assistance to the country's rural migrants.

This paper is structured as follows: we first examine the export slowdown in China and its impact on employment there, particularly for rural migrants. Second, we look at the effects of unemployment on rural migrant workers. Third, we look at the impact of government policies on rural migrants. Finally, we will discuss our research that was conducted in Sichuan province on rural migrants.

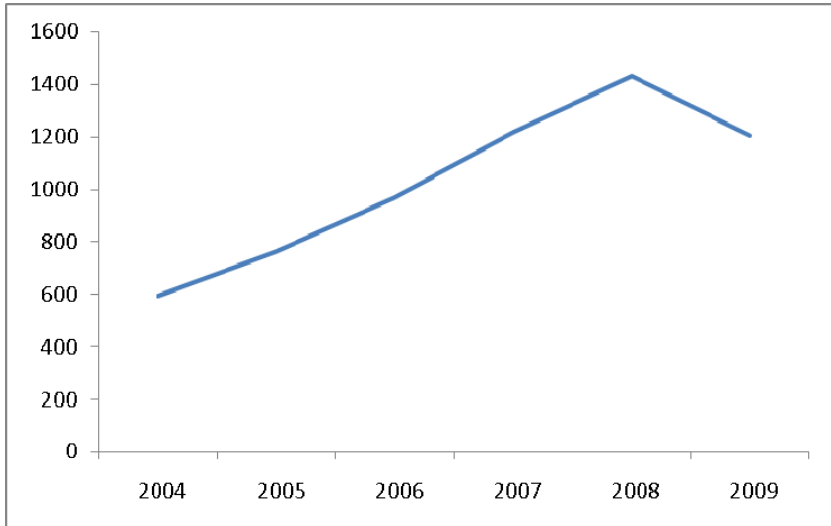
A Slowing Export Regime and Unemployment

China's export regime accounts for over 30 per cent of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Rodrik 2006: 2), and any shock to this sector can have dramatic effects on both employment and growth. Indeed, this happened; as unemployment rose and income declined in the countries that constitute China's major trading partners, as a result of the 2008 global financial crisis, the demand for manufactured goods significantly dropped. News of China's slowing export growth inundated the media in the first and second quarters of 2009. Reports in *The Wall Street*

1 We wish to extend our heartfelt thanks to Jianjun Li for helping to make this article possible. We also wish to thank Jocelyn Lam for her assistance with research.

Journal (Batson and Poon 2009), the *Daily Telegraph* (Foster 2009), *Bloomberg* (Panckhurst 2009) and *The Guardian* (Branigan 2009), for example, reported a sharp decline in China's export growth, which was countered only by the production of domestic infrastructure, aided by the stimulation from the Chinese government's spending.

Figure 1: Total Exports by Year (in Billion USD)



Source: NBS 2009c.

From the data above, we can see that exports rose throughout most of 2008 and then declined into 2009. The decline in exports began at the end of 2008. This represents a stark divergence from the trend of increasing exports that we witnessed before this period.

As a result of this decline in export production, millions of Chinese workers were laid off from their jobs. Both the official and the unofficial unemployment statistics confirm that there was a trend of lasting unemployment. As can be seen in Table 1, the ten richest provinces in China saw a decline in the level of employment among non-migrants between the last quarter (Q4) of 2008 and the first quarter (Q1) of 2009.

Table 1: Changes in Employment between Q4 2008 and Q1 2009, in the Ten Richest Provinces

Province	Percentage Change in the Number of Employees
Zhejiang	-3.6
Shanghai	-3.1
Sichuan	-2.6
Jiangsu	-2.1
Hebei	-1.8
Liaoning	-1.6
Guangdong	-1.4
Henan	-0.9
Shandong	-0.9
Hubei	-0.1

Source: NBS 2009b; authors' own calculations.

The biggest decline in employment between Q4 of 2008 and Q1 of 2009 occurred in Zhejiang Province, followed by Shanghai, Sichuan, Jiangsu, Hebei, Liaoning, and Guangdong provinces (NBS 2009b). These drops in employment are dominated by eastern coastal areas with high levels of employment in export manufacturing. The official national unemployment rates, which are known to be understated, went from 4 per cent in October 2008 to 4.2 per cent in December 2008 (*Bloomberg* 2010).

However, the official statistics certainly do not fully capture the situation of China's rural migrants. Contrary to the official statistics, unemployment among rural migrants to urban areas remained quite high. Since rural migrants are in any case unable to register as unemployed, their true circumstances must be captured by other means of data collection. Close to 70 per cent of the estimated 130 to 150 million rural migrants work in informal employment, making their exact circumstances particularly difficult to track (Cai and Chan 2009: 515). In Dongguan, a major export production zone, about 40 per cent of rural migrants, who dominate the city, were laid off as businesses collapsed (*Caijing* 2009a). About 5,000 Dongguan businesses collapsed during 2008, and many of the remaining businesses reported no new business at that time.

The Chinese Ministry of Agriculture found that around 20 million rural migrants had lost their jobs before the New Year festival, while

according to the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security (MHRSS), of the 70 million migrant workers who returned home for the Spring Festival, which took place after the New Year festival, only 80 per cent returned to the cities. Of that group, only 80 per cent (or 64 per cent of the total number of workers who returned home) had found work in the city, which would mean that 11 million rural migrants in the cities later remained unemployed (World Bank 2009a: 5).² Cai and Chan (2009) note that the temporary return home of migrant workers for the New Year holiday began, unusually, three months earlier than normal due to lay-offs, and calculate that, after the Spring Festival, 16 per cent of rural migrants (20 million people) were still seeking work in the city. The divergence of statistics on the number of unemployed rural migrants thus reflects the difficulty, yet absolute necessity, of assessing a transient population.

The Effects of Unemployment on Rural Migrant Workers

Some factory owners closed down their operations and left without paying their workers (Zhan 2008). There are many verbal accounts of such occurrences. Although the All-China Federation of Trade Unions attempted to help unionized migrant workers obtain their unpaid wages, many of the migrant workers who were not part of a union were simply out of luck (Xie 2008). The NBS reported that of the migrant workers returning home for the New Year holiday, in December 2008, 13 per cent were owed back wages due to company closures after the financial crisis, while 5.7 per cent were owed back wages due to lay-offs (NBS 2009a). Michael Standaert (2008) writes of a 21 year-old man returning home in December 2008:

Three months ago he was brought from Guigang [in Guangxi province] to Guangzhou with a group of around 20 people to work on a project for a water company. After three months of work, all of them were let go without pay. "We don't know who to ask for the money", he said. "I'm angry because they told us we'd be paid well, but when we came here they only gave us some money for food and rent, but no salary. I don't know what I'll do now".

2 14 million rural migrants remained in their home villages.

After the crisis, the rate of unemployment among migrant workers was much higher than that among urban *bukou* workers – 16 per cent for the former compared to 4.3 per cent for the latter, as noted by Cai and Chan (2009). This was due to the higher rates of migrant employment in the informal sectors, which obviously provide less job stability (Cai and Chan 2009: 521). Although not the direct focus of our paper, it should be noted that this prejudice has been documented both in scholarly literature as well as in popular media.

Wang (2010) performed, in their home villages, survey research on 2,700 rural migrant workers returning home for the New Year holiday in January and February 2009, in order to assess what types of migrants were more likely to be laid off, and what choices the migrants made thereafter. Wang assimilates into this research the literature on rural migrants, which profiles them as more likely to be younger, more educated and male (Wang 2010: 220). This profile is also verified by Wu (2010: 25).

Wang (2010) finds that the largest number of migrant workers originated from Sichuan, Guizhou, Henan, Hubei, Guangxi, and Jiangxi provinces. His estimated number of unemployed (around 28 million people) is higher than the figure given by the Ministry of Agriculture, since the latter conducted its survey in 15 provinces, whereas Wang conducted his research in 24 provinces, and since the Ministry of Agriculture in any case initially assumed a lower number of migrant workers. Wang's survey reveals that migrant workers were more or less laid off indiscriminately, regardless of age, gender, marital status, educational level and ethnicity (Wang 2010: 224), although other sources have indicated that the workers who were most likely to be laid off were the less-educated ones (see *Caijing* 2009b; NBS 2009a).

Wang found that 63 per cent of laid-off migrant workers had decided to return to the cities to seek work, and many of them were more educated than those who were undecided or those who chose to stay (Wang 2010: 225). This may also be due in part to government policy; the Spring Wind Action Program, launched in 2008 by the MHRSS, encouraged rural migrants to seek work in their home provinces, and encouraged the provinces to provide re-training to around three million rural migrants so that they might find more skill-intensive jobs when they return to the cities (MHRSS 2008), and also worked in favour of migrants in the wake of the crisis. It should be noted, however, that, according to *Caijing*, a prominent media source,

this program got off to a slow start, as many of the migrants were unaware of its existence, and even then the program took place in the provincial cities, where many rural migrants did not live (*Caijing* 2009b).

Unemployment across China post-crisis remained a problem, particularly for rural migrants who rely on wages earned in goods production for cash remittances. Unemployment of rural migrants is a problem of great significance. We know that rural migrants remitted over 30 million USD from urban export-processing areas to their inland rural homes in 2005, more than China received from cross-border cash flows, providing somewhere between 18 and 50 per cent of total rural income (Huang and Zhan 2008: 223; Cheng and Xu 2005, cited in Murphy 2006: 6). That said, commonly cited in news media stories on rural migrants' unemployment is the People's Bank of China statistic that rural migrants provide on average 65 per cent of the total rural income (for example, see Divjak 2009). This is a result of the fact that there have been relatively few economic opportunities in rural, interior China to date. In this way, sharp declines in rural incomes, by between 50 and 65 per cent according to the statistics above, mean deepening and widening poverty for China's rural residents.

Though agriculture remains the main source of income for the poor, many have also pursued additional sources of finance. Included in these additional activities are rural industry and the migration to urban areas in search of employment. However, because rural residents in China are restricted from full acceptance as city residents, and must maintain their lands in the rural areas, urban employment does not, then, ultimately represent a viable opportunity and solution for these rural residents. Furthermore, the benefits of increasing economic growth in China's urban areas are noticeably absent from the life's of these rural residents. Though foreign investment, government inputs and open regulations have spurred China's growth and the aggregate number of those in extreme poverty has decreased as a result of reforms, there nevertheless still exists increasingly little parity for the country's rural residents. According to the World Bank (2009b), China is home to the world's second largest number of poor (comprising up to 30 per cent of China's rural population at under 1.25 USD per day, 2005 purchasing power parity), after India (World Bank 2009b: V).

The segregation in urban areas of rural migrants from urban residents is a reflection of this stark urban-rural divide, a phenomenon that has occurred due to the concentration of development in urban areas,

particularly in the eastern coastal regions. For rural migrants the acceptance of discrimination and poor jobs in urban areas is a necessity, because they have few, or even no, other economic opportunities back home in their own villages. The wages that they earn while working in cities are sent back to their rural homes in order to sustain livelihoods there, and, indeed, to slow the growing urban-rural economic divide. Poor rural residents represented, in 2001, about eight per cent of China's total population (Ravallion and Chen 2007: 2), and much of the improvement, over time, in their income has come from rural out-migration. In this sense, economic discrimination against rural migrants can be conceived of as part of a larger discrimination by urban residents against the vast rural majority.

In the poorest regions, remittances pay only for everyday consumption, while in the somewhat better-off regions, remittances pay for consumer durables. One Chinese national survey showed that, in 1995 and 2000, 50 per cent of remittances were used for consumption (Huang and Zhan 2008: 227). Remittances may also pay for productive investment in land, agriculture and/or business, or for human capital-building in health and education (Murphy 2006: 29). De Brauw and Rozelle (2008), however, find that remittances are much more likely to be used for consumption than for production, and that remittances have no statistically significant effect on productive investment (De Brauw and Rozelle 2008: 331). Money from this source is therefore mainly used to support only the basic needs. Before the Chinese stimulus package was enacted, the specter of worsening poverty was present, given the average adverse impact of crises on rural migrants, as in the Asian crisis and others. We next turn to the impact of government policies, which worked to effectively provide a safety net for vulnerable individuals, including rural migrants.

The Impact of the Chinese Government's Policies

The financial crisis would have had an even worse impact on rural labour migrants if not for the fiscal stimulus package that was swiftly enacted by the government in November 2008. With an already-fragile social safety net beneath them, these impoverished individuals were struggling to survive as labour demand fell and social services were reduced.

The fiscal stimulus package accounts for China's quick emergence from recession. The four trillion CNY (586 billion USD) that was in-

vested sought to make improvements in housing, rural infrastructure, transportation, health and education, environment, industry, disaster rebuilding, incomes, taxes and finance. According to *Xinhua* (2008), the main objectives of it were to:

- Build affordable housing
- Speed up rural infrastructure
- Expand the transportation network and power grids
- Improve health and medical services
- Improve environmental protection
- Increase industrial restructuring and innovation
- Reconstruct Sichuan's earthquake zones
- Raise incomes in urban and rural areas
- Extend Value Added Tax reforms to all industries
- Increase financing for priority projects

Certainly industrial production for the stimulus package's infrastructure construction ramped up in 2009. Despite these efforts, though, largely promised at the beginning of 2009, protests over the closed factories continued, and the central government thus went further to alleviate the stress on rural migrants. In February 2009, Vice Commerce Minister Jiang Zengwei committed to setting up 150,000 stores in rural areas within one year, in order to provide jobs to three-quarters of a million rural workers (*People's Daily Online* 2009).

To alleviate the problems caused by unemployment, the Chinese government also adopted several policies that gave specific attention to the country's rural migrants (Feng 2009: 23). Included in these were: requests to firms in the coastal regions and cities to fire fewer migrant workers; requests that public infrastructure projects with government investment should hire as many rural migrants as possible; the extension of government support to those rural migrants who returned home to start their own businesses. Some local governments also took measures to assist these migrants. Wuxi City, in Jiangsu province, worked to help migrants find jobs, while Jiangxi province provided a one-time stipend to those migrants who were eligible.

The news stories about job losses among rural migrants died down in April 2009, and the MHRSS stated that, as of August 2009, 95 per cent of migrant workers had returned to urban areas after the Spring Festival, and that most rural migrants had found jobs in the cities (*China*

Daily 2009). According to the MHRSS, about 4.5 million rural migrants in the cities remained unemployed at that time (Tan 2009).

Additional statistics put forth by the NBS showed that the number of rural migrants to cities actually increased between 2008 and 2009 (NBS 2010). In the eastern coastal regions, there was an increase of 3.1 per cent, in the central regions the increase in numbers was by 0.9 per cent and in the western regions there was a 1.2 per cent increase. There were declines in the number of migrant workers in the Yangzi River Delta by 2.4 per cent and in the Pearl River Delta by 7.6 per cent.

Table 2: Migrant Workers from Within the Province Versus from Outside the Province (in Per Cent)

Region	2009		2008	
	Province	Outside Province	Province	Outside Province
Eastern Region	79.6	20.4	79.7	20.3
Central Region	30.6	69.4	29.0	71.0
Western Region	40.9	59.1	37.0	63.0

Source: NBS 2010.

From Table 2, we can see that most of the migrants who came to the central and western regions did so from outside the province, in both 2008 and 2009, while most of the migrants who came to the eastern region arrived from within the local eastern province. Again, most of the migrants tended to be both young and male (NBS 2010). The average monthly income for rural migrants rose, between 2008 and 2009, by 5.7 per cent, although it should be noted that around 40 per cent of migrants worked without a contract (NBS 2010).

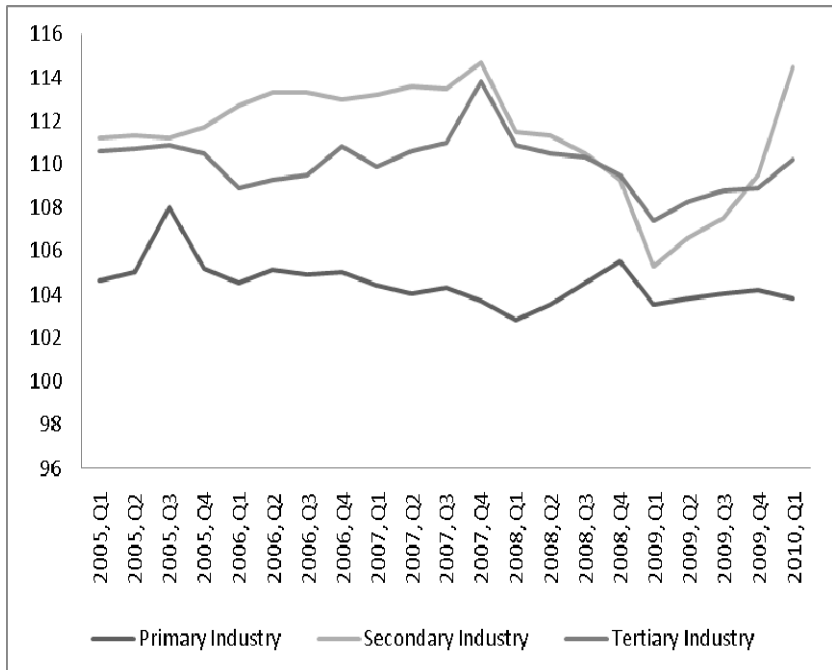
However, rural migrants did not fare better across the board. In areas such as Shenzhen, the wage guideline was cut by 3.8 per cent so as to allow for increased employment (Batson 2009). Different regions faced divergent circumstances. Dongguan, as of August 2009, continued to struggle in its attempts to revive its export-manufacturing status (Foster 2009), while small and medium enterprises in other coastal regions, such as Wenzhou in Zhejiang province, suffered a shortage of migrant labour (Wang and Xie 2009).

If the statistics on rural migrants returning to cities are reliable, then most of the laid-off rural migrants did not find work in their villages

before leaving once again for the cities. The fiscal stimulus package's construction programs did not, then, hire most of the laid-off rural migrant workers within their home provinces. Yet it is entirely plausible, even likely, that migrant workers returned to the cities in order to find heavy manufacturing work in preparation for the programs put forth by the stimulus package. Indeed, official statistics show that China's GDP was boosted by the increase in the production of heavy manufactured goods.

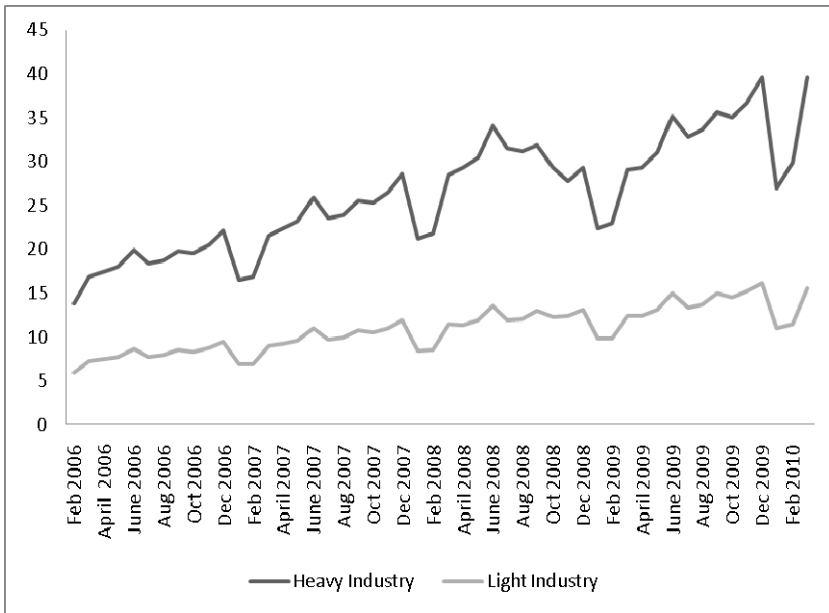
From Figure 2, we see a sharp decline in GDP for primary, secondary and tertiary industries in the first quarter of 2009, with noticeable increases thereafter, particularly in the secondary industries.

Figure 2: GDP by Industry (Accumulated to This Quarter, Preceding Year = 100)



Source: NBS 2009b.

Figure 3: Gross Output Value of Light and Heavy Industry (100 Billion CNY)



Source: NBS 2009b; authors' own calculations.

Light industry dropped somewhat at the end of 2008, representative of the decline in exports, and increased once again thereafter. Heavy industry dropped sharply at the end of 2008 and then, as a result of the economic stimulus package, reverted to its upward trend at the beginning of 2009.

The fiscal stimulus package boosted the production of heavy industrial goods for use, in large part, in the construction of domestic infrastructure in rural areas. Therefore, as the production of goods for export declined the production of, and demand for, domestic products increased. The fiscal stimulus package greatly bolstered heavy manufacturing while somewhat stabilizing the primary and tertiary sectors.

Evidence from Sichuan Province

Next we turn to the impact of the financial crisis on rural migrants in Sichuan Province, since this is where most of the rural migrants originate from. In June 2009, the authors traveled to Sichuan Province, in the

heart of China, to examine the impact of the financial crisis on the provincial economy. We conducted 14 in-depth interviews with both professors at the Sichuan Provincial Communist Party Committee School and with provincial government officials.³ At the point in time when we conducted these interviews there was still great uncertainty over the fate of both the rural migrants and China's economy in general, although it was clear that most people now had more confidence in the economy as a result of the Chinese government's swift action when the crisis initially emerged.

During these interviews, it became clear that the biggest economic problem in poorer, non-coastal regions like Sichuan was indeed a loss of export processing jobs in the east. Although over 1,000 miles away from the coastal area, the rural poor in interior provinces such as Sichuan have no choice but to migrate to those areas that offer large numbers of manufacturing jobs. There are simply insufficient economic opportunities within the province itself. Furthermore, the homeward return of rural migrants clearly concerned government officials.

Among the people we interviewed, the awareness of the impact of the financial crisis ranged from those with a relative lack of knowledge on this subject to those who had an intimate understanding of it. By far the most knowledgeable of those we interviewed were the government officials. Junior professors believed the crisis had affected China as a whole, but that it had not really affected their province, while one senior professor that we interviewed understood the ways in which the crisis had affected not only rural migrants but also their domestic households. Government officials provided us with detailed information on the impact of the crisis on small and large businesses, as well as on women and ethnic minorities, although this analysis is not directly relevant to this paper.

As for other discoveries, we found that many rural residents had faced hardship due to the crisis. A sharp decline in income had led to worsened poverty. The lowest level of income reached was 400 CNY per month, while for some people income more or less vanished, as rural migrants had lost their jobs and because many small-scale companies in Sichuan, and particularly in Chengdu, went bankrupt (Interview 2, 2009). With a grim look on his face, one official told us that, "the poverty situa-

3 The anonymity of our respondents was maintained, so as to allow for their freer expression in speech.

tion in Sichuan Province is very bad after the financial crisis” (Interview 1, 2009). Another official noted that the number of those officially classified as impoverished had increased (Interview 5, 2009).

But change was in the air. In line with the overall view taken by the Chinese government and international and domestic media, all of our interviewees suggested that although poverty in China was temporarily increasing due to the financial crisis, the pace of the country’s economic slowdown had certainly been constrained, since the central government had invested a massive amount of funding so as to promote ongoing economic development (Interviews 1-14, 2009). Indeed, it has been noted that China’s fiscal stimulus package has had profound effects on economic growth, particularly in Sichuan’s capital city, Chengdu (Interview 1, 2009). This fiscal policy has targeted multiple social strata, including the poor, and was therefore somewhat effective in alleviating the dire shocks to income that were caused by the financial crisis. In addition, the provincial government has been working over time, even before the crisis struck, to build up enterprises and create jobs in areas where poor locals work (Interview 1, 2009).

An update: currently, Sichuan Province, like other provinces, has focused on training rural migrant workers (Working Committee of the CPC Sichuan Provincial Committee 2010a), as part of the Spring Wind Program initiated by the MHRSS (Working Committee of the CPC Sichuan Provincial Committee 2010b). Action has also been taken to increase the number of rural migrants who sign labour contracts, in order to improve the working conditions for them (Working Committee of the CPC Sichuan Provincial Committee 2010c). In these ways, policies at both the national and provincial levels are working to relieve the economic stress on rural migrants.

Conclusion

The effects of the global financial crisis on China’s rural migrants were sharply curtailed by the Chinese government’s immediate proactive policy. The approval of the substantial fiscal stimulus package in November 2008 did much to allay the fears of businesses and local officials, thus greatly reducing panic over the crisis’ shock to the export sector. Uncertainty, the enemy of economic confidence, was thus greatly reduced.

Many migrants returned to the cities after the Spring Festival and were able to find jobs, particularly in the heavy manufacturing sector,

which was gearing up to provide material inputs for the construction to be undertaken as per the new fiscal policy. The slower recovery of employment in Dongguan, China's main export-manufacturing city, points to the continuation of the trend of only a slow rise in export production. Central government policy, along with training programs implemented by provincial governments, greatly improved the situation of rural migrants as they returned to other urban areas in China. In other words, the recovery stemmed from domestic policy rather than from global recuperation, and thus the sustenance of continued growth will require, simultaneously, both continued domestic spending as well as an improvement in international trade.

Although the plight of rural migrants in China appeared dire in the first quarter of 2009, the situation was quickly reversed by a proactive government. However, the danger for this vulnerable group is certainly not over; their ongoing employment is contingent on economic growth, and as China's economy is closely integrated into, and inter-dependent upon, the world economy, then continued recovery will, ultimately, be dependent upon worldwide revival.

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