

Policy Forum 08-094: China Civil Society Report: Chinese Civil Society Impacts on Urban Migration



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Recommended Citation

Jia Xijin and Zhao Yusi, "Policy Forum 08-094: China Civil Society Report: Chinese Civil Society Impacts on Urban Migration", NAPSNet Policy Forum, December 09, 2008, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/china-civil-society-report-chinese-civil-society-impacts-on-urban-migration/>

Policy Forum Online 08-094A: December 9th, 2008
China Civil Society Report: Chinese Civil Society Impacts on Urban Migration

By Jia Xijin and Zhao Yusi

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I. Introduction

Jia Xijin, Associate Professor at the NGO Research Center at Tsinghua University, and Zhao Yusi, Project Assistant of NGO Research Center at Tsinghua University, write, "Noting the tension between migrant workers and cities under the household registration system, civil society in China

has worked to protect the basic rights of migrant workers and resolve the conflicts involved in their residence in cities to make the migrant population function more harmoniously during China's urbanization process."

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II. Article by Jia Xijin and Zhao Yusi

- "China Civil Society Report: Chinese Civil Society Impacts on Urban Migration"

By Jia Xijin and Zhao Yusi

The large scale migration of rural labor to urban areas is an issue that all developed and highly urbanized countries experience. It is an inevitable trend of industrialization and urbanization, as well as an important symbol of a country's modernization. The climax of Chinese farmers' migration was after the 1980s, coinciding with the changing socio-economic structure of the country. But due to China's unique dual urban-rural structure which has a strict distinction between urban and rural domiciles, most farmers can travel to, but not fully relocate to the cities, because their domiciles are still in their original rural hometowns. These rural migrant workers are mainly engaged in non-agricultural industries. Some of them travel to the cities for work during lulls in the farming season, while others work in cities or township enterprises for the entire year. At present, there are a total of 200 million migrant workers in China, with 120 million in urban areas. Most of them go to the cities on their own initiative and rely on their relatives to help them look for work. Most migrants find work in varying positions in the manufacturing, construction or service industries. Generally their working days are very long while their income and benefits are quite low. Their living conditions are also generally bad. Most of them live in poor quarters or sometimes sheds. Most children of migrant workers live with their parents and go to local schools. In addition to the regular tuition, some migrant workers have to pay transient fees, sponsorship fees and so on.

Noting the tension between migrant workers and cities under the household registration system, civil society in China has worked to protect the basic rights of migrant workers and resolve the conflicts involved in their residence in cities to make the migrant population function more harmoniously during China's urbanization process.

In this context civil society refers civic or non-governmental organizations. In addition, it also consists of civic social movements and the rise of civic awareness in individuals. Chinese civil society has attempted to promote civil rights, civic self-governance, and civic awareness in the rural, migrant population.

Civil Society and Migrant Worker Rights

The term "citizen rights" refers to a citizen's civil rights, political rights, and social rights. It involves the right to have equal opportunities. But in China, migrant workers often cannot attain equal opportunities and are often seen as "second-class citizens". Though they contribute a lot to urban construction, they are not treated as well as other workers and urban residents. They are informal, low-pay workers, with no job security, no urban residences, and no social security. Most of them have to eventually return to the rural areas that they originally came from. Given this status they are often reliant on civil society organizations to protect their rights. In recent years, some organizations that have worked to safeguard the rights of migrant workers in China have appeared, such as the Beijing Cultural Communication Center for Facilitators and the Shenzhen Reform and Development Institution. These groups work to address the special cases where the rights of rural workers are

infringed upon, initiate policy for better wages, working conditions, labor protection, and social security for migrant workers, and educate migrant workers to promote their rights as citizens.

Civil Society and Migrant Worker Self-Governance

Self-organization is a core tenet of Chinese civil society. Thus civil society organizations play a prominent role in promoting the self-government of migrant workers. These groups have many different organizational models including independent, self-organizing organizations such as Little Birds, the Panyu Migrant Workers Service Center, and others. The members of these organizations identify personally with migrant workers and provide services such as information, legal aid, cultural and sports activities, and advocacy for migrant rights.

Other organizations are supported by the government. They employ some migrant workers in administrative management positions and coordinate the relationship between migrant workers, enterprises, and the government. For example, since 1996 in the Longhua District of Haikou City in Hainan province, organizers have set up various residential and employment districts for migrant workers through partnerships between the government, businesses, and civil society organizations. These partnerships established organizations such as the "Migrant Workers Management Association" to promote the self-management and protect the rights of migrant workers. Additionally there are many organizations founded by businesses. A typical example is in Fenghua City in Zhejiang Province. With the sponsorship of the Nippon Paint Company, the migrant workers were encouraged to manage and organize themselves and founded a "virtual community" (for people without homes in the city), to participate in local elections.

Both the "Migrant Workers' House" and "Nippon Village" are concentrated communities of migrant workers. The government gives migrant workers some space for their participation in government and supports them through related policies and funds. The community is maintained through the self-organization of migrant workers which has replaced the original direct management of the community by the local government.

Civil Society and the Civic Awareness of Migrant Workers

China's social structure changed radically before and after the reform and opening up of Chinese society. People from different strata begin to strive for their own interests, which led to the development of civil awareness. While migrant workers may not know the specific legal rules and regulations, they know their basic rights conferred by law, they know how to seek legal protection when their rights have been violated, and they know the basic social obligations they need to comply with.

Their civil awareness is developing with the help of different groups in Chinese civil society. For example, on the morning of July 15th 2008, more than 100 migrant workers held a press conference before a mansion in Zhengzhou city of Henan province, asking for the payment of wages in arrears. They carried a banner that read, "Safeguard the Rights of Migrant Workers Press Conference". Compared to more extreme methods used previously, holding a press conference is very rational progress. By inviting the journalists to the conference, they could discuss their perspective on these events in detail, publicly state their position, attitude and requirements, and then use the influence of the mass media to change their vulnerable status. This embodies the civil awareness awakening in migrant workers in the new social environment.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send

responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
Northeast Asia Peace and Security Project (napsnet-reply@nautilus.org)

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