

China: migration of a nation

How the world's largest pool of cheap, uneducated labor is being transformed into a fierce competitor for the West



Bai He Ping, left, and Wang Fu Ying are the parents of six people who are helping to change the course of the world's most populous nation.

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TWO DRAGONS, China

Along a narrow mud road that cuts through the unending farmland of east-central China sits a village so modest it hardly deserves its evocative name.

At the end of the lane is the dirt-floored hovel of Bai Li Yun, an illiterate farmer who cannot afford to support his five children.

Until recently, Bai, 46, had left Two Dragons only once. Ten years ago he rode a bus two hours to the provincial capital to buy a 15-inch black-and-white television, which pulls in the fuzzy signal of just one channel.

For at least eight generations, members of the extended Bai clan have lived in Two Dragons, the rhythm of their lives almost unchanged as they have struggled to survive as farmers in a poor, overpopulated country. There have been years of famine and of bounty, eras of political upheaval and of calm. Yet always they have lived and worked with "our eyes facing the yellow earth, our backs pointed toward heaven," according to a proverb quoted by one Bai.

There is no ancient saying to describe the changes sweeping through the Bai clan of today. One by one they are fleeing the land.

Their destination is the city, where many in the family have found opportunity and heartbreak as tiny, nearly anonymous contributors to the modern economic boom that is reshaping China.

The migration of the Bai family and millions more from the countryside is transforming a vast communist country that is still, at its heart, a fiefdom of lords and peasants into a fierce competitor for the West.

Desperation to get ahead

Tens of millions of former farmers now work in China's urban factories. They build the industrial equipment, sew the clothing and make the toys that are sold around the world. Many if not all of these products once were manufactured in the United States. Now many of those jobs have gone to China, where a vast work force is willing to endure harsh conditions and low pay out of a desperate desire to get ahead.

The peasants have always defined China. They built the Great Wall and defended the empires that rose to become some of the world's great civilizations. Yet time and again they have proved ungovernable through their unmanageable numbers.

Once more, the 1.3 billion people of the world's most populous nation present both strength and weakness. They are the largest pool of cheap, uneducated labor on the planet, but they also are an extraordinary burden on themselves. That is especially true for the 900 million Chinese from the countryside, many of whom - like those in Two Dragons - eke out meager existences.

China's own economy never could provide work for them all. But perhaps the rest of the world can employ enough of them to sustain the country and keep the Communist Party in power.

That was part of the logic behind the government's decision to abandon rote communism 25 years ago and open itself to the outside world. It was China's good fortune to get the timing just right, laying the groundwork to become the world's factory at the moment countries were becoming more interconnected economically.

Companies from the United States, Europe and elsewhere in Asia were recognizing that it made sense to search the globe for the cheapest, most efficient workers to manufacture their products. They found what they were looking for in China.

China's great advantage is not just a low-cost labor force but also the people's desperation to succeed. Over the past decade or so, more than 100 million peasants have left their villages for China's cities, so hungry for work that they accept nearly any wage and will tolerate nearly any living condition if it means a job.

It is an exodus that constitutes one of the greatest mass migrations of all time.

Road to a better life

Members of the Bai family have become determined and resourceful participants in this journey. Though it has been terribly difficult at times, they have discovered that the dirt road through their village connects them to the world and the possibility of a better life.

The parents are Bai He Ping and Wang Fu Ying. It is their children, five adult brothers and one sister, who are changing family history. Illiterate farmer Bai Li Yun is the second-oldest son. The oldest brother also is illiterate. The next two younger brothers went to middle school. The youngest graduated from high school.

All of them grew up in a home much like the one now occupied by the second brother. There is no indoor plumbing. The family draws water from a well and uses a walled-off bit of back yard for a toilet. During winter, the house is freezing cold. At night, the six chickens that share the living space huddle quietly in a covered basket.

In their windowless home, lighted by a single bulb, cooking is a two-woman operation: A daughter crouches behind a concrete oven in the corner of the main room, stoking the fire with fistfuls of hay as Bai's wife stirs the wok that rests over a hole on top. Smoke fills the room and soot collects on the mud-and-straw walls.

This is the life being abandoned. Today, three of the five adult Bai brothers are working in the city. Wives, children, cousins, aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces: All have gone, many leaving Two Dragons for the first time in their lives in the past year or so. Of about 40 men in the Bais' neighborhood, 30 have gone down the dirt road that leads to the modern highway toward Hefei, the capital of Anhui province. From there they head by train or bus to Shanghai or Beijing or Nanjing or Shenzhen, where growth offers unprecedented opportunities to migrant workers.

The first Bai to leave was the eldest daughter of the eldest brother. She began working in a clothing factory 10 years ago. But the harsh experiences and eventual success of the youngest Bai brother redefined what is possible for this peasant clan in the era of economic globalization.

Nine years after first leaving home, the youngest brother, 32-year-old Bai Li Peng, is

about as far as he can be from Two Dragons and still be in China. He is an assembly line foreman in Shenzhen, the boomtown just across the border from Hong Kong. He works for McQuay International, a Minnesota-based, Malaysian-owned manufacturer of industrial heating and air-conditioning equipment.

He and his wife, also from Two Dragons, work together at McQuay. She has a job on the assembly line. They live in a small apartment in a concrete-block building with their newborn son. They have a big color television set. They carry cell phones.

To get where he is now, Bai endured what he assumes was a fairly typical experience for migrant workers. It nearly killed him.

"I've got some bad memories," he said, reflecting on his journey while sitting in the clean, comfortable cafeteria at McQuay's Shenzhen plant.

"The life of a farmer is poor"

He was just finishing high school when he decided to leave home for the first time. He was 24 - not an uncommon age for graduation in the countryside - and eager to explore the world.

"A young man should be ambitious and have his own goals," he said. "I did not want to be a farmer. The life of a farmer is really poor."

Bai's parents opposed his dream because they were afraid of what he might face in a big city. So he borrowed about \$25 from classmates and ran away in the direction of Shanghai, where his cousin worked.

"I didn't know anything about the outside world," Bai said. "It was all so fresh and exciting."

Getting work was easy, but survival was a struggle. In the industrial city of Changshu, he put in slave's hours at a Dickensian factory, working with a team of 10 men to drag a hot, heavy pressing machine across enormous sheets of fabric to make wallpaper.

After working seven days a week for two months, he found a job hauling timber at a hardwood-floor manufacturer for \$1.25 a day. Shortly before the factory shut down for the monthlong Chinese New Year holiday, his boss saw how diligently Bai worked and gave him the opportunity to try to sell hardwood floors in Shanghai. But the market was not very good, and when the holiday came he headed home, exhausted and discouraged but not defeated.

Bai's next plan was to take the college entrance exam, a punishing mental exercise based on rote memorization that must be passed to gain acceptance to a university. The stress is so great that a few students turn up for the test with parents carting oxygen tanks.

Bai didn't want to give up his freedom or burden his family with this decision. So he made up a story that he was working in Hefei to cover for himself while he studied for the exam.

He had saved nearly \$90 and planned to spend \$125 on a test-preparation class. He borrowed the rest and found himself alone in Hefei, sleeping on the floor of a small, dark room in a shared apartment, trying to study for the exam without having enough money to eat more than rice and pickled cabbage. He went to bed hungry each night, too weak to study properly.

"I didn't pass the exam," he said, smiling ruefully at the memory of putting himself in a no-win situation. "I lost confidence completely. I went home."

A few weeks later, on a hot July day, Bai sat on a bed in his parents' house in Two Dragons and felt he couldn't face the shame of having failed in his dream, and didn't think he would get another chance. He knew he could not spend the rest of his life on the farm. He slashed his wrist with a knife and slipped into semiconsciousness as he bled.

"If I hadn't found him, he'd be dead for sure," said the third-oldest brother, Bai Li Yin, who happened by the room. He roused his brother, wrapped his wrist in a towel and tried to convince him that there was life to be had even without college.

"My brother is a very quiet man, and very honest," Bai Li Yin, 38, said of his despondent younger sibling. "He should have had the chance to go to college, but because of the family he couldn't afford it. He's very stubborn. The reason he's succeeded is he never gave up."

Once more unto the breach

A month later, the young Bai was ready to go again, this time to Shenzhen, where survival was even tougher.

He spent an unsatisfying stint as a security guard, frustrated because he was learning no skills and earning no respect. After that he suffered through months of dangerous and menial jobs. He endured toxic fumes in a back-alley assembly line filling disposable lighters with fluid, and found day work dangling out of windows painting walls at construction sites.

In his worst experience, he got a job on a construction crew doing interior renovation work. The working conditions were pitiable. And then, after three months - and before payday - the boss disappeared, fleecing Bai of nearly \$200.

There were weeks and weeks without work when he survived on a few bread buns a day or was forced to scavenge food from garbage. When he no longer could pay rent, his sympathetic landlord helped him build a temporary shelter on the roof.

Then, with the help of a cousin, Bai found a temporary job as a painter at the McQuay International air conditioner plant. Because he had no place to sleep, he hid in a corner of the factory at night.

His bosses at McQuay liked him, hired him full time and gave him several promotions. He is the pride of his family, doing the kind of blue-collar work that once defined the American middle class, but he does it for about \$6,000 a year.

Bai's wife, Wang Jun Mei, who is from Two Dragons but did not meet him until moving to Shenzhen, said she had trouble believing his hard-luck story.

"I was surprised at first at what he had gone through, but when I realized it was true I was very touched," she said. "I thought it was completely impossible that he would refuse all help and eat two buns a day."

Now, she thinks of Bai as "courageous, diligent, pragmatic and never boastful."

Bai dismisses the compliments.

"I don't think I'm very successful," he said. "My story is very typical in Shenzhen."