

Emigration Dynamism and Social Transformation in Northeast China

Synopsis

Focusing on migration agents as a revealing lens, this ethnographic study examines how the dynamics of labour emigration from northeast China is produced and changed through the interplay between the state, the labour market, and individuals/ households.

Background

The study of international migration is often focussed on *immigration*. Research projects are predominantly motivated by the concerns of receiving societies, funded by agencies in destination countries, and based on data collected within receiving states. The COMPAS Programme on Sending Contexts, wishes to fill this knowledge gap by positioning its research within the migrant-sending perspective -- the primary site where migration, as a life-choice for individuals and collective action for communities, is socially and culturally produced.

Aims and objectives

The current project aims to examine three inter-related issues:

- (1) Migration agents, who have been widely recognised as key facilitators of migration flows, but whose actions have so far been subject to very limited theoretical conceptualisation;
- (2) Exit controls developed by the state that shape migration flows; and
- (3) More broadly, the links between out-migration and dramatic social transformation in regions, particularly the privatisation of state-owned enterprises which has led to massive numbers of redundancies and intensified social inequality.

The overall policy objective of the research is to help the Chinese government to utilise labour emigration for development. More specifically, this research aims to:

- explore effective synergies between government regulation and market mechanisms, particularly regarding the relations between government, agents and migrants.

The ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford conducts high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform public opinion and contribute to policy debates on migration.

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- evaluate different labour *immigration* policies within various destination countries from the sending country's point of view.
- examine the relationship between regular and irregular migration. While labour sending countries often attribute irregular migration to the limited channels for regular migration, developed countries fear that a wider front door would open more back doors. This gap in understanding has become a major obstacle in GATS - Mode 4 negotiations. This project wishes to further the discussion by presenting new evidence that will enhance more meaningful dialogue in the negotiations.

Methods

A key concern at this stage is to tease out the relationship between formal regulations and the “messy” reality on the ground: how does the state think of/see emigration, and how migrants see/respond to the regulations? To address these concerns, three types of methodologies have been developed:

1. Documentary study on policies and regulations
2. Interview with migration agents, would-be migrants, and policy makers
3. Participant observation in three key arenas: agent offices (where migrants consult agents, and agents make business deals with other agents), living spaces of would-be migrants (mainly villages), government offices/meetings.

This project is multidisciplinary in theoretical analysis: it engages with political anthropology and political sciences, as well as political philosophy, in its reflections on the modern state. It is also related to (institutional) economics and economic sociology in its analysis of brokerage.

Work in progress

- XIANG, Biao (2006). “Agent chain” as a state bureaucracy project: labour migration intermediaries and the state in China. Paper to be presented at COMPAS Annual Conference 2006. *International Labour Migration: In Whose Interests?* 5th and 6th July. Oxford.
- XIANG, Biao (2005). Labour Emigration Management Systems of Countries of Origin to Republic of Korea (Country report on the People's Republic of China and Mongolia). Report written for International Organization for Migration. October.
- XIANG, Biao (2005). The Indispensable Bad Guy. Paper presented at COMPAS, 3 August. Oxford.
- XIANG, Biao (2005). The fixed and the fluid. Paper presented at Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. 27 July.

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Timetable: Phase One completed in December 2005. Phase Two - Analysis and write up to complete by early 2007.

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