



Changing patterns of migration in China

This Factsheet examines the general features and models of migration and places them in the context of rural to urban migration in China.

Migration - an introduction

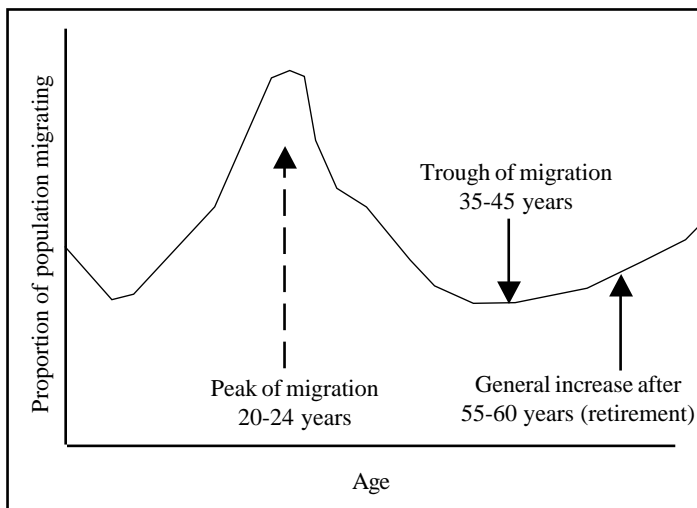
Migration is the permanent change of residence with a complete change of friends and social institutions. Thus, it does not include commuting (a daily movement of work), seasonal movements, or moving house in the same city.

Migrations are commonly divided into a number of types:

- Forced or voluntary
- Long distance or short distance
- International or internal

Migration is often explained by **push** factors and **pull** factors. Push factors are the negative features which cause a person to move away from a place. These include unemployment, low wages and natural hazards. Pull factors are the attractions (whether real or just imagined) that exist at another place. Better wages, more jobs and good schools are pull factors. Migration also varies with age (Fig 1) and with levels of education (more qualified people are more likely to travel further).

Fig 1. Variation of migration with age



Exam Hint - Frequently, candidates fall into two groups; those that regurgitate ready-made answers on the theories of migration but who can only provide superficial exemplification and those who provide long accounts of real and imagined migrations but who fail to relate any of these to the theory. The highest scoring candidates are always those who can illustrate a theory effectively.

Theories and laws of migration

There are a number of theories and laws which relate to patterns of migration. One of the earliest was that of Ravenstein, who investigated migration in the north-west of Britain up to and during the 1880s. He found that:

1. **Most migrants move a short distance** - due to limited technology/transport and poor communications, people know more about local opportunities.
2. **Migration occurs in a series of steps or stages** - typically from rural to small town to large town to city i.e. once in an urban area they become 'locked in' to the urban hierarchy.
3. **As well as movement to large cities there is movement away from them (dispersal)** - the rich move away from the urban areas and commute from nearby villages and small towns (an early form of suburbanisation and counterurbanisation).
4. **Long-distance migrants are more likely to go to large cities** - people will only know about the opportunities in large cities of far away regions.
5. **Urban dwellers are less migratory than rural dwellers** - there are less opportunities in rural areas.
6. **Women are more migratory than men over short-distances** - especially in societies where the status of women is low.
7. **Migration increases with advances in technology** - such as transport, communications, and the spread of information.

Other models of migration include Zipf's **Inverse Distance Law** which states that the volume of migration is inversely proportional to the distance travelled i.e.

$$N_{ij} \propto 1/D_{ij}$$

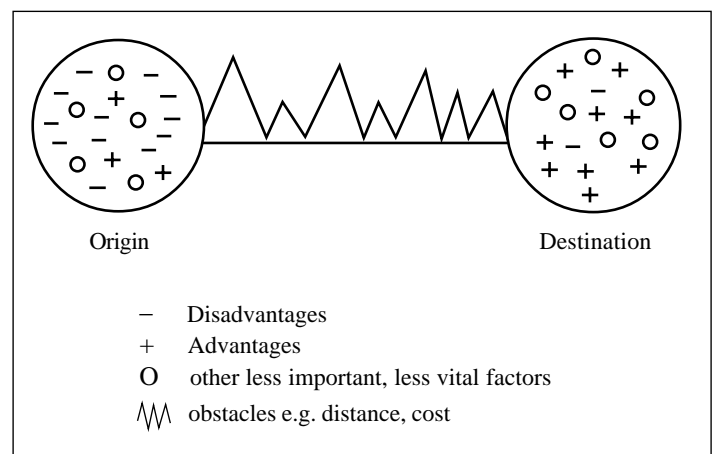
where N_{ij} is the number of migrants between two towns, i and j , and D_{ij} is the distance between them. This model was redefined by Stouffer in the 1940s using the idea of **intervening opportunities**. He stated that the number of migrants going to a place was proportional to the number of opportunities at that location, but inversely proportional to the number of opportunities that existed between the two places. Thus:

$$N_{ij} \propto O_j/O_{ij}$$

where O_j is the number of opportunities at j , and O_{ij} the number of opportunities that existed between i and j .

One of the most widely used models is that of Everett Lee (1966) who describes migration in terms of 'perceived push and pull factors' (Fig 2).

Fig 2. Lee's model of migration



The term **‘perceived’** means what the migrant imagines exists, rather than what actually exists. This may be quite close, but it can be very different.

All of the models are simplifications, and they contain hidden assumptions. These assumptions may be very unrealistic. For example:

- People are free to migrate
- People have the skills, education and qualifications which allow them to move
- There are no barriers to migration - such as race, class, income, language, gender, and so on
- Distance is not a barrier to migration

Rural to urban migration in China

China’s internal migration accounts for some of the largest and most important rural to urban migrations in the world. The main pattern is from less developed parts of the country to the most prosperous cities, especially in the south east and in particular, Beijing (Table 1).

Table 1. Percentage of urban population by province (1979-1990)

	1979	1990
National total	19.0	51.7
North Region		
Beijing	58.5	73.08
Tianjin	65.6	68.7
Hebei	10.2	19.08
Shanxi	15.6	21.49
Inner Mongolia	15.2	36.12
North-East Region		
Liaoning	34.7	50.86
Jilin	21.7	42.65
Heilongjiang	24.5	47.17
East Region		
Shanghai	52.2	66.23
Jiangsu	10.5	21.24
Zhejiang	6.5	32.81
Anhui	8.5	17.90
Fujian	11.2	21.36
Jiangxi	11.0	20.40
Shandong	9.5	27.34
Central South Region		
Henan	8.3	15.52
Hubei	9.7	28.91
Hunan	7.0	18.23
Guangdong	12.0	36.77
Guangxi	5.7	15.10
South-West Region		
Sichuan	9.4	20.25
Guizhou	14.1	18.9
Yunnan	6.5	14.72
Xiang (Tibet)	6.5	12.59
North-West Region		
Shaanxi	12.0	28.72
Gansu	9.4	22.04
Qinghai	14.6	27.35
Ningxia	16.9	25.72
Xinjiang	19.8	31.91

When the Communist Party came to power in 1949, China’s urban population was about 70 million or 12.5% of the total population (575 million). From 1949, when the People’s Republic of China was founded, to 1970, most population migration in China took place in rural areas i.e.

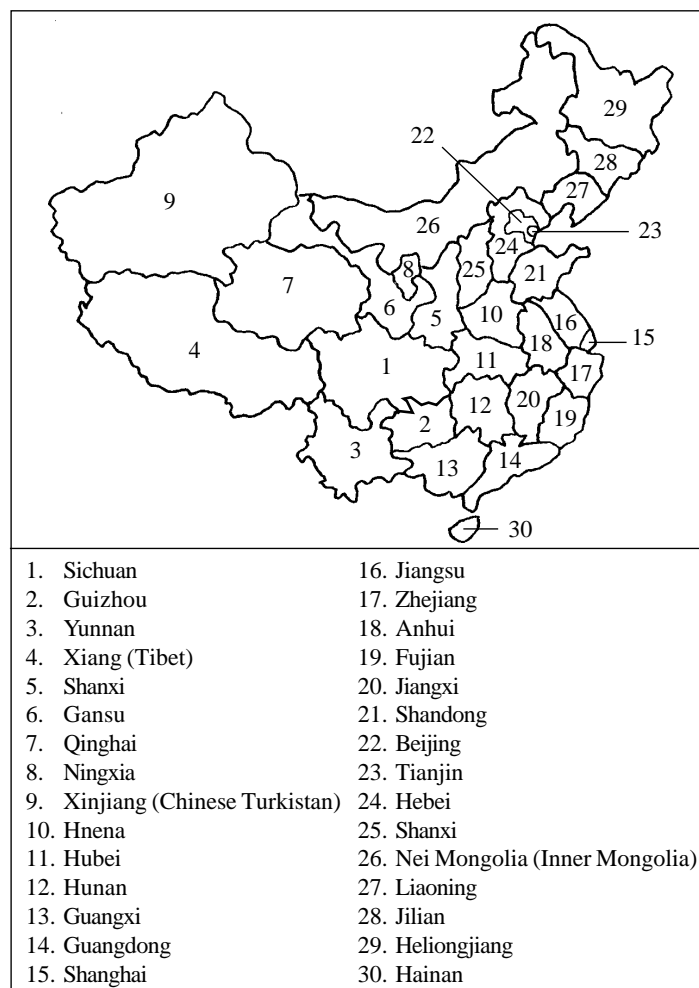
most migrants moved from densely populated rural areas to sparsely populated frontiers. Some also migrated to work in construction and in the mines. However the overwhelming purpose was the population, exploitation and consolidation of China’s frontiers.

After the death of Chairman Mao in 1976, China introduced a ‘socialist market economy system’ and began to modernise its agriculture, industry and technology and to develop new trade links. The government also loosened its grip on the distribution of population through household registration. Migration patterns changed accordingly.

One of the first systematic surveys of migration in China analysed data for the years 1982-7. It reached three main conclusions. Firstly, population migration increased between 1982 and 1987 compared with earlier estimates. Between 1982 and 1987 ‘official’ migrants accounted for nearly 3% of the population (over 30 million people!). Secondly, the direction of migration changed. Most migrants moved from rural areas to cities. During the same period urban areas grew at the expense of rural areas by some 13 million people. Thirdly, most people migrated from inland provinces to coastal areas. A smaller proportion migrated to factories and mines in inland areas. Of the 30 million migrants, 79% stayed within their own province, the other 21% were involved in inter-provincial migration.

Provinces which gained migrants included Shanghai, Beijing, Hebei and Shandong (Fig 3). By contrast, Heilongjiang, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang and Gansu, which used to attract migrants, lost people during that period. The most popular location was Beijing. Within the city, certain regions attracted migrants from different parts of the country. The suburb of Dahongmen now contains over 400,000 people from Zhejiang province in south-east China and is referred to as Zhejiang village. Another is Xinjiang village, containing Muslim Chinese from the west of China.

Fig 3. Outline map of China and its regions



The 1990 census revealed that these trends were continuing. Between 1985 and 1990 the population officially moving to other cities, provinces or overseas was 2%. The vast majority of migrations were internal, and 80% involved moves within or to urban areas. Less than 18% were moves to rural areas and of these only 5% were new residents to rural areas, the others were moving from one rural area to another.

Since 1979 over 100 million people have left rural areas for urban areas. The implications are great:

- The selective removal of the younger, more able population to urban areas
- An ageing population in rural areas
- Over-population in urban areas causing a strain on housing, education, health and services such as water and electricity

Most of the migrants are young and they move in search of employment in the construction industry, factories, textile sweatshops and in service occupations. However, working conditions are often poor and wages are low. Many migrants send a large part of their wages home as remittances in order to support their family in the rural area.

Urbanisation: a consequence of migration

By 1990, China had an urban population of over 575 million or 51% of the total population (1.15 billion). China’s urban population grew by almost 6% per year between 1949 and 1990, which far outpaced the growth rate of population, which was just under 2%. Unlike conditions elsewhere in Asia, urbanisation in China proceeded quite slowly until fairly recently. This reflected the population and decentralisation policies of the government. However, by the late 1980s the urban population was increasing rapidly and by 1995 almost 60% of the population lived in urban areas. This put China out of the group of less urbanised Asian nations such as Bangladesh (15%), Thailand (17%), India (23%) and Indonesia (22%) and into a group of more highly urbanised countries such as Malaysia (43%), South Korea (57%) and Taiwan (57%).

The urban growth figures are not just the result of rural to urban migration, there are other important factors too:

- The return of people previously sent to the countryside in the 1950s and 1960s
- The reclassification of rural settlements as urban
- The upgrading of some towns to cities

A distinctive feature of China’s urban population is the very high concentration in large cities. Over 60% of the urban population live in cities with a population of more than 500,000 and over 40% live in a metropolis (the main city in the region). In China there are almost fifty large cities including twenty metropoli, the largest number in any one country. For example, Shanghai’s population is 13 million, Beijing has over 10 million and Tianjin has over 9 million. Many of these are now saturated with people and are at crisis point.

Distribution of urban growth in China

The distribution of the population and urban settlements in China has been strongly influenced by government policy. One policy which slowed down the growth of large cities was the rural transfer movement (xiafang), whereby thousands of factories and millions of urban dwellers were sent to rural areas in the 1950s and 1960s.

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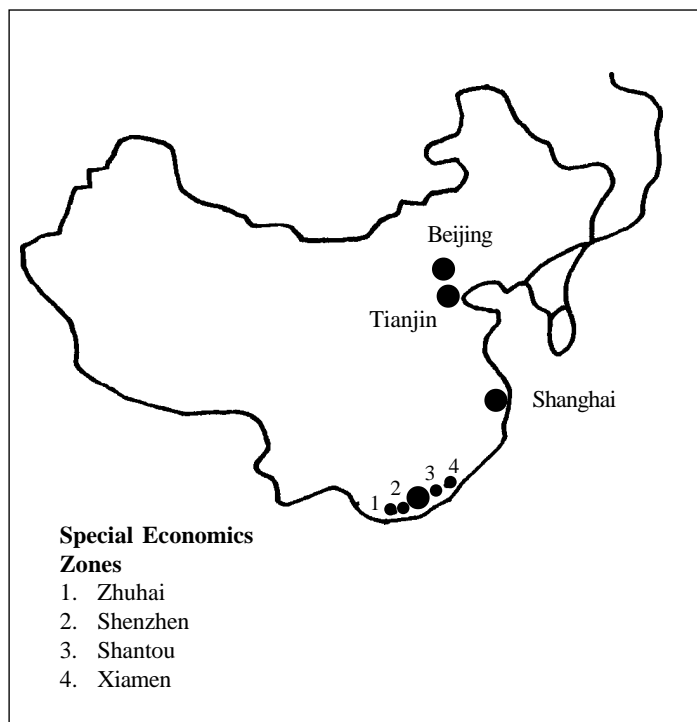
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The reason for these transfers included:

- National defence
- Geographically balanced development
- The elimination of rural urban differences
- The development of new forms of technology transfer

In 1980, the Government created four special economic zones in its south eastern coastal cities (Fig 4) to attract foreign investment and new technology. In 1984 another fourteen coastal cities were targeted as ‘open cities’ for foreign investment and development. Another significant policy reform in recent years was the dismantling of the commune system of agricultural production. This has enabled many farmers to generate a profit for the first time and has also led to increasing levels of mechanisation in rural areas. As a result, substantial industrial growth occurred in many small towns which has combated to a certain extent rural unemployment. Former commercial centres and market towns in rural areas that traded in handicrafts have become localised industrial centres and a growing proportion of the local labour force is employed in industrial enterprises. This has resulted in a greatly increased migration of redundant rural workers from farms to neighbouring industrial towns and even to more distant cities as they search for better jobs and a higher standard of living.

Fig 4. Location of main cities and Special Economic Zones in China



Cities in China are now beginning to experience the urban problems found in many other developing world cities: namely the emergence of slums and squatter settlements and an urban underclass of temporary residents or unemployed people who have little or no access to health care facilities, adequate housing, education or social welfare benefits.