

Chinese employment

Chinese migrant workers return home as urban jobs grow scarcer

Policy-makers fret about large-scale movement
back to rural interior amid weakening domestic
demand

William Langley in Longhui

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For decades hundreds of millions of rural Chinese have flocked from their home provinces in the interior to make a better living in the factories and construction sites of the country's more affluent eastern and southern cities.

But with [China](#)'s domestic demand weakening and well-paying urban jobs proving harder to come by, recruiters and policymakers worry that many migrant workers are now staying closer to home.

The government has issued guidelines aimed at boosting the number of jobs available for migrant workers, which include the provision of transport subsidies for those who travel to different provinces.

China has an estimated 300mn migrant workers, but an increasing proportion work in other areas of their home provinces rather than venturing further afield. The weakening pull of richer regions has meant the number travelling to other provinces has declined consistently since 2015.

Wages for workers who do are still higher, but grew more slowly than for migrants who remained within their home provinces in 2024.

Jenny Chan of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University said many workers, particularly older ones, were being caught out by the upgrading of Chinese industries, which require new skills, and the hit to labour-intensive manufacturing sectors caused by US-China trade tensions. Some fall back on farming and take up odd jobs to supplement their income.



Some migrant workers who struggle to find good urban jobs return to their home farms © VCG/Reuters Connect

In late March the FT visited Longhui county in Hunan, which has long been a source of outbound migration, particularly to cities in the neighbouring industrial powerhouse province of Guangdong.

Many Chinese migrant workers return home for the lunar new year, often extending their stays beyond the festival's official public holiday, which this year ran until February 23. But Longhui rural residents said that this year many older migrant workers — particularly those in their late forties, fifties and early sixties — were still at home weeks later.

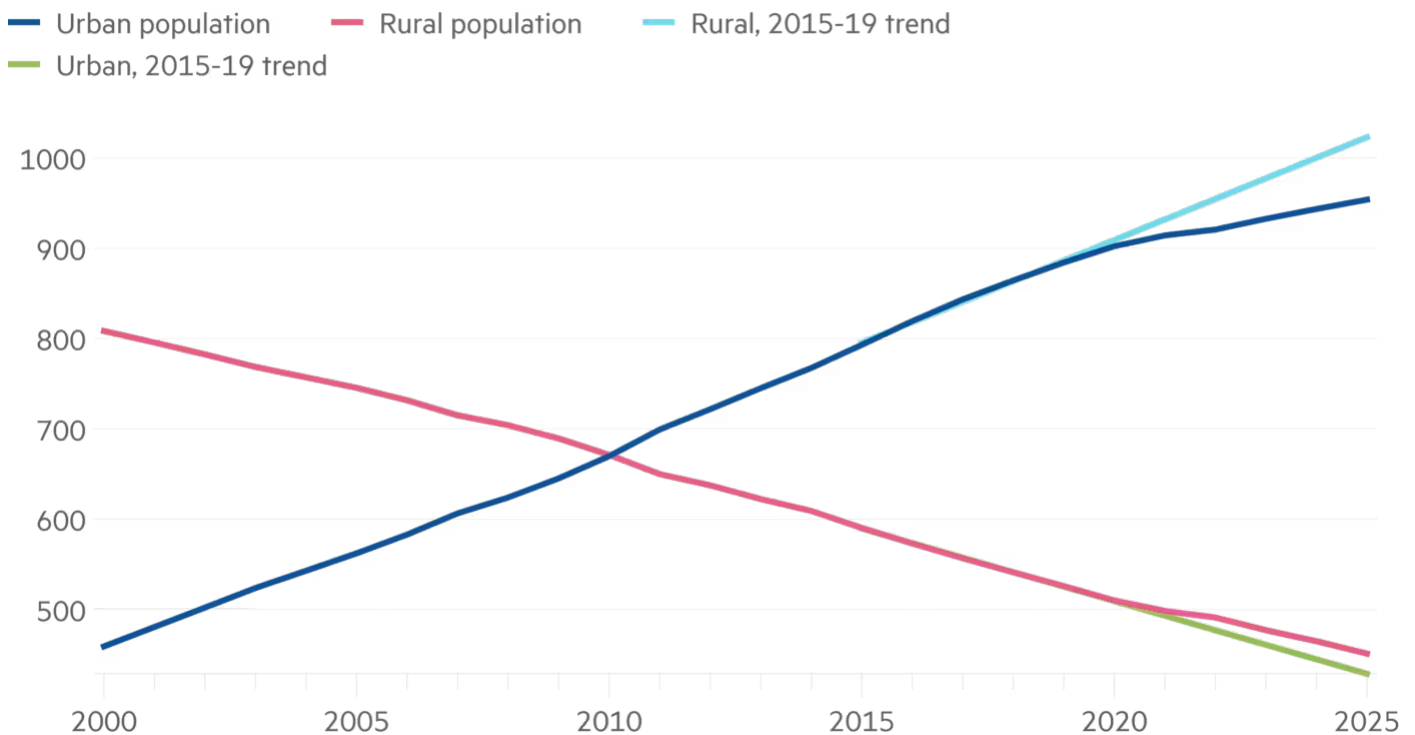
“Now there is no urgency to return,” said Wang, a worker in his fifties sporting a green bomber jacket, a cigarette and two Rmb20 (\$3) notes as he waited for a turn at a table at one of the mah-jong parlours that dot Hunan's towns and villages.

Wang, who asked to be identified only by his surname, said he was a construction worker in Guangdong but had decided to stay on in Hunan and do odd jobs while his current building site was on pause.

“In the good times I would earn Rmb15,000-16,000 [per month in Guangdong]. Now it's only Rmb7,000-8,000,” he said. “Here of course you can find some decent projects to do, but it's not so easy to make good money.”

Urban population growth has slowed while rural outflows have softened

No. of persons, mn



Sources: Gavekal Dragonomics, Macrobond

The Longhui recruiter who worried that a lack of jobs could be bad for social stability said the county's sports shoe factories now employed just 200-300 people, compared to close to 3,000 at their peak. “Because of the impact of the US-China trade dispute, their orders have declined,” he said.

One 35-year old marble tiler attending a Longhui job fair said a project he had been working on in the Guangdong manufacturing hub of Dongguan had been put on hold for three to four months, prompting him to seek local employment to tide him over.

While he would earn up to Rmb20,000 a month in Dongguan, the tiler said a local job would pay around Rmb4,000 at most. “Whatever the pay is, I will take it,” he said.

Cui at Gavekal said local economies were unable to absorb returning migrant workers, leaving city jobs often still their best bet.

“But urban labour markets are weakening, with net hiring declining across construction, manufacturing, and services,” she said. “New jobs are increasingly concentrated in AI-related sectors, creating a structural mismatch with displaced workers.”

Chen, a former migrant worker in his sixties from Longhui who asked to be identified only by his surname, said he would prefer to work in the Guangdong capital of Guangzhou if he could find employment that paid at least Rmb5,000 per month with food and board.

But such opportunities were few for a man of his age, so Chen had returned to Hunan permanently and was relying on odd construction and renovation jobs.

“It’s not worth going to Guangzhou,” he said, chewing a betel nut outside a village convenience store where residents had gathered to play *zipai*, a Chinese card game. “If you can earn enough money at home to pay for your food then it’s OK.”

Additional contributions by Tina Hu in Beijing

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