

“Gansu’s Bailie School Graduates Join the Migration to
Guangdong Province, 2005-2010”
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Rewi Alley Internationalism Spirit and the B&R Construction International Forum
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Introduction

Today’s conference honors the memory of Rewi Alley, a New Zealander who lived among the Chinese people for more than sixty years. He was a founder and longtime headmaster (1945-1952) of the Shandan Bailie School and was named honorary headmaster of the re-opened school in 1985. Rewi called the years at the school the happiest of his life.¹ Rewi’s visionary idea of education is succinctly expressed through the expression ““Hand and brain together, create and analyze.” [手脑并用 创作分析](#)

Early attempts at Chinese vocational education tended to alienate students from their rural origins. Under societal pressure, the technical skills-based curriculum was gradually changed to the regular liberal arts so highly valued in traditional China. Subsequent educational reforms were modeled on Japanese schools after 1905, American schools in the 1920s, and then Soviet education during the 1950s.² In contrast to the urban orientation of all three models, Rewi Alley believed in the innate creativity and capability of peasant youths. He found that “comparing those we had from peasant areas with those we usually had from the trading class in town...the peasant lad, given the same training, was far ahead in resourcefulness and ability.”³ Under Rewi’s leadership, students at the Bailie School learned the technical skills needed for China’s industrial production in the hinterland.

China’s economy has changed markedly in recent decades as it has geared up to become a major global leader. Rural families, spurred on by dreams of sharing the newfound prosperity, have sent their husbands, sons, and daughters to factory jobs in southeastern cities. The Bailie School students and their families have joined the migration to Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and nearby newly-industrialized cities. This study includes a group of Bailie School graduates among their migrant peers.

Literature Review

The English language literature of migration and education is strongest on program evaluation. “Leaving China’s Farms: Survey Results of New Paths and Remaining Hurdles to Rural Migration” by Scott Rozelle, et al, published in 1999, confronts the weaknesses in China migration studies but it is now dated. A 2007 World Bank report of education in rural Gansu used the Gansu Survey of Children and Families in its statistical evaluation. The France-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

(OECD) released in 2010 *Learning for Jobs*, a study of vocational education and training designed to help countries make their vocational education and training (VET) systems more responsive to labor market needs. The Rural Education Action Project of Stanford University uses quantitative, experimental (or quasi-experimental) design to study the impact of education and other poverty-alleviation programs around the world, including China, in 2013. The International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) is an international grant-making NGO promoting evidence-informed development policies and programs that focused on China in 2011 and 2013 publications. *Creating and Evaluating a Credentialing System for Vocational Schools in China Phase 2 Final Report, 2015* by Electronic Industry Citizenship Coalition (EICC) and Stanford University's Rural Education Action Program (REAP) introduced a credentialing program and has found a direct statistically significant impact on student educational outcomes.

China's vocational education and training (VET) has been the focus of academic research papers in the fields of Comparative Education, Economics, Sociology, History, and Urban Studies. These disciplines generally utilize data from China's census or other large-scale surveys. Their foci are the schools, themselves, the outcomes of education defined as relative earnings, standardized test scores, skills taught, and family attitudes.

A few studies, such as the Rural Education Action Project, the OECD and Maurer-Fazio et al, link education to migration. A critical study of government-sponsored job training programs, migration, and poverty alleviation by Mao et al appeared in *China Currents* in 2010.

Two book-length studies go beyond the above quantitative approaches. Journalist Leslie T. Chang's *Factory Girls* and anthropologist T.E. Woronov's *Class Work* were written after the authors' year-long emersion in a Shenzhen factory town and two Nanjing vocational schools respectively. Chang describes the lives of women workers, while Woronov narrates the stories of VET students.

Our small study of 82 workers in Guangdong province, which includes 29 workers from the Shandan Bailie School, links schools and migrants. We add to the social science literature, offering some support and a few questions about results. Our interviews also uncover some of the human stories behind the statistics in the manner of the above two monographs.

Methodology

Our inquiry sought to construct a qualitative study of a unique cohort of rural migrant workers who were graduates from vocational-technical high schools (VTE, also called VET), regular high school, or a lower level of education ⁴in five different factories located throughout Guangdong Province, China. Among the interviewees were graduates from the Shandan Bailie School of Gansu Province, a key vocational high school. For the structure of the Chinese educational system, see Appendix I.

A survey instrument containing 74 items designed by Blake Gentry and Marjorie King, included 46 open ended, 16 dichotomous, and 12 multiple choice questions. Surveys of 82 migrant workers (N= 82) were conducted in Mandarin and Cantonese and at five factory and work settings in Guangdong Province. Workers were selected using a snowball sampling method, a non-probability sampling technique. Teams of assistants (Ma Lecheng, Li Fang, Li Jueying, Cheng Zhiduo and Victor Yeh) from Shantou University trained in administering the survey first piloted the instrument, and after modifications, conducted the field survey in 2010 -2011 under the administration of Marjorie King. Survey data was entered into SPSS 22 by University of Arizona Student (USA) Zhang Tong. Survey data was reviewed and responses recoded by Blake Gentry in SPSS 24. Field notes were documented by Marjorie King from interviews with workers at work sites or in near environs, and by Blake Gentry with a Gansu family in Guangzhou.

Profile of Migrant Workers

From Gansu province in China's northwest, Bailie school graduates travel almost 3,000 km southeast, joining migrant workers from all over China to labor in the thousands of factories in the megacity that is the Pearl River Delta. Interviews were conducted in Huizhou and Shenzhen. Migrants from many other provinces were interviewed in Foshan, Dongguan, and Shantou. Except for Shantou these cities have burgeoned since joining the Pearl River Delta Economic Zone in the 1980s. The entire region is among the most dynamic and prosperous in China. Eight interviews were done in Shantou, which lies about 300 km east on the coast of the South China Sea.

Speakers of Mandarin or some variant dialect, the Bailie School graduates encounter Cantonese-speaking work-mates and communities. Used to dry weather, fresh air, blue skies and expansive space, they confront the humidity, pollution, and dense population of the south. Braised beef and roasted mutton eaters, the workers from Gansu must cope with bland southern seafood and strange vegetables. What must the daily life of a factory worker be like for Gansu migrants, coming from such a different environment? Did their education at the Shandan Bailie School benefit their employment? What pushed them and other migrants to leave their hometowns, or pulled them southward? Has the journey been worth it for the workers and their families back home?

To catch a glimpse of the factory workers' lives in Guangdong province, we interviewed over 82 workers. Twenty-nine had graduated from the Bailie School during the years 2002-2011. Other interviewees had come from Fujian, Henan, Hubei, Jiangsu, Sichuan, Yunnan, Hunan or Guangdong, itself.⁵ Of the non-Gansu workers, 16 had graduated from high school or a technical school while 20 others were not educated beyond the compulsory nine-year program. Very few had received any type of outside financial aid to attend school.

This was a young and energetic bunch; most had traveled south as a part of their internship or very shortly after graduation. Twenty percent, mostly women, had studied English education and found work in Guangdong's private schools teaching English to other outsiders. (They had no success finding work in public schools.) Of the remaining graduates, only a handful had degrees in fields related to their employment: accounting, computing, and electronics.⁶ The majority of students were 18-21 years old when they graduated from Bailie or another school. On the day they were interviewed, their ages varied from 18 to 44; 84% were in the 18-26 age range. They were in their first job or, in a few cases, their second. Almost two-thirds of the workers interviewed were male (65%); females represented 35%.⁷

The youth had decided to seek work in the south for many reasons. The realities of life back home pushed them to leave. Overwhelmingly, these were rural folk from isolated villages (81%) where the top three types of employment were agriculture/fisheries/livestock, service, manual labor, and factory work. Over half of their parents spoke only the local dialect (53%).⁸ Most of their mothers worked in agriculture, fishing, or livestock. Another 17% worked in factories or performed other types of manual labor in their home province. A few worked in services or retail, but 23% were unemployed, incapacitated or deceased. Their fathers were more likely to work in factories (26%) and less often in agriculture (23%). Twenty-eight percent of the workers' fathers were unemployed, incapacitated or deceased.

Siblings are common in rural China, where the "one child policy" has been less strictly enforced. Two-four child families is the norm (70%) Only 11% were single children. The majority of our interviewees' brothers and sisters worked in the same occupations as their parents.

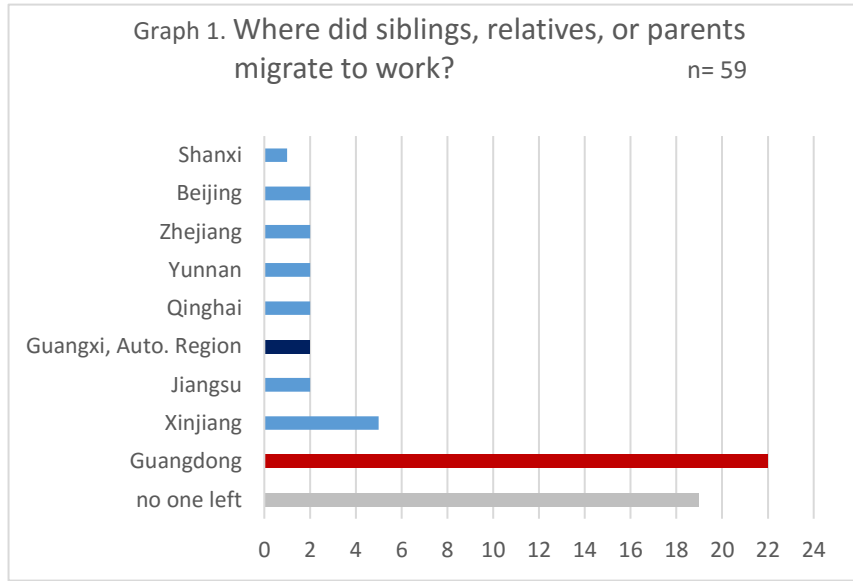
New government or private development brought some hope for better employment to some, but isolated rural communities were just as likely to experience no growth or even shrinkage. Time and again, the workers told us that their parents pushed them to leave in order to seek less exhausting and higher status jobs for themselves as well as income subsidies for the families.⁹

The big cities' allure was just as strong a "pull factor" as their home villages was a "push factor." In addition to the promises of higher income and status, which will be analyzed using the data from our survey, the young people all expressed a clear longing to join the torrent of their peers nation-wide flowing southward in search of a more interesting, broader life.

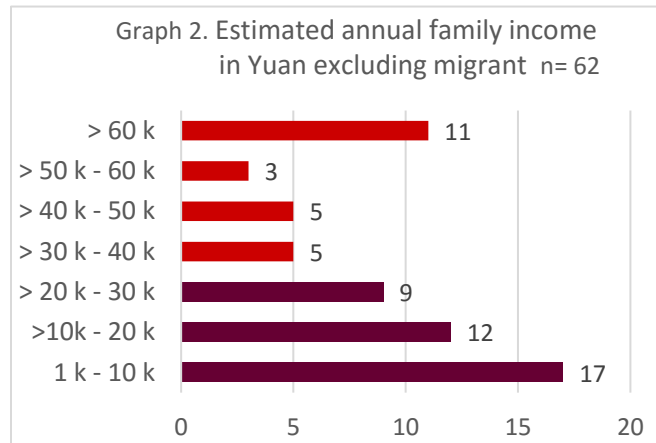
What did they find? Changes to Family and Individual Income of Migrant Workers ¹⁰

Migrant work among the rural families of workers interviewed was often a shared family occupational strategy. Workers reported that 54% of their siblings, relatives, or parents migrated outside the province (n= 79).

Parents, siblings, and relatives traveled not only to common destinations in Guangdong Province, but as shown in Graph 1, to seven other provinces and one autonomous region. That migration is motivated, at least in part, by the positive impact it has on their family’s standard of living as just over two thirds of workers indicated.

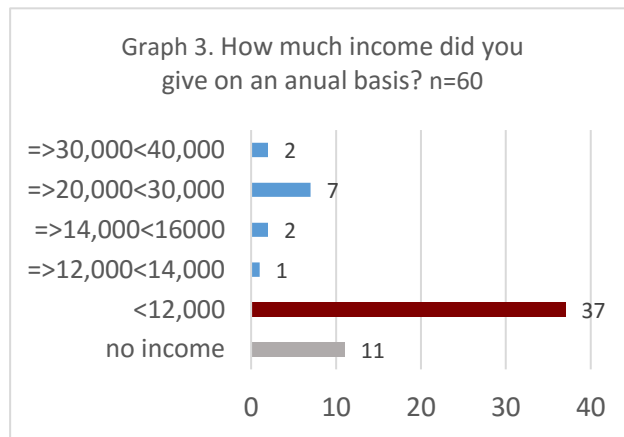


Some 61% of workers (n= 62) reported their family income (excluding their own contributions) was from 1 to 30,000 Yuan per year (See: Graph 2).



Over two thirds or 81% of migrant workers interviewed in factory settings (n= 77) in six urban locations in Guangdong province reported annual income of 1 to 30,000 Yuan.

The contributions of workers to the annual income of their family living in their home province is depicted in Graph 3. It shows that 62% improved family income by up to 12,000 Yuan annually, while the remaining 20% of workers improved their family's income from 12,000 Yuan to just less than 40,000 Yuan annually.

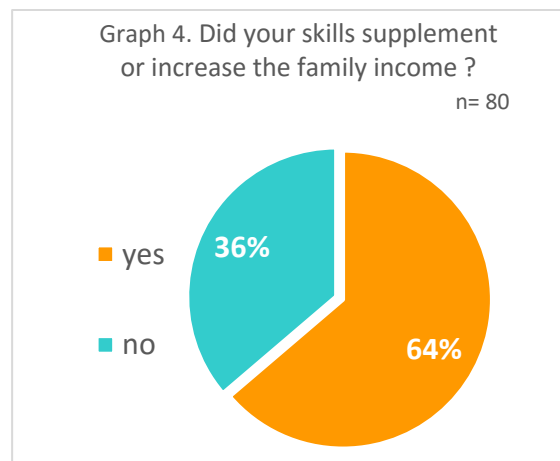


This finding points to individuals, as workers, making on par what their entire families make in the rural areas of their home provinces of Fujian, Gansu, Guangdong, Henan, Hubei, Hunan, Shanghai, Sichuan, or Yunnan (n= 82). Indeed, even when accounting for the difference in the number of respondents (62 v. 77) there were 7.5% more individuals than families making that level of income.

The cost of living in urban areas for migrants includes deductions for employer provided housing (or costs associated with privately rented apartments) plus food, and health care. Those costs are generally higher than that of rural towns. Take home pay, or the amount of compensation workers receive, is reduced due to a relatively higher cost of urban living. Rural to urban migrants also typically send home remittances, and this cohort of workers was no exception.

Both conditions, higher living costs and workers' provision of remittances to their families, imply that they didn't necessarily enjoy a much higher standard of living, but rather a relatively higher standard than families back home, in purely economic terms. Some 97.5% of the cohort of workers were from rural areas. Given the somewhat marked income differences between individual migrants and their families, the potential economic effects of those contributions had on their families back in their rural home setting is worth considering.

Nearly two thirds (n = 80) indicated that their skills or income increased the income of their families as Graph 4 suggests. The

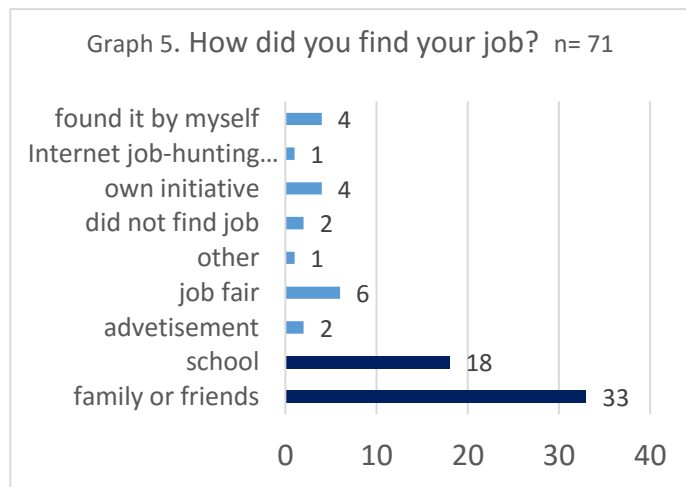


remittances they send home to their families though is but one aspect of their views on migration.

Nonetheless, when asked about the effects of their education and income on their family, 57% stated there were “no effects”. (n=68). Positive effects they identified for individuals accounted for 22% responses, while positive effects identified for their families registered 12%. A few even ascribed a larger view of the world for their families had been a positive effect, while 5% described negative effects on their family. Given the positive effects on income, the “lack of effects” described by a majority of this cohort of workers appear to rest on non-economic reasons. One possible reason is discussed below in the section Voices of Workers.

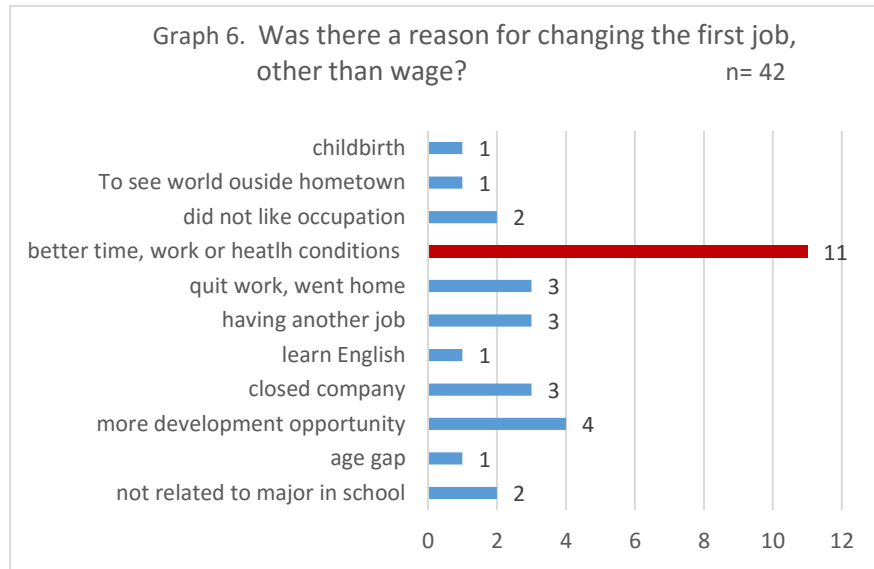
Entering the urban job market is a rite of passage for young rural migrant workers. Most enter large urban areas with vastly different natural and human environments in contrast to their own towns and villages. Social networks are key to their successful transition. On the whole, workers did not act autonomously outside known social groups. They tended to relocate for employment in clusters of locations where their contacts resided.

Some 72% of workers who graduated from Technical School (such as Bailie school graduates) or High School (n = 82) reported that school officials or family and friends assisted them in finding work. Other studies point to the existence of social networks as being influential on the decision to migrate (Zhao 2001, Zhang and Li 2001).¹¹ The



1995 Chinese Household Income Project (n=11,924) found that 50% of migrants aged 16 – 35 years old, relied on social networks comprised of family and friends to find their jobs. The study at hand demonstrates 46% relied on similar social networks, but when school assistance is added, 72% used a wider social network to obtain employment as detailed in Graph 5 above.¹²

Job satisfaction can be gauged in a variety of ways: by low job turnover, internal training and promotion opportunities, a good assortment of benefits, social bonding, etc. When asked if a worker had switched from a first to a second job, 26% had not entered a second job. For those that did, 65% entered a second job with higher pay. Other reasons for changing jobs other than for higher wages were cited. The category of improved work place and health conditions and better work hours was the second most popular response at 34% as shown in Graph 6.



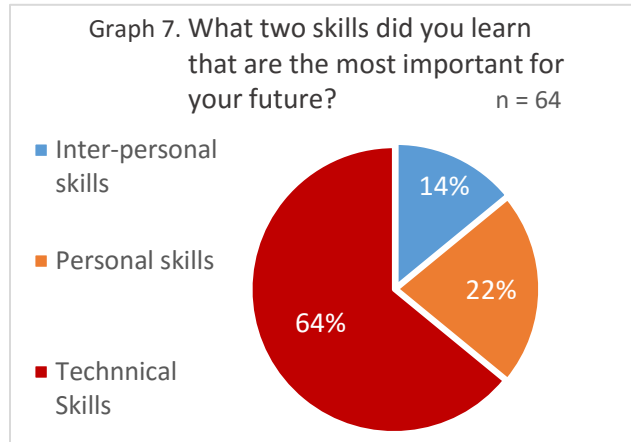
These two findings demonstrate job mobility among the cohort of workers surveyed, and mobility in a labor market where some wages and work conditions can be arbitrated by workers in the factories and work settings of their employment

Skills Acquisition and Prospects for the Future

China has signaled its strong interest in vocational educational training for improving human capital and accelerating economic growth. State investment led the way for increased numbers of technical students in the first decade of the 21st Century. With more than 21 billion spent annually, vocational high school enrollments nearly doubled from 2001 to 2011, growing from 11.7 million to 22.1 million.¹³

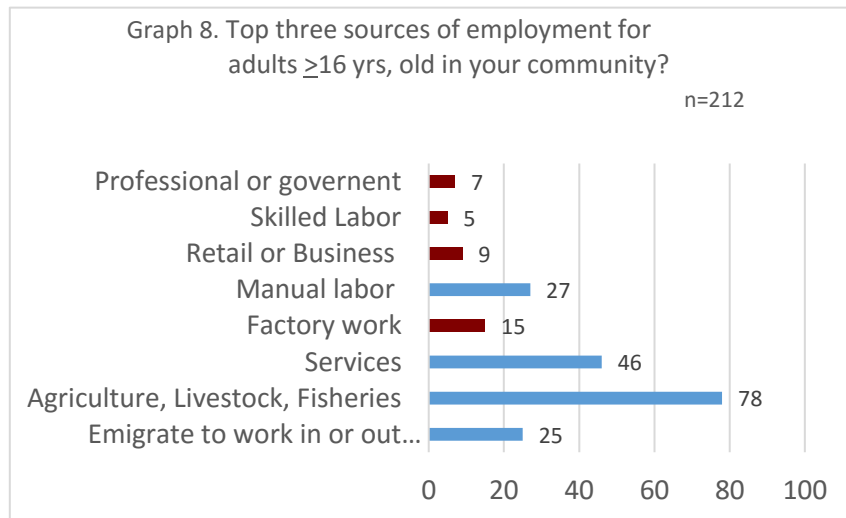
Skills acquisition as a result of the on-the-job-training is an additional strategy for workforce development. One longitudinal study demonstrated that vocational technical students (n= 7,114) lost general academic skills such as math, but gained technical skills such as computer skills.¹⁴ It was nevertheless weakly associated with additional skills gained after employment.

Changes in occupations between generations begin to appear when considering jobs available for non-migrant workers employed in their home provinces. Among the cohort of workers surveyed in Guangdong Province, 64% valued technical skills as shown in Graph 7. They also identified a wide variety of technical skills related to factory work: welding, measuring, mechanic repair, printing, computer, electronics, doing projects, accounting, and education methods.

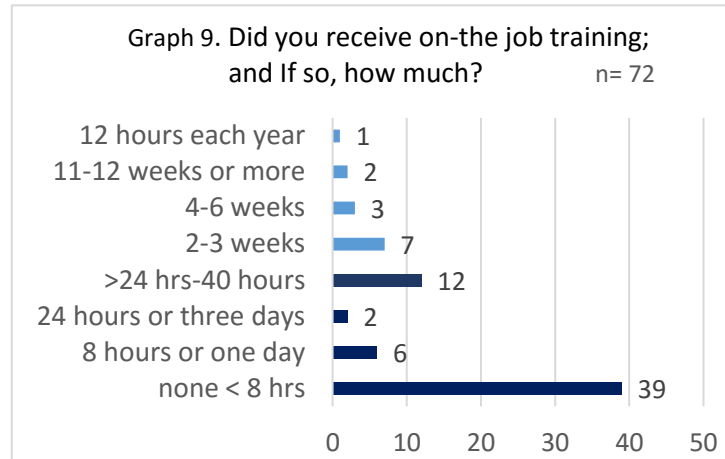


The top three sources for employment of adults 16 years and older reported by migrants for their home communities are illustrated in Graph 8 below. Only 18% of those jobs required some level of technical skill training outside the traditional sector of agriculture, livestock, and fisheries. In other words, some 64% of migrant workers reported having learned technical skills, though the market for technically skilled jobs back home was only 18% of available jobs. Under the same definition, technical skills were identified in 24% of reported occupations for migrants' mothers' (n = 78), but for 45% of their fathers' reported occupations.

Most workers reported a larger portion of technical skills than their parents' occupations outside the traditional sector of agriculture, livestock, and fisheries. Those skills were either directly related to the educational experiences they gained in technical, and high school, or gained on the job.



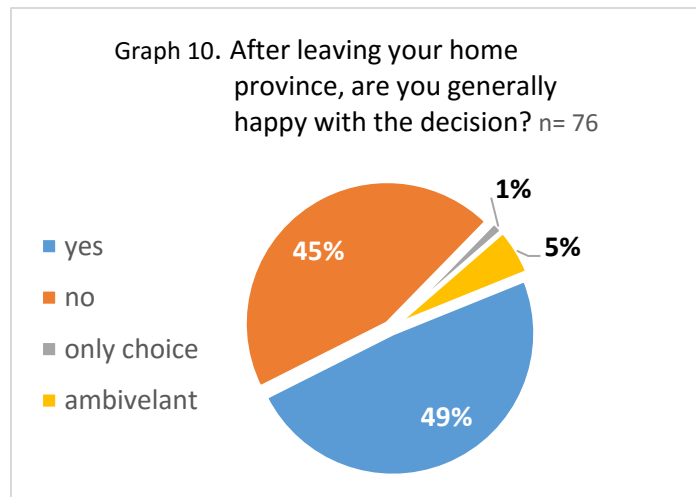
Some 82% of workers received 40 hours or less of on-the-job training as displayed in Graph 9 below. Given that dearth of training in the workplace setting, we may rule out on-the-job training as a viable source for migrant workers to acquire technical skills. Skills identified by this group of workers were obtained rather from technical schools - such as the Shandan Bailie School.



Finally skills acquisition was not seen as a major source of barriers, obstacles, or difficulties while on the job. Forty percent of migrant workers reported no major barriers to the current job, though difficult adjustments were mentioned by 60%.

Was the migration journey worth it?

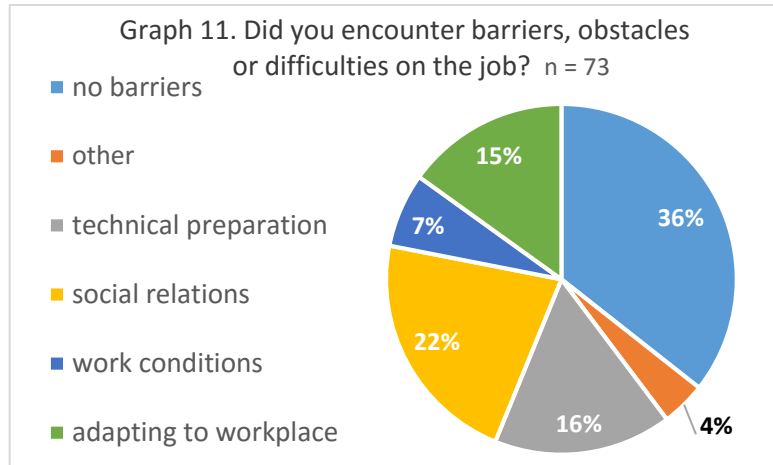
Beyond the general findings of the positive effects of income for individual workers and their families, and the acquisition of technical skills, workers encountered challenging adjustments on several fronts. This is reflected in their response to the question whether they were generally happy in their new setting?



Unhappy (45%) or ambivalent (5%) feelings accounted for half of their responses, while 49% were happy with their decision to migrate (n= 76) as noted in Graph 10 above.

Some one third (34%) of workers switched jobs due to unfavorable work conditions in this cohort of workers. The variety of barriers they encountered included social

relations, adaptation to the workplace, conditions of work, and technical preparation as seen in Graph 11. Their approach to such circumstances are exemplified in several views shared in interviews summarized below.



In Workers' Voices ¹⁵

One male factory worker in Huizhou changed jobs because the factory notified workers not to work more than two years on the electronic board due to toxins. He now manages a karaoke bar. His certificate was in agriculture because at the time he graduated in 2005 all graduates found good jobs in agricultural companies. His skills and interests did not match his initial job. A different worker in Huizhou wished to be a teacher, but the salary was higher at his factory work place. He was unhappy with the pressures of life, but had no other choice. He faced a particular challenge because his Mandarin was not good. He also thought the assembly line speed was too fast.

Female migrant workers who received a certificate in English Education encountered a variety of challenges. Several workers thought they lacked professional training as English teachers. One worker, who formally worked in the Huizhou factory line, originally wanted to be a teacher; her pay was better as a factory worker. Exhausted as a line worker from completing 12 hour days, one day she fainted. She was nevertheless able to become a quality control monitor. She did not think she learned skills at Bailie School. Yet another of her problems was the lack of health insurance in the first few months.

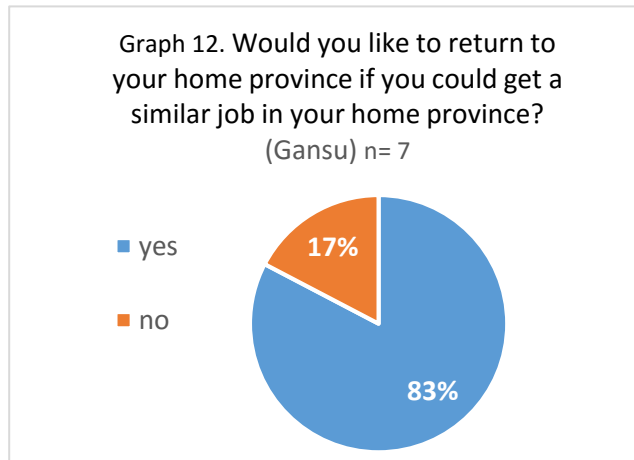
Another Bailie trained educator in a Shenzhen private school continued teaching, though she complained of being very tired every minute. She had not received the respect she expected as a teacher, but was treated like a worker.

A third trained teacher transitioned from education into being a small business-woman in Huizhou. She used her teaching skills in a part time teaching job. Though she is still glad to have teaching skills, she thought the curriculum at the Bailie School did not

prepare her sufficiently, as her English conversation skills were too low to remain a full time teacher. Nevertheless, she gained leadership skills as a student union leader, and on her own, she learned business skills to start a new business.

Our interviews clearly showed that this confident businesswoman spoke for many others in the room. She identified feeling isolated from Guangdong people who kept their distance. Given the high work load, she lamented, “Life doesn’t seem like life. People here don’t build and enjoy life.” She expressed loneliness and being disconnected to others. She reported that she had to depend on herself to solve every little problem. She felt that Gansu people are more honest and respectful of teachers. She hopes to return home where there is less pressure. On the brighter side, her younger brother is considering entering auto repair training. She looks forward to more opportunity as Gansu urbanizes. Her family back home is now considering opening a similar business.

In general, feelings of social isolation appear to reflect a shared overall experience between the migrant workers interviewed, 83% of whom would return home to their province if they had similar job opportunities, as Graph 12 illustrates.



A Gansu Migrant Family’s Transformation ¹⁶

One southern Gansu family interviewed paints a transformative picture of Gansu workers in China’s southern coastal industries. They witnessed their neighbor family’s life patterns change permanently as a result of cyclical migration. The daughter of a two sibling family migrated to work in Guangdong. She returned four years later to have a child with her new husband whom she met while working as a factory worker in the industrial belt. Her brother did not migrate but remained at home; he is chronically unemployed, but cares for the parents who were gainfully employed. One parent worked in a state enterprise. The situation of this family illustrates what life changing stages young workers face in China.

After middle school, they may opt for secondary education in the form of technical or vocational school training, or may attend regular high school. Regular high school gives

them a once in a lifetime chance to compete for entrance into college. If they do not ascend within the educational system, there is little to no chance later of a more prosperous existence through educational advancement.

In the case of the young migrant woman, like an estimated 30% of other young women immigrants from Gansu, she returned home to bear her child. Once a child is born, she may typically leave her child with the grandparents and return to factory work in the south. Like the other migrant workers from Gansu, her goal is to accumulate savings, purchase a home, and establish a small business once she and her husband return permanently some eight to nine years after the original migration.

Conclusion

Daily life in the southern megacity in the Pearl River Delta Region is quite a shock for new arrivals such as Gansu migrants. Some didn't want to leave their home provinces but were pushed out by the limited opportunities close to home. But even for the adventurers drawn to a wider world, the challenges remain daunting: strange customs and food, workplace discomforts, and mismatches between training and needed skills for their current position. These difficulties are offset by their higher income, ability to send remittances home, skills gained, and hope for a brighter future back home. The educational model that Rewi Alley founded almost 70 years ago has endured, helping Gansu's peasant youth to become workers vital to China's future.

¹ Alley, Rewi. *At 90: Memoirs of My China Years*, Beijing: New World Press, 1986, 232.

² Gewurtz, Margo S., "Social Reality and Educational Reform: The Case of the Chinese Vocational Education Association 1917-1927", *Modern China* Vol. 4, No. 2(April, 1978), 175-176.

³Alley, 229.

⁴ VET training offered in junior middle schools, workers training courses, and other specialty institutions are not included. *China - Secondary Education*, <http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/273/China-SECONDARY-EDUCATION.html>.

⁵ The total number of interviewees is inconsistent in the survey's variables, reflecting the fact that some workers chose not to answer some of the questions. Three surveys were eliminated for lack of sufficient number of completed answers.

⁶ The problems of vocational-technical education (VET) in 2007-2012 are the focus of Hansen, Mette Halskov & T.E. Woronov (2013), "Demanding and resisting vocational education: a comparative study of schools in rural and urban China, *Comparative Education*, 49:2, 242-259.

DOI: 10.1080/03050068.2012.733848. The failure of curriculum to correspond to employment opportunities applies to both urban and rural VET schools. Although the government hopes to develop more such schools, parents and students resist this traditional low-status educational institution. This attitude is confirmed in Horst Bermann, "China's Vocational Education System Facing the Twenty-First Century," *International Journal of Sociology*, 29: 1, Globalization and Changes in Vocational Training Systems in Developing and Advanced Industrialized Societies (II) (Spring, 1999,) p. 32.

⁷ Gender differences in the workplace were noted anecdotally but not systematically studied.

⁸ Workers used the term “local dialect,” to describe their first language. The most common second languages was “Putonghua,” (Mandarin). The third most common second language was “Gansu dialect of Mandarin.”

⁹ Hansen & Woronov (2013) “Demanding and resisting vocational education: a comparative study of schools in rural and urban China, *Comparative Education*, 49:2, 256.

DOI: 10.1080/03050068.2012.733848 confirms testimony given in our oral interviews of selective workers that “agriculture ...is probably the least desired occupational sector of them all.”

¹⁰ In order to better understand the dynamics and characteristics of this population, we recoded values for variables related to: destinations of migrating relatives, siblings, or parents, workers’ skills acquisition, jobs available to adults > 16 years old in workers’ home communities, occupations of the mothers and fathers of migrant workers, individual and family income, and the effects of education and employment on migrant workers’ families, and barriers, obstacles, or difficulties encountered on the job.

¹¹ Determinants of Temporary Rural –Urban Migration, Haizheng Li, Steven Zahniser, *Urban Studies*, Vol 39 , No. 2219-2235, 2002., p. 2226.

¹² *Ibid*, page 2226, see also Table 2 (p. 2222) and Table 3. (p.2224).

¹³ The Impact of Vocational Schooling on Human Capital Development in Developing Countries, Evidence from China, Prashant Loyalka et al, Working Paper 265, Rural Education Action Project, August 2013: p 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 7, 21, and Table 3.

¹⁵ In *Workers Voices* was reconstructed from field notes documented on April, 14, 2010 in Longgang, Shenzhen, and on June 5, 2010 Huizhou. Workers are identified by numbers corresponding to those field notes.

¹⁶ Field interview location, Tianhe District, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China. January 29, 2011.

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Appendix I.