

Thomas Awe: Desperate People in the City. Shanghai and the Phenomenon of Migration

The 'Wai-di-ren', the migrant workers of which there are five million in Shanghai alone, are not least among those to whom China's soaring megacities owe thanks for their palaces made of glass and steel. For 30 to 100 Euros a month, they cook, wash, clean, repair, and build. The jobs they do are called '3-d jobs' – dirty, dangerous, and demanding. When the migration to the cities began in 1989, the People's Republic of China saw itself confronted with its greatest social challenge ever: Adding to the already-large army of migrants who have no permanent home, 200 million of so-called vagrants go on moving from place to place, working for a meagre wage which has to feed the entire family. Social distortions are increasing; the income gap is widening.

At least, there are some ideas about how to solve the problem: These include basic provisions and insurance for everybody as well as offering school education free of charge and without proof of permanent abode. China's rapidly expanding national economy particularly needs qualified workers, but these do not exist. Instead, unqualified and unspecialised workers step into the breach. Problems of hygiene and familial dynamism problems exacerbate the general situation: Diseases are spreading, and children whose parents struggle for their subsistence in the city are brought up by their grandparents – after a fashion. Education deficits are increasing, while social learning and value orientation fall by the wayside.

Unlike other megacities in the world, China does not yet have any slums. Yet it is only a question of time until its mass migration will detonate the social dynamite. The societal, demographic, and emotional time bomb is ticking. The 'medal of labour' that was awarded to a few hand-picked migrants in 2007 is hardly more than a symbol of the growing awareness of the problem among the leaders; it suggests appreciation, if that. On the other hand, there are no real and sustainable relief programmes in cities like Shanghai.

Those who are especially affected by the misery are the children of the migrants. They are largely left to take care of themselves and may easily be drawn into drug-related crime. Without any school-leaving degree they do not stand a chance. The only work that awaits them is the '3-d jobs' their parents are doing. Some encouragement is offered by the 'schools of hope'. They recall tiny village schools, most of the teachers work without pay, and the rooms are filled with up to 150 children of migrant workers. These schools function as a kind of day-care centre, taking in the children until they parents return and providing them with their basic needs. The director and founder of a 'school of hope' in Shanghai nevertheless describes the situation as hopeless, mentioning the daily uncertainty and the discrimination by local authorities which perceive the mere existence of the school as 'harmful to their image'.

It is sad that the value of education is declining in China, a civilisation which, for thousands of years, has emphasised the special significance of knowledge and education. At the moment, migrant workers make up 'only' 18 percent of China's total population, but their number will grow to 450 million in 2020. It may hardly be expected that a mass movement of a dimension equivalent to the entire population of the EU will proceed peacefully.

Given the closed system of residence registration, the people's only opportunity is to seek their alleged fortune illegally in one of the booming cities on the east coast, such as Shanghai. In the last 28 years, the People's Republic achieved average annual growth rates of nine percent. In 2006, it generated a GDP of 2,300 and a foreign-trade volume of 1,500 billion Dollars, accumulating the highest foreign-currency reserve worldwide. All this clearly indicates the large pressure for change the country is subjected to because of its demographic problem.

The social gap between unskilled workers and the educated upper class is widening. Those who suffer from it are the migrant workers, without whom no building, renovation, or urban project can become reality. Yet they often work on the most dangerous building sites in the world. Unsupported scaffolding and ignored safety regulations have caused the death of hundreds of thousands of them.

The major task still is to improve the education opportunities for migrant children substantially, which includes containing the unjust commercialisation of education at urban schools. China's migrant workers constitute a swiftly-growing risk potential for the development of the domestic economy which may be the key problem of the country. If no sustainable solution can be found for the question of education and health insurance especially for the children of these workers, the country will be threatened by unrest, instability, and chaos.

What is needed now is concerted action by the political parties, the government, NGOs, and private education programmes which reaches beyond the isolated measures that now exist. In a first step, the Hukou system which, due to its caste-like character, favours some and discriminates others would have to be reformed, and migrant workers would have to be legalised. In a second step, the government would have to develop social insurance systems and ensure a sound school education for the children of migrant workers. All this would contribute to the realisation of a 'harmonious society' to which, after all, the country's government has committed itself.