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# LEEDS EAST ASIA PAPERS



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## **Livelihoods and Migrants' Social Protection: An Investigation of Migration and Health in Beijing and Tianjin, North China**

Heather Xiaoquan Zhang

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**Livelihoods and Migrants' Social Protection: An Investigation of  
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**Heather Xiaoquan Zhang**



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# **Livelihoods and Migrants' Social Protection: An Investigation of Migration and Health in Beijing and Tianjin, North China**

**Heather Xiaoquan Zhang**

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper contributes to a growing body of research on the social protection for rural-urban migrants in Chinese cities. Drawing on extensive fieldwork in Beijing and Tianjin and applying an analytical framework of livelihood studies, it examines an important aspect of migrants' social protection, namely migrants' health, in particular workplace safety and occupational health. It aims at (1) delineating the current state of affairs in respect of social protection for rural migrants; (2) identifying the risks and threats to migrants' health as perceived by the actors involved; (3) examining the extent to which the social rights of rural migrants are recognized, and the struggles that migrants have fought for securing livelihood and realising such rights; and (4) assessing the central and local government responses to the challenges posed for mobile livelihoods and suggesting possible ways forward.

### **Keywords**

Rural-urban migration, migrants' social protection, social policy, social exclusion, livelihood, health, access, China

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the issue of building social safety nets in China has drawn increasing attention from academic and policy fields partly because of the serious erosion of the traditional social support system, the long-term neglect of the state in welfare investment and provision, and their consequences for China's human and social development and well-being in the context of market transition, intensifying globalization, and rapid and drastic societal change. Among a growing body of research on China's social policy and welfare reforms published in both English and Chinese is an emerging and increasing interest in issues relating to the social protection and citizenship rights of rural-urban migrants.<sup>2</sup> This has partly arisen from the very magnitude of the migration phenomenon, the realisation that as a long-term historical process of industrialisation and urbanisation rural-urban migration will continue to grow, and that the graveness of the problem of unrecognised and even violation of migrants' rights for the past three decades is such that the country's social and political stability as well as economic growth may increasingly be at stake. According to recent research based on Chinese official statistics, the number of migrants working in Chinese cities reached 120 million in the first half of the 2000s (State Council, 2006: 3-4), 140-150 million in 2008-2009 (NBSC, 2009, cited in Chan, 2010: 359), and when counting in those employed in township and village enterprises (TVEs) the number was estimated at more than 225 million nationwide in 2008 (NBSC, 2009, cited in Chan, 2010: 362). Behind the large numbers of migrants are about 300 million members of their families in urban or rural settings, and together they account for some 40 per cent of China's entire population of 1.3 billion (Zheng and Huang-Li, 2007: 18), suggesting that two fifths of Chinese people are directly or indirectly affected by migration and its related issues. As the rural population has continued to grow producing more labour than the rural economy can absorb, it is estimated that annually between six to eight million people therein are leaving for urban areas to look for employment opportunities, and that another 150

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<sup>2</sup> Recent research has investigated the problem from different perspectives. For example, Watson (2009) looks at the urgent needs and challenges in providing old age security for migrant workers; Murphy's volume (2008) analyzed a range of issues in relation to migration and social development in China, including for example schooling of migrant children, housing for rural-urban migrants and NGOs for migrants; Chan (2010) and Tao (2008) linked the social security problems for migrants with the hukou reform; Kumar and Li (2007) discussed social protection for informal workers including migrants from a comparative (China and India) institutional angle focusing on the organization and representation of labour; Davies and Ramia (2008) examined governance problems in respect of discrepancies between policy making at the top level and implementation at the local level; Tao and Xu (2007) approached migrants' social security through engaging in debate about rural land requisitioning in the process of urbanization in terms of ownership, use rights and management of arable land; Hu, Cook and Salazar (2008) in their short report summarized the main concerns in respect of migrants' health in present-day China. At a theoretical and paradigmatic level, Philip Huang's (2009) insightful analysis looks at China's expanding informal economy and the theoretical and ideological underpinnings of its omission from official statistics and its policy implications. Solinger (1999) did pioneering work on rural migrants' citizenship in China some 10 years ago. Among recent work published in Chinese, the most influential ones include, for example the State Council's (2006) first comprehensive research report on the migrant workers issue, and the subsequently published research reports on the various aspects of migrants' social security (cf. Deng and Liu, 2008).

million rural labourers and their family members will be ‘transferred’ out of agriculture in the decade to come (Zheng and Huang-Li, 2007: 9).

Given the scale of the phenomenon, the seriousness of the problems and their economic, social and political implications, current research in the field, despite the more recent increase in migration volume, is far from sufficient. In addition, it is worth noting that existing research published in English calls for more empirical evidence, while research published in Chinese needs to adopt alternative investigative approaches to the quantitative survey methods that are predominantly used today. The latter, while statistically descriptive and representative, are able to address the question of what but not how and why, and often fail to provide details of local processes and practices, deep insights into and nuanced understanding of individual or collective experiences, ongoing negotiations and struggles, or to represent the perceptions, perspectives and voices of the key actors involved – aspects that are equally vital for advancing knowledge and informing policies.

In a wider global context the development studies community since the turn of the century has started attaching higher priority to the construction of social safety nets, the enhancement of social protection mechanisms and their role in poverty reduction and international development as manifest in, among other things, a special issue of the *IDS Bulletin* devoted to the debate over social protection (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2007), a special issue of the *International Labour Review* published by the International Labour Organization (hereafter ILO) on employment and social protection (ILO, 2002), a growing body of research on social exclusion, the adoption of a ‘rights-based approach’ and social policy interventions in developing and transition societies supported by major international development agencies, such as the World Bank, ILO and the UK government’s Department for International Development (cf. ILO, 2002; Norton, et al. 2002; Standing, 2002; World Bank, 2000). However, much of the debate in the area has tended to be focused on the ‘poor’ and/or the ‘poorest’ (cf. Conway and Norton, 2002: 534; World Bank, 2000), leaving out large numbers of people who are among the most vulnerable, disadvantaged and marginalized but not classed as destitute.

The ‘poor-centredness’ of research and policy making has posed particular difficulties in analyzing the subject of this article, namely rural-urban migrants in China. This stems from the fact that firstly, migrants, due to the mobile nature of their livelihoods crossing geographical and administrative boundaries, are often missed out from the various commonly used categories of the ‘poor’, such as the urban or rural poor, the absolute or relative poor, the so-called chronic poor, and so forth, and we do not have a category of the ‘mobile poor’. Secondly, rural migrants, though sharing considerable characteristics, are not a homogeneous group, and it is true, as many researchers have shown as well as evidenced in the author’s own empirical work, that many of them and their rural families are not in destitution given the financial demands for enabling migration in the first place (c.f. Murphy, 2002). While the issue of migrants’ social protection could have been tackled by livelihood research that has gained increasing prominence since the mid-1990s (c.f. de Haan and Zoomers, 2005; Scoones, 2009), particularly with regard to its envisaged positive nexus between migration and livelihoods/development (de Haan, 1999; Zhang, et al., 2006), this literature has thus far paid scant attention to the problems with protecting mobile livelihoods while the current debate about migration and social protection has tended to be overwhelmingly

concerned with international migration (cf. Adams and Page, 2003; Sabates-Wheeler and Macauslan, 2007). Furthermore, the relatively small though increasing body of research on internal migration and development tends to overlook the high risks involved in rural-urban migration and the vulnerabilities of migrants to a wide range of hazards and threats to their livelihoods, welfare and well-being.

Situating studies of Chinese rural-urban migration in this wider scholarly context, we may identify a few areas calling for more academic attention, including for example the application of a livelihood approach to China's migration research, an analysis of the social risk faced by migrants and their families, and in particular problems and threats to migrants' health and (sometimes) life, which has seen frequent media exposure in recent years, directly affecting livelihood in respect of its sustainability and security in urban and rural settings.

This paper aims to contribute to a growing body of scholarship on migrants' social protection in China, as well as to wider livelihoods studies, and migration and citizenship research by focusing on migrants' health issues and addressing the following questions: what is the current state of affairs in respect of social protection for rural migrants? What are the needs of the mobile population, and what are the risks and threats to their health as an essential component of livelihood as perceived by the actors involved? To what extent are the social rights of rural migrants recognized and what structural barriers do migrants face in realizing such rights? How do migrants resort to informal networks and institutions, and mobilize the resources at their disposal in order to overcome such barriers and facilitate access to formal institutions and public goods? What are the central and local responses to the challenges? And to what extent are these actions able or unable to address the problems concerning social protection of mobile livelihoods?

The paper is structured as follows: section two discusses the research methodology based on my fieldwork conducted between 2005 and 2009, and the analytical framework employed in the research. Section three identifies the changing patterns and trends in China's rural-urban migration since the mid-late 1990s and delineates the state of affairs in terms of migrants' social protection. Applying the analytical framework and with a focus on work-related safety and occupational health within a wider, complex and multi-faceted issue, sections four and five discuss the risks and threats to migrants' health, problems with access and equity faced by rural migrants in urban settings, and the tactics and strategies utilized by migrants to deal with and minimize such risks in their daily livelihood struggles. These sections also look at the recent institutional responses to the challenges posed for mobile livelihoods as well as the structural barriers to their implementation and/or enforcement, and how migrants have attempted to deal with this. The paper concludes by summarizing the key arguments and suggesting possible ways forward in policy and practice.

## **2. METHODOLOGY AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**

The primary data on which the paper draws derives from extensive fieldwork that I conducted in Beijing and Tianjin, North China, as well as in other parts of the country which I visited, such as Guangzhou, Nanjing and Hangzhou in southern and south-

eastern parts of the country between 2005 and 2009.<sup>3</sup> The fieldwork investigated issues related to migration and health in urban settings, which is considered an important dimension of livelihood security and sustainability. It employed a number of qualitative research methods, including semi-structured and unstructured interviews, participant and non-participant observations, site visits, and so forth. More than 50 qualitative interviews which also included purposive conversations were conducted with migrants, urban residents, private entrepreneurs who employed migrant workers, local NGO representatives, academics, government officials, and representatives of multilateral and/or bilateral development agencies. The interviews with migrant workers lasted between three to four hours in single or consecutive sessions, through which detailed data on a range of issues, and the perspectives and experiences of migrants relating to their health and social security was obtained. The selection of interviewees was based on the principles of qualitative research, including, for example, 'sequential discovery', 'snowballing' and 'purposive sampling'.<sup>4</sup>

Site visits to migrant workplaces were made where interviews, conversations and observations were conducted. These included visits to urban residential houses where migrant domestic workers provided services; construction sites to include both outside construction and interior renovation; university campuses where migrants performed diverse types of manual labour, such as construction work, street and office cleaning, and catering services in canteens and small restaurants; small-scale private enterprises which employed migrant workers, streets and neighbourhoods where migrants ran their small businesses like breakfast services outside hotels, small restaurants outside university campuses, other community services for the convenience of urban residents to include shoe repairing, collecting waste for recycling, and so forth; and to Beijing's then open 'labour recruitment market', where migrant labourers gathered looking for temporary casual work. In addition, site visits were made to migrants' residences to include construction sites where unfinished buildings were used as migrants' temporary housing, and residential areas in the outskirts of Beijing, Tianjin and Guangzhou where migrant individuals and communities rented housing from local residents/ex-farmers. Non-participant and participant observations were carried out through the assistance of a migrant NGO in Beijing, for example by helping teach English classes on Friday evenings and Sunday afternoons, and participating in and observing migrants' activities therein to include weekend parties and performances organized by and for the migrant workers themselves, and gatherings between migrants, local residents and outside visitors such as university students. The close contact with migrants and the migrant NGO allowed me access to the research site, shortened the distance between the researcher and the researched, helped meet and select interviewees, and conduct interviews at the NGO's premises, as well as collect detailed observational data and other relevant materials.

Utilizing such qualitative methods, I intend to capture the perceptions and meanings understood by the research subjects of their migratory experiences in respect of their livelihoods, the tangible and intangible resources that they developed, maintained and

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<sup>3</sup> The fieldwork conducted in Beijing and Tianjin between summer-autumn 2005 provides the main source for the research with supplementary data further gathered during 2008 and 2009 fieldwork.

<sup>4</sup> These are categorised as 'non-probability sampling' (Denscombe, 1998: 15). See Denscombe (1998) for more details on the different qualitative sampling approaches, as well as their epistemological and methodological underpinnings.

drew on in urban and rural settings, and the strategies and tactics that they employed in dealing with various kinds of difficulties, risks and threats, or with other social actors in order to sustain and secure livelihoods, as well as the negotiations and interactions between migrants on the one hand, and urban residents and institutions on the other about livelihoods, socio-economic rights and interests. The research proved to be an evolving process, in that the original design focusing on migrants' access to healthcare services was broadened during fieldwork when multiple dimensions of a much larger and complex issue in terms of migrants' social protection gradually unfolded. The primary data gathered are supplemented by secondary data collected in governmental and non-governmental organizations and international development agencies to include relevant official documents, regulations, research reports, grey literature<sup>5</sup> and other publications, as well as materials published on the internet in order to gain a timely and better understanding of the broader background and context as well as to capture the dynamics of migrants' livelihood struggles in response to the wider economic, social and political change and environment.

It should be noted that employing the range of qualitative research methods as specified above, this research, instead of seeking to be representative of, and by extension to describe, in a statistically valid way, an overall situation in China as is often the case in most quantitative studies using large-scale survey methods, intends to offer insights into the complexities of micro-level social practices and interactions, as well as the perspectives and perceptions of migrant workers who, as a socially disadvantaged group, are frequently voiceless in formal or popular representations and discourses, so as to provide a sense of agency and a snapshot of how agency and the wider social and political structures are intersected, and the ways in which they together shape the individual's and social group's experiences, perspectives and well-being outcomes.

The research employs an analytic framework of a livelihood approach. Livelihood studies have gained prominence since the early 1990s. In contrast to the conventional negative perception of migration manifest in such terms as 'forced', 'involuntary', or 'distress' migration frequently associated with devastating situations involving environmental hazards, natural disasters or political turmoil, livelihood analysis emphasizes the positive links between migration and development in terms of poverty reduction, livelihood diversification and rural development with a particular emphasis placed on the role of remittances (cf. Cai, 2003; de Haan, 1999; Li, 2001; UNDP, 2009; Social Science Research Council, et al., 2005). Migration in the livelihood approach is considered a manifestation of individual agency, a rural household strategy for survival, risk minimization or opportunity maximization, accumulation of resources for investment or for a combination of all this (cf. Bebbington, 2000; Ellis, 2000; Ellis and Ade, 2004; Francis, 2000; Zhang, et al., 2006). Despite this positive linkage conceived between migration and livelihoods, however, livelihood studies have thus far largely focused on agricultural and rural settings with insufficient attention being paid to the livelihoods of rural migrants and their urban experiences (Zhang, 2007). In this paper, I extend the existing focus of livelihood studies by looking at the security and sustainability dimension of diverse and multiple livelihoods in respect of their social protection, and the negotiations and struggles

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<sup>5</sup> This refers to internal documentation and publications such as leaflets, pamphlets and brochures.

surrounding this against a complex backdrop of rapid socio-economic and political changes in Chinese cities.

The paper adopts the commonly used definition of livelihood proposed by Ellis: ‘A livelihood comprises the assets (natural, physical, human, financial and social capital), activities, and the access to these (mediated by institutions and social relations) that together determine the living gained by the individual or household’ (Ellis, 2000: 10). In applying this concept, however, the existing livelihood approach needs to incorporate a health and well-being perspective by broadening an understanding of ‘human capital’ (not just education as generally interpreted but also health as an essential constitute of livelihood), of ‘sustainability’ (not only environmental but also social) and of ‘access’ (more than just to economic opportunities) (cf. Zhang, 2007). The paper therefore is an initial attempt to apply the livelihood framework in this broadened sense, focusing attention not so much on assets and activities of the mobile population, but on access, in particular to institutions, resources and power, such as public goods and legal and social justice, in its investigation of the issues relating to migrants’ health, and more broadly their social protection.

### **3. SOCIAL PROTECTION OF MOBILE LIVELIHOODS: CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS**

#### **3.1 Changing Patterns and Trends in China’s Rural-Urban Migration**

Large-scale rural-urban migration emerged in China in the mid-1980s shortly after the initiation of the market reforms. It has since then continuously gained momentum and therefore attracted the attention of the academic and policy arenas domestically and worldwide. Findings from my earlier work in the mid-1990s as well as from others’ research showed that the age of migrants in the early years tended to be younger – typically in their early-late 20s. Migration was initially a male dominated phenomenon with women ‘catching up’ since the mid-late 1990s: the increasing number of female migrant workers was observed especially in eastern and south-eastern coastal cities and the Special Economic Zones (Davin, 1999; Judd, 2009; Li, 2004; Scharping, 1997a, 1997b; Zhang, 1999). Migrants came from large inland agricultural provinces (the sending areas), such as Anhui, Henan, Sichuan, Hubei, Hunan, Shandong, Shaanxi, and so forth. The majority were ‘economic migrants’, unmarried and most of them sent a significant proportion of their wages back to their home villages (Davin, 1999; Fan, 2008; Li, 2004; Murphy, 2002; Zhang, 1999). Migrants tended to stay in the city for a few years, and because of the restrictions of the household registration (hukou) system and the extreme difficulties in changing one’s hukou status from the rural to the urban, only the very rich could manage to settle permanently in China’s large metropolis (Chan and Buckingham, 2008; Jacka, 2005; Li, 2004; Zhang, 2007). Young women who might wish to find urban boyfriends and eventually settle down in the city often faced insurmountable obstacles due to difficulties in changing their hukou status from the agricultural to non-agricultural category, and the frequent objection and interferences from the parents of their urban boyfriends. In the early- to mid-1990s most migrants were working in the non-state sector, and female migrants were frequently found in domestic service and other service industries, as well as factory work like assembly lines in joint ventures, foreign-owned companies, and private enterprises and businesses at various scales (Gaetano and Jacka, 2004; Lee, 1998; Pun, 2005a; Zhang, 1999).

New trends and patterns in rural-urban migration in terms of the attributes of migrants, marital and residential arrangements and their employment sectors were observed more than ten years later in my 2005-2009 fieldwork. Among the most noticeable is age and marital status: many migrants were much older with some working in urban areas for more than a decade – about half of the migrant interviewees were aged between late 20s to early 60s, and two-thirds of them were married with diverse post-nuptial residential and child-rearing arrangements.<sup>6</sup> Along with the increased age of the first generation of migrant workers was the emergence of the so-called ‘new generation of migrants’ (xinshengdai nongmingong), who, born in the 1980s and 1990s, either grew up in urban areas with their migratory parents or migrated out of rural areas on finishing most often nine-year compulsory education in rural areas (Judd, 2009). As the younger generation had little knowledge or experience in farming, they were more eager than the parent generation to settle in and integrate themselves into the urban economy and society (CCP Central Committee and State Council, 2010).

Migrant-concentrated residential areas in the outskirts of large cities like Beijing, Tianjin and Guangzhou have become much more established nowadays (see Images 1, 2 and 3). Some migrants had stayed mobile and change jobs in different parts of the country extending from the South to the North. In respect of distance, in addition to inter-provincial and inter-regional migration as observed before, there had been more short-distance migration and commuting between the outskirts of Beijing and Tianjin and the city proper or nearby provinces, particularly from Hebei, which surrounds both cities. The commuters often worked as taxi drivers (the case in Beijing, while in Tianjin laid-off workers from state-owned enterprises [SOEs hereafter] often took taxi driving as a livelihood) as well as in other services and industries, such as retailing business, or the catering and construction industries.<sup>7</sup> The suburban commuting migrants to large cities, however, tend to take jobs that require certain skills such as interior renovation, as chefs and taxi drivers, and so forth rather than manual or casual work. With the deepening of the urban industrial restructuring since the second half of the 1990s, many state organizations have started employing non-local residents (chengshi wailai renkou) as contract workers,<sup>8</sup> which has led to a growing number of

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<sup>6</sup> These fieldwork observations are in keeping with the statistically representative data gathered through quantitative surveys. For example, Yang and Hu (unknown date), based on their survey of 423 migrant workers in Chaoyang District, Beijing in late 2005, found that the migrants’ age ranged from 16-68 with an average age of 28.31, about half of them (49.2%) were married, and more than 40% were living with family members.

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that variations in local policies formulated by urban authorities often explain the different occupational patterns for different social groups. For example, I found during fieldwork that taxi-driving, when it was profitable, was reserved for residents with urban hukou status especially SOE laid-off workers as was the case in Tianjin, where taxi drivers, in most cases as holders of the business licenses, were the owners of the cars, and that the municipal government in its urban management regulations explicitly barred non-local hukou holders from entering the occupation. When taxis were owned with business licenses monopolised by big companies, which also charge outrageous fees to taxi drivers, and taxi-driving became a hard-to-sustain livelihood, as was the case in Beijing and Hangzhou, it then became an occupation dominated by commuting migrants and ‘outsiders’ (waidiren). The latter scenario is also attributable to the prevalent unequal citizenship and entitlements, which are differentiated by urban versus rural, local versus non-local hukou status. Taxi companies in these cities, in order to minimise costs and maximise profits, prefer employing rural commuters or outsiders since they are not expected to pay full social insurance contributions for rural/non-local hukou employees (see also Lu, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> This practice was to reduce labour costs as public sector employers were not expected to contribute to the social security schemes for temporary workers until quite recently.

migrants being employed in the public sector on a temporary basis, such as in universities, hospitals, SOEs or other governmental organizations. Differentiations in policy implementation with regard to migrants' social protection in the public and private sectors will be examined later.



Image 1: An Older Migrant Construction Worker in Tianjin (September 2005)



Image 2: Migrant Families and Community in Eastern Suburban Beijing (August 2005)

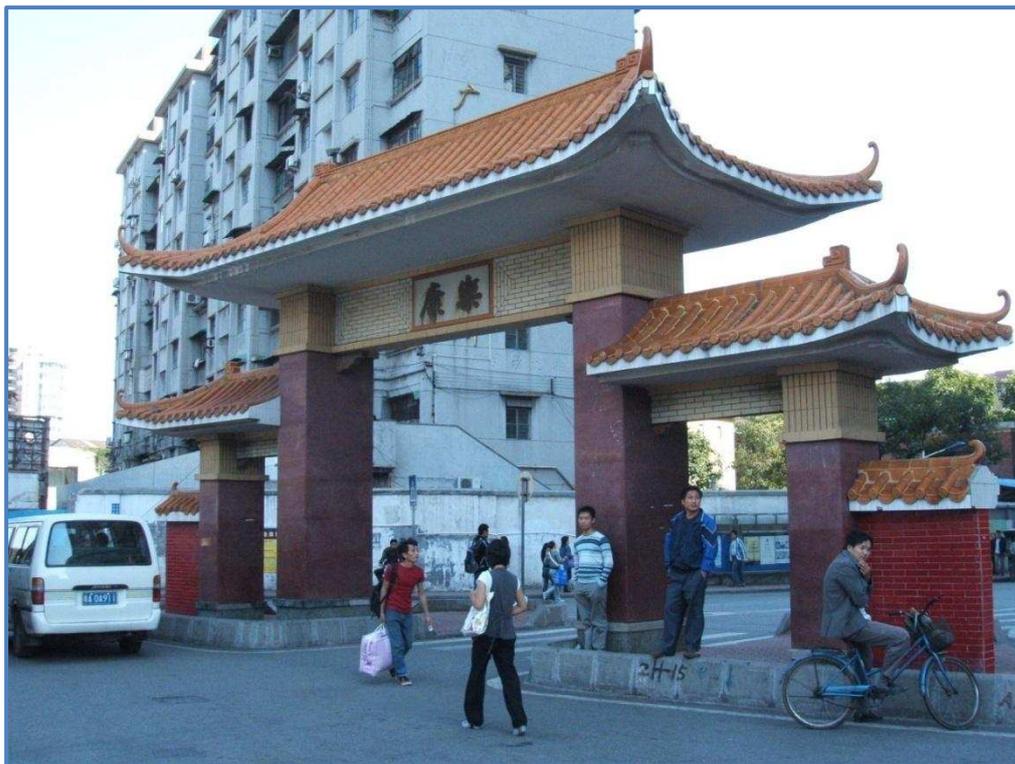


Image 3: An 'Urban Village' in Guangdong Inhabited Mostly by Migrants (November 2008)

While migrants' age is now much more varied and in many cases older and with longer migratory experiences, their average wages, particularly for the unskilled workers, have remained more or less unchanged, which has failed to keep up with inflation or the rise of average wages in urban areas (Chan, 2002; Pun, 2005b).

In short, despite higher geographical mobility and frequent job change, the occupational mobility of migrants, as observed in my fieldwork and consistent with the findings of other research (cf. Li, 2004), is found to be largely horizontal rather than upward movement in respect of the socio-economic status, esteem and remuneration associated with their jobs: they are likely to be employed in the low-wage, non-skilled sector of the informal economy although some longer-term migrants and suburban commuters tend to hold jobs at the lower end of the skilled sector. There has also been a noticeable increase in the number of older or married migrants living with their partners or families in the city. In addition, rural-urban migration has started showing shared features with those observed in other developing countries and regions, including for example Latin America, where migrants are frequently found working and living at the edge of large metropolises, establishing their informal institutions, such as schools and medical clinics, and developing their communities separate from the mainstream urban residential areas (see Image 4).



Image 4: A 'Black Medical Clinic' (hei zhensuo) Run in a Migrant Residential Community in Suburban Beijing (August 2005)

### 3.2 Welfare and Social Security for Rural Migrants: The Unmet Needs

Rural migrants nowadays are experiencing increased economic, social and political marginalization, as well as relative poverty and deprivation in Chinese large cities, which renders them vulnerable to a wide range of risks and threats in terms of livelihood security and sustainability. Bearing in mind this context, we now examine whether there are any social security schemes designed and developed to tackle this vulnerability and provide social protection for rural migrants.

Generally speaking, China's social policy development since the initiation of the market reforms has undergone two phases. In the first phase, which lasted up until the early 2000s, the overwhelming emphasis was on economic growth. This, combined with the earlier experience of relatively high welfare provision but ineffective growth, resulted in a predominant perception that opposed social welfare to economic growth (c.f. Feng, 2007; Gong, et al. 2007). For example, the welfare state system adopted in many western European countries was seen as effectively encouraging idleness (*youshouhaoxian*) and a 'dependency mentality' (*yilai xinli*).<sup>9</sup> Guided by such thinking, state-promoted growth channelled most available resources to economic development while systematically minimizing 'unproductive' welfare expenditures. Stress was placed on 'producing a larger pie' as opposed to the pre-reform policies accentuating 'redistribution' issues. This 'growth-led welfare model' or the 'developmental welfare system', as termed by Gordon White and Roger Goodman (1998) - though highlighting the role of the state as the paramount institutional actor in leading and managing economic growth and market according to its perceived priorities as against the neo-liberal free-market, state's hands-off approach - shares similar assumptions with neo-liberalism in respect of social policy and welfare provision. For instance, both models share a faith in the market's ability automatically to allocate resources in an optimal manner, and to redress inequality and uneven development through 'trickle down' (from the rich to the poor) and 'spill-over' (from the urban core to the rural periphery) effects.

The consequence was a serious erosion of the existing social security system, prolonged neglect of and under-investment in developing new welfare schemes, and the failure to protect Chinese citizens against a plethora of emerging uncertainties and risks associated with the market economy. For example, once a model of equitable healthcare provision for its large population in the developing world, China was rated 144th out of 191 countries in terms of healthcare performance, and 188th, or third from the bottom, with regard to the fairness of healthcare provision according to an assessment by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2000 (WHO, 2000). Also the events surrounding the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in spring-summer 2003 first in China and then beyond suggested a growing public health crisis in the country (Duckett, 2003). All this led to exacerbated inequality, poverty, vulnerability and livelihood insecurity by the turn of the twenty-first century.

The second phase started in the early 2000s after the succession of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao to the top leadership. Faced with the mounting development challenges and growing tension and discontent in society, the new leadership has begun paying

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<sup>9</sup> This was reflected in much of the official and popular discourse of the day, including government documents and the popular press. See also Gong, et al. (2007) for a comprehensive review of the impact of China's marketisation and neoliberalisation of economic and social policies on its healthcare system.

greater attention to equity and social justice by giving higher priority to wider human development issues, in particular building social safety nets and improving social security and welfare for Chinese citizens. New discourses stressing ‘people-centred development’ (yirenweiben), ‘building a harmonious society’ (goujian hexie shehui), ‘urban-rural integration’ (cheng xiang yitihua), and upholding the ‘scientific development view’ (kexue fazhanguan), and so forth have signalled a new emphasis on the role of the state in resource (re)distribution to address worsening problems of polarization of wealth and uneven development through central government fiscal support and improving welfare and public goods provision. This ongoing phase has witnessed an accelerated pace of establishing, expanding and enhancing a wide range of social security programmes. These include new social insurance schemes with combined contributions from employers and employees, such as pension, healthcare, unemployment, maternity and work-related injury insurances; and means-tested social assistance programmes such as the Minimum Living Standard guarantee (MLS), medical assistance, housing subsidies, continued support for the ‘Five Guarantees’ scheme,<sup>10</sup> legal aid, disaster or social relief, and so forth.

This second phase has been marked by greater importance attached to statutory social protection and institutionalization of the various welfare schemes. For instance, 2004 is termed China’s ‘social security year’ with social security as citizens’ basic social rights formally incorporated in the country’s Constitution. In the same year, the State Council published a white paper entitled China’s Social Security and Its Policy detailing the state responsibilities for supporting and improving a range of social insurance and welfare schemes under its social security system (State Council, 2004). However, most of the welfare and social insurance schemes are still urban-centred, such as pension, work-related injury, unemployment and maternity insurances, minimum wage, and so forth, which have only had limited extensions to the rural population. While it is too early to evaluate the actual effects of these policy initiatives, a closer look at the picture of the latest developments reveals some continuities in terms of protecting mobile livelihoods: rural migrants have not featured prominently in the new discourse, nor in the institutional design for policy and practice despite their large numbers and their status as one of the most vulnerable social groups requiring urgent attention in respect of social protection. This state of affairs is in part attributable to the institutionalized urban-rural divide in welfare production, financing and provision (in terms of quantity, quality and coverage), to the obstacles erected and maintained by the hukou regime for recognizing and realizing migrants’ social rights in urban settings, to the mode of migrants’ livelihoods, which involves frequent movement across geographical and administrative boundaries (hence posing new challenges in the absence of universal entitlement and to the current practice of fragmented administration and management of welfare provision), and to the often bureaucratic and discriminatory attitudes of urban local officials and residents towards rural migrants insofar as their rights and entitlements are concerned. In the next section, I turn to examine a specific aspect of social protection for mobile livelihoods, that is, migrants’ health through firstly identifying the health risks and threats as perceived by various actors concerned.

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<sup>10</sup> This scheme is a legacy of the Mao era in rural China, by which rural collectives were responsible for providing the most needy people, in particular the childless elderly, with five guarantees of food, clothing, shelter, basic healthcare and a burial after death.

## **4. RISKS AND THREATS TO MIGRANTS' HEALTH AND LIVELIHOODS**

Employing a livelihood framework in studying China's rural-urban migration from a well-being perspective suggests a fresh focus on migrants' health, in particular in relation to access as mentioned above. This may initially point attention to migrants' access to healthcare services in urban settings. In effect, my 2005 fieldwork was originally designed to address a set of research questions surrounding this aspect of migrants' social protection. The field study, however, turned out to be an unfolding process, during which new issues and sub-themes related to the core theme emerged and were identified. Accordingly the dimension and scope of the investigation in connection to the central concern of the research were adjusted and broadened. For example, my interviews with the director of the migrant NGO and the deputy director of the non-profit organization in Beijing revealed that there were a wide range of issues affecting migrants' health, some were acute and engendered direct effects due to their highly visible character, while others may be hidden or latent but can lead to potentially devastating impacts on health and livelihoods. In addition, access in the Chinese migration and development context should also cover access to institutional resources, in particular those provided by the state such as law and legal justice.

### **4.1. Work-Related Safety and Occupational Health**

It was revealed in the interviews that one of the most acute problems with regard to migrants' health was related to health and safety at work, particularly for those doing the three-D (dirty, difficult and dangerous) kinds of jobs. Employers' neglect of safety measures and of workers' training in this aspect (for minimizing production cost and maximizing profit) led to low awareness of the risks, inadequate or no preventative measures and frequent industrial accidents, resulting in injuries, disabilities and even deaths. These, together with occupational diseases suffered by migrant workers have seriously threatened their rights to health, livelihoods and, in some cases, life, and therefore are among the gravest health hazards and risks.<sup>11</sup>

According to official statistics, nationwide fatalities and disabilities caused by industrial accidents of all sorts reached around 140,000 and 700,000 per year, respectively, and migrant workers represent the majority of the victims (as shown below). This is partly due to their concentration in the officially classified highly dangerous enterprises (*gao wei qiye*), including, among others, mining, construction and manufacturing using hazardous chemical materials (State Council, 2006; Zhao, 2005: 5). During the past two decades and more, rural migrants have replaced urban residents as the main workforce in such industries. More recent studies show that migrant workers represent almost 70 per cent of the workforce in processing and manufacturing industries, 80 per cent in construction (State Council, 2006: 12); and almost 100 per cent in township- and village-run small coal mines (thereafter TVCMs) (Li, 2005: 52). A recent report shows that in the first four months in 2004, there were 586 reported accidents in the construction industry nationwide, causing 605 fatalities, of which around 90 per cent were migrant workers (Zhao, 2005: 5). Fatalities in coal production alone have reached over 6,000 per year on average in the

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<sup>11</sup> In September 2008 alone, three disastrous mining-related accidents happened. The most serious occurred in an iron mine in Shanxi Province on 8 September causing fatalities of at least 265 (Xinhua Net, 2008). On 20 September a fire accident happened at a coal mine in Heilongjiang Province leading to the deaths of 31 miners (Anon., 2009). On 21 September thirty-seven miners died in an explosion at a coal mine in Henan Province (Beijing Youth, 2008).

decade 1996-2005, of which about 3/4 occurred in migrant-concentrated TVCMs (Andrews-Speed, 2007).

While coal mine accidents and the resultant deaths have frequently hit the media headlines in China and beyond, much less attention has been paid to occupational diseases, a significant part of which are related to the mining industry. This health problem, albeit more hidden, is equally crippling. A recent report by the State Coal Mine Safety Supervisory Bureau indicated that occupational diseases have seen continued increase in recent years with pneumoconiosis accounting for 83 per cent, or an accumulated 580,000 of the reported cases in 2002 (Figure 1) (Li, 2005: 52). Among the diagnosed cases, 140,000 had already died by 2002, and nearly half, or 250,000 were estimated to be suffering from coal mine pneumoconiosis. Moreover, diagnosis and deaths have displayed a trend of decreasing age, i.e. among younger age cohorts, in recent years. For example, those under the age of forty who were diagnosed as contracting pneumoconiosis at work represented 8.1 per cent of the total diagnosed in 1997, while by 2002 the figure rose to 11.2 per cent. Patients' average length of work as miners was shortened from fifteen years before showing symptoms to three-five years (Li, 2005: 52), suggesting migrant miners' intensified exposure to occupational health hazards, paucity of information on risks and employers' (public but mostly private mine owners) serious neglect of health, safety, and preventative and protection measures. All this points to aggravated problems of systematically regulating and supervising the mining industry in terms of health and safety, as well as enforcing regulations and laws. The consequence is livelihood unsustainability and increased vulnerability to poverty and destitution for migrant miners and their families. It should be noted that the above statistics collected by the Ministry of Health are based only on the reported cases by large state-owned coal mines, which often employ migrants as short contract or temporary workers. Therefore, the situation can be far worse if those working in local and TVCMs are tested, reported and included. Based on this, it is feared that occupational illness among migrant miners may emerge as a serious epidemic in many rural areas (Li, 2005; see also Figure 1), disabling people in their prime age, crippling livelihoods and exacerbating poverty for hundreds and thousands of individuals and families. The serious threat posed by occupational diseases to migrants' health and livelihoods is shown in the following case:

Forty-two young farmers from Shanyang County, Shaanxi Province went to work in Chen'er Gold Mine in Luonan County on a seasonal basis starting from the early 1990s. Since then many became very ill showing shared symptoms of difficulty breathing and some died of suffocation. In 2000 advised by a fellow villager, the ex-migrant miners went to Xi'an, the provincial capital, to take a test. It turned out that they caught pneumoconiosis while working in the gold mine... By 2005, thirteen of the ex-miners had died because the employer refused to pay any compensation and the miners couldn't afford proper treatment, and a few committed suicide after years of suffering and futile attempts in getting their case redressed and receiving compensation from the gold mine owners. Among those already dead, the oldest is thirty-nine and the youngest only in their late 20s... They died or lost the ability to work in their prime age leaving behind their wives, elderly parents and young

children... As a result, their surviving families are in destitution...  
(Interview with the deputy director of the non-profit organization in  
Beijing, September 2005).<sup>12</sup>

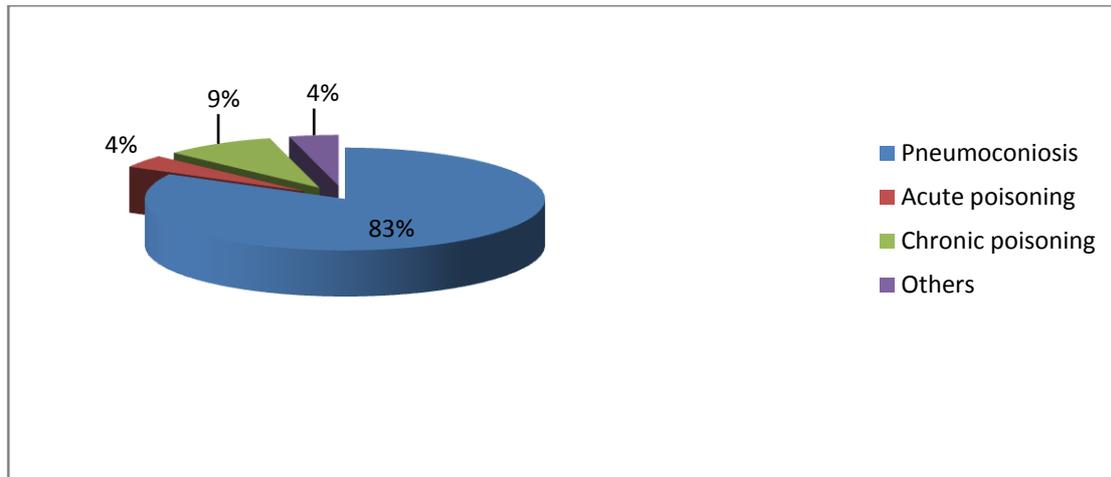


Figure 1: Proportions of Major Occupational Diseases in China, 2002  
(Source: Su, 2005: 15).

Occupational health concerns were expressed by migrant workers in my interviews, in particular for those who work in certain industries, such as construction and internal renovation. This is evidenced in the following account of a woman interviewee working in domestic service in Beijing, whose husband was an internal renovator (zhuangxiu gong):

The internal renovation work is harmful to his body (dui shenti buhao). The work environment is heavily polluted. There is lots of dust coming from stone, marble and hard floor materials. The dust is so heavy that you can hardly see things around you, and this harms your lungs and eyes. In winter you can wear a mouth mask and glasses, but it's too hot to wear these in summer and you're fully exposed. Another source of pollution is noise. The noise is so loud that if you talk to him while at work, he could hardly hear you. The third type comes from the poisonous materials used in construction and internal decoration, such as industrial glues and paints, all have a strong unpleasant smell ... We don't know how to reduce the risks, except my husband doesn't intend to be in the trade for too long. Now he feels all right and wants to carry on working in the trade for another few years, and then change to a less harmful job ... (Interview with Wu, female, 28, August 2005).

A migrant construction worker in Beijing described his experiences as follows:

I left my home village in Hebei sixteen years ago ... Before I learnt the skills of masonry and tiling (wa gong), I initially worked as an unskilled labourer (xiao gong) in a state-owned construction company. My job was

<sup>12</sup> The fieldwork interviews were carried out in Chinese, and the quotations cited in this paper are the translations of the original Chinese narratives.

to apply cement on the outside walls of high buildings. It was very strenuous. I was only a teenager, but had to work for more than ten hours every day. It was very dangerous too. We stood on the high scaffold and applied the heavy materials on the external walls. Accidents were quite common, and on average, completion of a construction project would claim one-to-two lives ... (Interview with Gu, male, 33, September 2005).

The high risks and threats to mobile livelihoods can also be glimpsed from the following image (Image 5) taken during my fieldwork, which shows that migrant construction workers had very little protection against work-related accidents and injury.



Image 5: Migrant Construction Workers, Beijing, August 2005.

Institutions, social relations and power have shaped responses to such acute health hazards, threats and risks as well as their outcomes. Individual migrant workers adopted rather simple tactics and strategies, like the internal renovator who covered himself seasonally by a mouth mask to deal with the heavy pollution produced by industrial dust and poisonous chemicals, or the construction worker who shifted jobs through learning a skill in order to reduce the risk associated with non-skilled work in the construction industry. Such tactics, though a manifestation of migrants' agency in terms of self-managing and minimizing exposure to risks, will not be able to systematically address the problem, and hence the protective effects are rather limited. One institutional channel through which migrants and their families could potentially seek justice and appropriate compensation (when suffering from work-related injury-caused ill health, disabilities and poverty, or from serious mental stress – a potential threat to mental health, livelihoods and well-being – caused by other types of institutional deficiencies in terms of migrants' social protection, including for

example the prolonged delay or default of migrants' wages)<sup>13</sup> is through the labour dispute resolution and arbitration (laodong zhongcai) organizations, going to law or through the 'petition' mechanism<sup>14</sup> set up by the government.

#### 4.2. Access to State and Law

When migrants' health is damaged and livelihoods broken (for example in the case of work-related injury or occupational diseases-caused ill health, disabilities and deaths), and their rights violated (for instance in the case of delayed or default on pay), livelihood struggles are sometimes fought on the legal front. Theoretically, there are a number of formal avenues available for migrants to seek protection and justice; in reality however there are daunting obstacles to realizing these.

This study is not a systematic analysis of the existing relevant legislation, the labour dispute resolution system and how these in reality have discriminated against and disadvantaged migrant workers but in favour of employers and sometimes local authorities. Here it suffices to say that currently the procedure of addressing labour disputes, such as seeking insurance payment or compensation for work-related injuries or for delayed or embezzled wages, that migrant workers must go through is extremely complex, time-consuming, financially costly and practically ineffective. This was particularly pointed out in the author's interview with the deputy director of the non-profit organization in Beijing:

According to the Labour Law, in order to receive medical treatment and work-related injury insurance or compensation paid by the employer, a harmed migrant worker must first obtain an official work-related injury classification certificate (gongshang rending). The application for this certificate however must be made by the employer within one month of the injury. If the employer doesn't apply, then the injured worker must apply within one year of the injury or in the case of occupational illness, of the designated hospital's diagnosis, and following this the organization in charge of the injury classification should make a decision within sixty days of receiving the application. In practice, however, if an injury occurs, the work-related safety supervisory department can fine the employer, and the social insurance department will also increase the insurance premium paid by the enterprise. As a result, the employer usually tries every means to conceal the injury and attempts to settle privately (si liao) by paying a little money to the injured migrant worker rather than applying for the

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<sup>13</sup> According to incomplete statistics collected by the All China Federation of Trade Unions, by November 2004 the overdue pay to migrant workers nationwide reached around 100 billion Chinese yuan (RMB). A survey conducted by the Beijing Research Center on Legal Aid for Young People (BRCLAYP) at the end of 2003 showed that among 8,000 migrant workers surveyed, nearly half (48.1 per cent) experienced default on wages, of whom about 1/3 (30.6 per cent) lost between RMB100-1,000, 15.7 per cent lost RMB1,000-5,000, and 1.6 per cent lost more than RMB5,000 (BRCLAYP, 2005). Given the fact that migrants' average monthly wage is between RMB600-1,500, the phenomenon of delayed and default on pay constitutes a serious stressor and threat to migrant mental and material well-being (see also Wong, et al., 2008). While resolving this problem has been continuously emphasized by the central government in, for example, its No. 1 Document issued at the beginning of each year, in recent years it continues to recur (Wu 2006).

<sup>14</sup> xinfang or shangfang means individuals writing petition letters or going in person to the upper level authorities until to the top level, that is, the State Council's Office for Dealing with Complaints from Ordinary Citizens (guowuyuan xinfang bangongshi), to make a complaint and seek justice directly to the government when most other institutional channels have failed.

classification certificate on behalf of him or her... In reality, when migrant workers are injured at work and hospitalized, in many cases, the employer only contributes a little to the medical expenses before driving the injured worker out of the hospital [due to unpaid hospital fees]. In disregard of the seriousness of the injury, they often pay very little money to get rid of the injured migrant worker, and some even deny any labour relations with the injured worker.

Another problem in the whole process is that in order to obtain the injury classification certificate, the injured worker must produce evidence of the existence of industrial relations. However because of the delayed legislation and underdevelopment of the employment contract system, many employers don't sign contracts with migrant workers, and therefore the harmed migrant worker cannot produce such evidence. As a result they're faced with great difficulties in obtaining such a certificate. Without the classification certificate, the labour arbitration committee won't accept the application of the injured migrant for dispute resolution... In order to just obtain the classification certificate, the injured workers or their families must go through prolonged legal and administrative procedures frequently traveling between their home villages and the city. Some cases lasted three-four years while others seven-eight years. In the end, the injured migrants are effectively denied timely medical treatment and appropriate compensation... And many migrants and their families, on top of the injuries or disabilities they sustained, suffer from extreme stress, financial hardships and destitution (interview with the deputy director, September 2005).

Despite the enormous difficulties, some migrant workers did manage to redress the injustice through seeking legal aid, a constituent of the social protection programmes introduced in recent years.<sup>15</sup> Others would resort to law, using their limited resources to hire a lawyer in their negotiations and struggles about livelihood in terms of its protection and sustainability. A migrant interviewee working as a cleaner in a university in Beijing recounted his experience:

My son [who was also a migrant worker in the university's catering centre] was seriously injured at work early this year... I was very worried since he was not yet 18 and if he was disabled because of the injury, he'd lose the ability to work for the rest of his life. I was under such pressure that I haven't fully recovered from the stress yet. We're outsiders here and don't know whom we'd go to for useful information. When we were at home, we had friends and relatives to ask for information and ideas but in Beijing we've got nobody to go to. One day, I happened to pass a legal consultative service, so I entered and asked for advice. The legal advice centres charge fees variedly from RMB50-100 per visit. But the lawyers told me that the catering centre had the responsibility for my son's injury. I've consulted about ten legal firms spending almost RMB1,000 [as oppose to his monthly net wage of RMB550]. My lawyer lodged a lawsuit against the catering centre: they employed two lawyers. In the end, the

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<sup>15</sup> China's Legal Aid Regulation (Falu yuanzhu tiaoli) was promulgated on 17 July 2003 which came into effect on 1 September 2003.

case was settled out of court through court mediation and the catering centre paid us RMB20,000 in compensation (interview with Yan, 48, September 2005).

These examples illustrate that migrant workers are social actors rather than just victims of discrimination and exploitation: they exercised agency through actively seeking to redress the injustice that they experienced. Despite the unfavourable conditions and structural constraints that they face, some migrant workers do manage to obtain useful information through formal or informal channels and actively seek legal protection. In Mr Yan's case, the employer failed to follow the regulations and law emphasized by the central and Beijing municipal governments when the accident occurred in that they did not contribute to the social insurances, including work-related injury and medical insurances that his son was entitled to. During the interview, Mr Yan commented that health for a migrant worker was extremely important because without it one could not make a living and support the family. The conceptual link between migration, health and livelihood was also shown in his fear that his son might lose 'the ability to work' due to the injury. His experience also suggests that migrant workers' entitlements to social security and their rights to health and livelihoods are one of the fiercely contended domains of citizenship entailing aspects of exclusion, inclusion, and control and allocation of economic, social and political resources by diverse actors and interests. Despite the power and resource imbalance, those migrants who are more aware of their rights, more active in seeking relevant information and hence more resourceful like Mr Yan could use the law to protect themselves in different ways. During the interview, Mr Yan pointed to a construction site on campus (see Image 6) saying that nowadays he kept newspapers carrying government documents on protecting migrant workers' rights including timely pay of wages, and often advised the migrants working at the construction site about using the law as a tool to demand timely pay or claim back their overdue wages.



Image 6: Migrant Construction Workers on the Campus of a University in Beijing (September 2005)

## 5. ACCESS TO SOCIAL INSURANCE AND ENTITLEMENT

As mentioned above, 2004 is termed China's social security year when social security as all citizens' social rights was formally incorporated in the Constitution. While new government initiatives aimed at improving and strengthening a wide range of social protection programmes are introduced, and new schemes especially targeting rural migrants are being designed and piloted, in particular since 2006 (cf. Watson, 2009),<sup>16</sup> they are yet to adequately accommodate the interests and needs of rural migrant workers. There are a number of problems with these programmes and schemes in terms of protecting mobile livelihoods. To start with, most schemes are urban-centred: not only have they had limited extension to rural areas, but they exclude migrant workers in urban settings. For example, the unemployment insurance scheme only covers urban workers (*chengzhen zhigong*)<sup>17</sup> despite that most migrant workers have experienced periodic unemployment as I found in fieldwork interviews as well as other researchers.<sup>18</sup> Maternity insurance, which covers a range of benefits, such as paid maternity and paternity leave following child birth (90 days for women, 10 days for men), prenatal health checks, hospital delivery charges, and so on, is confined only to urban hukou holders (c.f. Anon., 2008).<sup>19</sup> The Minimum Living Standards guarantee, an income support scheme for low income families, only targeted the poor with urban hukou until very recently when it was expanded to cover the rural poor as well.<sup>20</sup> In either setting, however, the 'mobile poor' have not been taken into consideration. And minimum wage, despite the more recent implementation and enforcement efforts through promulgation of the Minimum Wage Regulations in 2004 by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, has limited coverage for migrant workers (Du and Pan, 2009).<sup>21</sup> For the few that should have included migrant

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<sup>16</sup> China's central government issued the No. 5 Document titled The State Council's Some Proposals for Resolving the Problems for Migrant Workers (State Council, 2006b) on 27 March 2006 together with the publication of a comprehensive research report on China's migrant workers (State Council 2006a).

<sup>17</sup> The Regulations on Unemployment Insurance (*shiye baoxian tiaoli*) promulgated by the State Council at the beginning of 1999 excludes rural migrant workers from entitlements to unemployment insurance by defining the benefit eligibility as urban workers, i.e. those with urban hukou status (*chengzhen zhigong*) (State Council, 1999). The exclusion is reinforced by other government regulations at the central and local levels. For example, the Methods of Application for and Distribution of Unemployment Benefits (*shiye baoxianjin shenling fafang banfa*) issued by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security at the beginning of 2001 reiterates several conditions of eligibility for unemployment benefits, including city and town workers, evidence of termination of a formal labour contract, and evidence of contributing to the unemployment insurance scheme by both the employer and the employee for at least one year, etc. (MHRSS, 2001). As discussed above, such conditions effectively exclude migrant workers from the scheme.

<sup>18</sup> Yang and Hu (unknown date) based on their survey of 423 rural-urban migrants in Beijing carried out in 2005 find that 40% of the respondents experienced unemployment lasting for more than a month.

<sup>19</sup> None of the migrant female interviewees in my fieldwork was aware of this scheme, not to mention being covered by it.

<sup>20</sup> This scheme was introduced in parts of rural China in 2004 with nationwide extension in 2007 following the publication of the State Council's Circular on Establishing the Rural Minimum Living Standards Guarantee System Nationwide (*guowuyuan guanyu zai quanguo jianli nongcun zuidi shenghuo banzhang zhidu de tongzhi*) in August 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Research by Du and Pan (2009) on China's minimum wage regulations, adjustment and implementation, based on data collected in the 2001 and 2005 China Urban Labour Surveys, shows that while there has been substantial progress in adjusting and implementing a minimum wage across the country since 2004, the coverage of migrant workers as of 2005 was only about one fifth of the surveyed samples on average with the coverage of male workers nearly double that for female workers. This is largely attributed to the design of the minimum wage as predominantly monthly wages rather

workers according to specific government policies and regulations, such as work-related injury insurance, basic medical insurance and basic pension, insurance coverage by employers is highly uneven. My fieldwork revealed that in Beijing and Tianjin, particularly since 2004 the city governments placed emphasis on employers' responsibility to abide by the law and extend such insurance schemes to migrant workers, a practice also evidenced in the city authorities' websites (c.f. Beijing Municipal Government, unknown date; Tianjin Municipal Government, unknown date). My interviews however, showed that only the public sector employers tended to follow the law and regulations by providing migrant workers with relevant information and knowledge of their rights and of the schemes' benefits, and contributing to migrants' social insurances and welfare.<sup>22</sup> In the informal economy dominated by the private sector, in which most migrants find jobs, enforcement was ineffective and coverage patchy at best.

Institutionalized discrimination against rural migrants underpinned by a dual labour market between urban and rural areas, the dividing hukou system, bureaucratic apathy and irresponsibility, and deep-rooted social prejudice, such as stereotyping and scapegoating migrants for exacerbated social problems in urban areas (for instance blaming migrants for the increase in crime and urban unemployment) all serve to further undermine migrant workers' statutory rights and livelihoods. In addition, as a few researchers (c.f. Dong, 2008; Watson, 2009) have pointed out, more powerful, vested interests in the form of, e.g. an increasing alliance between global and domestic capital on the one hand, and political power and the local state on the other, whose revenues have derived, to a considerable measure, from the former's minimised labour cost achieved largely through depriving migrant workers of a decent wage and social welfare rights, are at play. This, combined with a continued dominant policy priority placed by many local authorities on economic growth through attracting more external investments with cheap labour (largely extracted from migrants) as a 'comparative advantage' (c.f. Dong, 2008), has further disadvantaged and disempowered the mobile population.

One example is provided by a private entrepreneur in Tianjin who employed about twenty migrant workers. He said in the interview that following the enactment of the government's Regulation on Work-related Injury Insurance at the beginning of 2004, the city government required all private businesses to pay for the insurance of the employees whether they were local residents or migrants. If an employer was found non-compliant, his or her business license would be revoked. This, combined with an earlier experience of a worker being injured in an accident, made the entrepreneur especially serious about the new rule. He visited one government department after another in an attempt to pay the insurances for the migrant employees, but wherever he went he was told that he had gone to the wrong department. In the end he was 'like

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than hourly rates, disregarding that migrants work much longer hours than local urban workers. It is also recognised that the one fifth of the data would be much of an overestimation of the actual coverage given the fact that China's statistical reporting system frequently excludes employment and wage information in the informal economy where most migrant workers are employed.

<sup>22</sup> This pattern emerged when I analysed the interview data: four of the interviewees who worked in the public sector as temporary employers, such as hospitals and universities, were aware of the major social insurance schemes, particularly medical insurance and pension schemes, and said that these were recently extended to cover them. The rest of the interviewees worked in the informal economy in diverse occupations (see Section 3 above), and most of them were either unaware of the social insurance schemes or had limited coverage.

a ball kicked back and forth (ti piqui) and no department really cared.’ Finally he told an official that he must buy the insurance for the migrant employees, otherwise he would risk losing his business license. To his surprise the official replied, ‘they’re outsiders (waidi ren), who would bother? Nobody will check and you forget it and go home!’

Bureaucratic irresponsibility, institutional apathy and inertia can also impede institutional innovation, targeted design and creative action required for protecting mobile livelihoods to suit the specific situations of the mobile population. The latest official emphasis is placed on urban-rural integration particularly in the field of social security as a necessary step to render obsolete the hukou regime by hollowing out its essential function of dividing urban and rural societies through unequal entitlements, rights and access to welfare provision and resources. This initiative has been piloted since 2007 in Chengdu and Chongqing followed by other large cities, including Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin in their suburban areas (Interview with Professor Peng Huamin, Nankai University, September 2008). Yet the needs of the mobile population have not been systematically targeted in the new initiatives. In my interviews with migrant workers employed in the public sector, such as universities, hospitals, government organizations and SOEs, some expressed the concern that even though they were now entitled to join certain welfare schemes, they were unsure about how they could eventually benefit given that the current schemes were not portable (thus unsuitable to their mode of livelihoods) and there was a lack of trust in the bureaucracy,<sup>23</sup> as echoed in Mr Yan’s concerns below:

Since the beginning of this year I’ve joined a few insurance schemes, including medical, unemployment and pension insurances. Each month RMB43.3 is deducted from my monthly wage of RMB598 and the employer contributes to these too. However, except the medical insurance, for which I’ve been given an insurance booklet (yiliao baoxian ben), I don’t have any documents or proofs for other schemes. I’ve made a query to the accountant, but he told me nobody had been given such a proof and all my contribution was recorded in my personal file kept by the university... The explanation hasn’t assured me though... It’s like going to the bank to withdraw money we must present our account booklets (cunzhe), but we don’t have any evidence or proof (ziju) for the social insurances that we’ve joined. I’m thus not so sure and don’t feel secure. Joining the medical insurance scheme guarantees healthcare for us migrants and I’m quite happy with the new policy. However, this is a good thing in principle and I don’t know whether it really works when we need it. For example, I don’t have an insurance account number or any proof for the pension insurance: without any evidence how could I withdraw a pension when I retire? Also, the home of a migrant worker like myself is not in Beijing, how could I get my pension when I return to the home village after retirement?... In my home village, villagers are reluctant to join the New Rural Cooperative Medical Care System mainly because the scheme is often useless when you really need it. If you fall seriously ill and need help, then you’d find nobody is actually in charge. You go from the lowest to the upper level authorities but nobody takes the

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<sup>23</sup> For a detailed discussion of a wide range of institutional and technical challenges for designing social security schemes accommodating the needs of migrants, see also Watson, 2009.

responsibility to cover your medical expenses... I wish the government could further do something about this. (Interview with Yan, Beijing September 2005).

While the New Rural Cooperative Medical System (*xinxing nongcun hezuo yiliao*) has seen considerable expansion since 2007 with substantial fiscal support from the central and provincial government, the reality that migrants often fall into a coverage gap between urban and rural societies and communities has not been fundamentally changed. This shows that translating access and equity into practice is still often based on a lack of understanding or even indifference to the needs of the mobile population, which in turn reinforces social exclusion and marginalization. The process of recognizing and dealing with migrant workers' needs has too often seen segregated programmes differentiated by the sector where migrants are employed and subject to the vagaries of local political will and budgetary conditions, and to implementation by people either embedded in societal prejudice or lacking awareness, sensitivity and/or a sense of responsibility. In the end, the uneven process of extending the welfare schemes to migrant workers in the city becomes one of making the mobile population fit the system, rather than the other way round.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

This study addresses the problem of migrants' social protection focusing on the linkage between health and livelihoods. As such it intends to contribute to a growing body of research on China's social policy and welfare reforms related to rural migrants, who, for the past thirty-odd years, have made possible China's rapid and sustained economic growth, urbanisation and societal transformations while sharing, disproportionately, few of the fruits and benefits. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Beijing and Tianjin in 2005 with supplementary data collected in 2008-2009, and applying a livelihood framework and a well-being perspective, the paper shows that in spite of the accelerated pace of legislation and consolidated efforts to reform and reconstruct the social safety net and welfare system in China since the early 2000s, the new social security schemes have thus far, by and large, failed to cover migrant workers in a systematic manner. Migrant workers continue to face high risks and threats to their health and livelihoods. Citizenship in the sense of economic and social rights, despite its more recent expansion with the official reinterpretation and through new legislation and amendments to existing laws, is still exclusive – defined, applied and acknowledged differentially along the dividing lines of, among other things, individuals' *hukou* status, and in particular their mode of livelihoods.

Migration, health and livelihood sustainability as related to social protection is a complex and multi-faceted issue, and this research focuses attention on a specific aspect, that is, work-related safety, occupational health and their related problems of access. The emphasis on access in the analysis directs attention to issues of institutions, social relations and power that have mediated, controlled and frequently constrained migrants' access to vital resources, including formal institutions such as the state, law and public goods. The paper demonstrates that migrant workers are social actors, who have exercised agency and attempted to manage and deal with the health risks through developing informal institutions such as social networks and supportive mechanisms, by adopting tactics and strategies that they can conceive of, and by mobilizing the limited resources at their disposal, and that livelihood struggles

are sometimes fought in the battlefield of law when mobile livelihoods are seriously harmed. Despite this, however, such individual efforts are unable systematically to tackle the structural deficiencies which generate and exacerbate vulnerabilities, increase risks, undermine entitlements, deny statutory rights of migrant workers to institutional social protection, and which in many cases lead to broken livelihoods, and aggravated poverty and ill-being.

Arguing that the social welfare of the mobile population is essentially a matter of equity and social justice, and recognition of equal citizenship rights, this paper points to an urgent need to address more effectively the issues identified in the study, in particular the health of migrants. This is a challenging programme requiring multi-sectoral, multi-ministerial collaboration and a well-coordinated holistic approach engaging diverse actors and stakeholders, such as the central and local state, civil society, migrant workers, and urban, rural and migrant communities. The fact that the majority of migrant workers are gaining their livelihoods in the informal sector together with their relatively high physical mobility also poses special challenges in respect of the design, implementation, enforcement and management of social security schemes and funds for the mobile population. While new experiments and initiatives have been introduced in coastal cities and different regions of the country, in particular since 2006, as discussed for example by Andrew Watson (2009) on the old age pension scheme for migrant workers, the effects of these and the extent of institutional innovation in terms of the migrants' social protection are, however, still too early to assess. The issues raised in this paper therefore call for more empirical, and particularly qualitative in-depth research as well as greater policy attention and more forceful institutional responses to the challenges.

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