The bitter generation

In China's cities, young people with rural ties are angry

They are one of the biggest threats to the country's social stability

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WANG FENG is a 28-year-old cook in Beijing. But he was not born in the capital so, under China's household-registration (*hukou*) rules, he is not treated as an official resident, even though he and his wife work there and have a four-year-old daughter. One freezing night last November, he returned home to discover that the city government had declared many of their area's tenement blocks unfit for residential use and had given the inhabitants 24 hours to get out.

The event quickly became notorious. The overnight eviction of Beijing's "low-end population" (a term used in official planning documents issued by some of the

city's districts) attracted worldwide condemnation. Queues of young families snaked away from the condemned blocks, heading back to the towns and villages where they were born. But Mr Wang (a pseudonym) and his wife balked at returning without jobs to a village where they had neither the experience nor the desire to farm. Instead they headed to another part of Beijing to start over again. He says his monthly rent is now far higher: "I can't save anything. But at least I have a job and will stay as long as I can." If he leaves, he says, it will be because he wants to, not because the government has told him to go.

Mr Wang belongs to a new generation of people from the countryside who have moved to work in cities. Over the past 40 years, hundreds of millions have done this, providing the blood, sweat and tears of China's economic miracle. The Communist Party has often congratulated itself that such a vast movement of people has happened without mass unrest. But those such as Mr Wang who have left rural areas more recently challenge the party's sense of security. They face a wider range of problems than earlier participants in the rural exodus. They are dissatisfied with their lot and have little to lose. They may prove less quiescent than their predecessors.

When observers of China think of threats to the party, they often focus on the rapid growth of the country's new middle class. At some point, surely, China's wealthier millions will demand a more open, accountable and even democratic government, just as middle classes in other countries have done. But many Chinese analysts worry less about the kind of instability that occurred during the student-led protests of 1989. Rather, they fret about turmoil created by members of a social underclass: poor workers in the cities whose family ties are rural.

After 1978, when Deng Xiaoping started to open up the economy, huge numbers of farmers began flocking to fill new labour-intensive jobs, first in towns and later in cities. Their cumulative numbers reached 280m in 2017 (the rate of growth is now tailing off). In 2010 party documents began referring to a "new generation of

migrants": those born since 1980. Some are offspring of earlier migrants and have lived in cities all their lives. Others have left the countryside in the past decade. This group has more than 90m members.

The two generations are very different. Many of the early migrants were born at a time of mass starvation and were raised during the chaos of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). Their determination to make good in the cities was intensified by childhood memories of poverty and suffering. And if they did not succeed, at least they still had land in the countryside and experience of farming so they could return to scratch a living in the fields.

Aiming high

Members of the younger generation are children of Deng's reforms. They have never worked the land. A study published in 2009 in the Beijing-based *Economic Research Journal* said the younger migrants wanted "personal development", unlike their parents who were focused on more basic needs. The new generation, it concluded rather snobbishly, "is no longer willing to stay in the dirtiest jobs, is not frugal enough to save money to send home and not able to earn enough to build a married life." Its members are less stoical and unwilling to suffer in silence.

Young migrants share four characteristics that worry the party. Like their parents, they are not well educated. The men face more of a "marriage squeeze" than their fathers did, ie, a shortage of women of marriageable age from similar backgrounds. They similarly earn low wages and face official discrimination as a result of the *hukou* system that shuts many of them out of subsidised urban services such as education and health care. But they are more dissatisfied and pessimistic than their parents were. Their hopes of carving out a future in big cities are being wrecked by high living costs, demographic change and the hostility of local governments.

In September 2017 a study in another Chinese journal, *Sociological Studies*, by Tian Feng of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), took a detailed look at the new migrants. To flesh it out, *The Economist* conducted its own (admittedly unscientific) poll of 90 migrants between the ages of 18 and 33 in six areas of Beijing and Guangzhou, a large southern city. Combined with earlier studies, these surveys build up a detailed portrait of a slice of Chinese society roiled by change.

Mr Tian's study is based on five surveys of social conditions, conducted by CASS between 2006 and 2015. It shows that migrants born in the 1960s and 1970s had ten or fewer years of formal education, but those born after 1980 had 12 or more years. While the quantity of education received by the new generation is higher, the quality is not. The *hukou* system makes it difficult for many migrants in the biggest cities to secure places for their children in state-run schools, so they send them to

ramshackle private ones that are often forced to close. A study from 2010 found that only 17% of migrants with children in such schools in Beijing thought their offspring were getting a good education. Matters have not improved. A cleaner in Beijing who sends her son to a private kindergarten told *The Economist* that "the quality of education is nothing like as good as in state schools."

Not much to smile about

Many members of the new generation were educated in villages, separate from their migrant parents who worked in the cities. A study by the Second Military Medical University of Shanghai found that such children did worse than average academically and were more likely to be depressed. Despite such problems, many parents feel they have no choice but to leave their children in the care of relatives in the countryside. "I haven't thought about bringing my kid here," says a cook in Beijing, "because I can't afford to."

The younger generation are products of China's one-child policy, which went into force nationwide in 1980 (although in the countryside, families were sometimes allowed two). They are among the first to suffer its unintended consequences. The one-child policy contributed to a drastic change in the sex ratio because female fetuses were aborted by parents who wanted their only child to be a boy. The ratio of boys to girls at birth soared in the 1980s, peaking in 2005, when there were 122 baby boys for every 100 baby girls, one of the most distorted ratios ever seen.

The average age of first marriage in China is 26. The first of the new-generation migrants are reaching that age. Already, the marriage chances of migrant men are falling. Wang Chunguang, another scholar at CASS, found that three-quarters of the new-generation migrants he studied were unmarried. The group he looked at

included some 18- to 25-year-olds, who may have been single because they were too young (in China, women must be at least 20 to get married and men at least 22). But that does not fully explain the low overall rate. In *The Economist*'s sample, two-thirds of migrants were unmarried. Only two said they had any wedding plans. A 25-year-old manager of a food company in Beijing admitted, "I would need to have a much better-paid job or promotion before thinking about getting a girlfriend."

The marriage squeeze is about to tighten. By 2020, the government says, there will be 30m more men of marriageable age than women: six brides for seven brothers, in effect. Young migrant men will suffer all the more because of a preference among Chinese women for marrying men with more money or education (a practice known as hypergamy). According to Yue Qian of Ohio State University, 55% of college-educated Chinese men marry someone with less education, whereas only 32% of university-educated women do the same. Hypergamy happens at every level of society. As a result, two groups find it hard to get spouses: women with a lot of education (known derisively as *sheng nu*, or left-behind women), and men with only a little schooling. Young male migrants usually belong in the second category.

No wheels, no deal

Among Chinese men generally, a common response to the shortage of women is for prospective grooms to buy an apartment and car before marriage—a sort of reverse dowry. One survey found that three-quarters of young women in big cities took this into account before accepting a man's offer. Alas for migrant swains, they cannot afford such a bride price, especially in expensive cities such as Beijing and Guangzhou. It is usually difficult for people without a city's *hukou* to buy government-subsidised housing there. Young migrants are therefore at a threefold disadvantage. There are fewer women of marriageable age. Those who come from their own background tend to marry richer rivals. And the men cannot compete in the marriage market by buying property.

Another problem is income. Rural people migrate to cities for money, and usually get far more of it than they would if they had not moved. Migrants' wages rose from around 1,700 yuan ($205) a month in 2000 to over 3,000 yuan in 2016. But the rate of increase fell from almost 17% a year at the start of 2012 to about 7% at the beginning of this year. Since 2015, their incomes have been rising more slowly than those of urban residents generally (see chart).

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The earnings of the youngest ones have deteriorated the most. Mr Tian looked at earnings by age. He found that the highest earners are those in their mid-30s (between 32 and 36). That remained constant in all his surveys. But there was a significant change among workers in their mid-20s (22 to 26). In 2008 these younger migrants were earning almost as much as the best-paid. By 2015, they were earning much less.

This may be connected with changes in the nature of migrants' work, caused by an economic transformation that is making China's growth more reliant on services and less on manufacturing. The earlier migrants typically found jobs in construction or on production lines. According to Mr Tian, 60% of migrants in 2008 worked in such "secondary industry" sectors. That share fell to 52% by 2015. Meanwhile, demand for migrants' labour in the "tertiary sector", ie, in services, has taken off. For the less well-educated this often involves insecure work in areas such as food delivery and cleaning.

The best-laid plans of migrants...

One result of this shift into shorter-term or part-time work has been a fall in savings. In the past almost all migrants used to save a third or more of their income to send back to their villages. But in *The Economist*'s sample a third of respondents saved nothing. Most younger migrants "will not make the sacrifices of frugality in order to save money", harrumphs CASS's Mr Wang. "It is a far cry from their parents' generation."

The upshot is that the new generation appears to be one of the most dissatisfied segments of Chinese society. Because the country has no reliable opinion polls, this judgment must be tentative. But a proxy measure, the way people view their own achievements, suggests it is accurate.

Mr Tian's survey includes a question about where respondents place themselves in society on a scale from top to bottom. Between 2006 and 2015 the migrants he questioned gave, on average, ever lower assessments of their social position. Initially, the younger ones (aged between 22 and 26) were the most likely to describe themselves as being in the top half of society. By 2015 they were more inclined than older migrants to put themselves in the bottom half. Mr Tian concludes that those born in the 1990s are the most disappointed of the migrants he has studied.

The Economist's survey bears him out. Most migrants want to stay in the big city but few feel welcome there. "There is no sense of belonging," complains a 24-year-old coffee-shop waiter in Beijing. "For the moment I will stay," says a 28-year-old hairstylist who also lives in the capital, "but there's no sense of happiness."

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In some ways, little has changed. Most of the early migrants, concluded the *Journal of Economic Research* nine years ago "knew they were just passers-by in cities. They came from rural areas and were fated to return there." But the new generation feels alienated from the countryside even as high living costs, the *hukou* system and social discrimination in the cities "crush their urban dreams" as well. "They are truly marginalised people," it said.

How serious a threat to social stability are they? They seem unlikely to challenge the party itself (a surprising one in eight of those surveyed by *The Economist* said they were members of it). It is true that some of those evicted last winter in Beijing protested loudly. One group (pictured) chanted about human rights outside a local-government building. By and large, though, these are exceptions. Most migrants are not politically active. Few of those who spoke to *The Economist* were willing to talk

about politics. Those who did mostly said they supported the president, Xi Jinping, because of his anti-corruption campaign.

Low-end people" object to being evicted

The party, however, cannot take their passivity for granted. Throughout Chinese history, opposition has seemed muted right up to the point when it has exploded. Yu Jianrong of CASS wrote in 2014 that the social exclusion felt by new-generation migrants could forge a sense of common political cause among them that could even lead to revolution. Mr Yu called this a "colossal hidden threat to China's future social stability". There is little sign of that yet, but there are several reasons for thinking migrants might become more restless.

As the marriage squeeze tightens, it will produce a generation of unmarried migrant men with low incomes, poor education and no tie to the social order that marriage provides in China. It is a recipe for discontent. Mr Tian worries about a vicious cycle developing, with poor education leading to low income that results in anti-social attitudes and disruption to children's schooling.

Migrants form a huge group, roughly as numerous as the middle class. But compared with the middle class, they have little to lose and less to keep them loyal to the party. They revel in subcultures that the party dislikes. Chinese rap music has its roots among young migrants, who were also the main users of Neihan Duanzi, a popular app specialising in bawdy jokes that state censors closed down in April. There are signs that some young migrants are starting to organise themselves. Strikes over pay and conditions have become more common. In April a court in Tongzhou, a district of Beijing (next to the area where the forced evictions took place), said 32% of the labour disputes referred to it involved collective agreements,

almost double the proportion in 2016. This suggested there was a link between the number of disputes and the expulsion of migrants.

The biggest uncertainty is what will happen if the economy falters. The party does not seem ready for this. The social-safety net is threadbare. The *hukou* regime means migrants cannot get full access to it anyway. Modernisers want to reform the system and allow migrants to live more securely in cities. But change has been slow and patchy. (In Guangzhou only two of the 40 respondents to *The Economist*'s survey had a local *hukou*.) The government is trying to cap the size of giant cities by pushing migrants out. Charles Parton of the Royal United Services Institute, a think-tank in London, says young migrants will not overthrow the party, but if the economy stagnates "they will cause a lot more trouble than they do now."

The new generation is entering a difficult period. Its men will remain unmarried and its children will often be educated away from home. Many will be on low, insecure wages. If the evictions in Beijing are any guide, the party's reaction to any discontent is likely to be greater repression. That would make solving migrants' deep-seated problems harder, and an explosion of rage more likely.

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