

China's harsh capitalism is forcing millions overseas

The Philadelphia Inquirer

March 4, 2007 Sunday

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The Philadelphia Inquirer

Found on Philly.com

Section: CURRENTS; Pg. D07

Length: 962 words

Body

Peter Kwong

is a professor of Asian American studies at Hunter College

On a recent trip to Shanghai I often heard the comment, "Wherever there are people, you'll find some Chinese." It was usually uttered with pride by people from all walks of life, as though delivering a testament to a rare resourcefulness, unmatched by others.

Indeed, population figures around the world indicate that there is something to that claim. Not only do Chinese number in the hundreds of thousands in Australia, France and the United Kingdom; one also finds great numbers in places like Argentina, South Africa, Mauritius, Israel and Dubai, not usually associated with the notion of Chinese migration. New Chinatowns have sprouted in Milan, Panama City, Johannesburg and even Belgrade.

It may or may not come as a surprise that more than three million Chinese live in the United States and some 1.3 million in Canada today - but more than half a million in Oceania? Almost 700,000 in Russia? Surprise grows as one looks at the demographic statistics provided by the 150 countries reporting alarming increases in Chinese immigration, which has doubled, and then doubled again during the last two decades. The Chinese are now the largest single immigrant group in the world: more than 62 million, by the latest estimates.

As an American expert on Chinese immigration, I am constantly asked, "Why do the Chinese keep coming to the United States when China is doing so well?" Conventional wisdom would suggest they are looking for better opportunities, freedom and education - just like everybody else.

The driving force behind this unprecedented emigration, however, is a monumental demographic shift in China's 1.4 billion population, induced by the rapid economic expansion. Ever since the economic reforms of the late 1970s, Chinese cities have been attracting rural people looking for jobs. And as able-bodied workers continue to leave the countryside, partly because of the precipitous drop in prices of agricultural products worldwide, the Chinese rural economy teeters on the verge of collapse, only further accelerating the pace of rural-to-urban migration. Even with the double-digit growth, the domestic economy is not creating enough jobs.

The influx of peasants has created a plethora of urban problems: overcrowded housing, depressed wages, traffic congestions, and general social disorder. To survive, people have to struggle day in and day out: fight to get on buses, wait in line to purchase affordable goods, argue with clerks to get attention, and bribe officials to get opportunities. The Chinese economic miracle has created a mean human condition in which the nasty thrive while

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law-abiding citizens face the mortal danger of being run over by surly drivers every time they attempt to cross the street.

For those who harbor even modest ambitions, leaving China is an attractive option - even if it means getting into another country illegally. The stress and strain of making the move pales in comparison to soldering on in **China's** primitive **capitalism**. The move generally means a tenfold increase in income, living in a more civilized environment, and with better amenities (such as good education for the children), by doing almost exactly the same thing as in China - be it doctors in British hospitals, computer scientists in Silicon Valley, producers of low-end Italian label garments in Milan for sale in Eastern Europe, or street peddlers in Madrid.

Not surprisingly, the increased presence of Chinese around the world has created anti-Chinese backlash in the receiving countries. Typically, the Chinese are accused of undermining domestic labor standards and cultural values. Their single-minded pursuit of their own wellbeing, with disregard for local history and legal regulations, has fed into this image and contributed to their problems. Spanish leather-workers, angry at cheap competition, have set fire to several Chinese shoe warehouses. Poor residents of Buenos Aires have looted a Chinese-owned supermarket. Chinese businesses in the capital of the Solomon Islands went up in flames. Russia is introducing immigration restrictions in the hope of curbing a rising tide of migration from China.

The last anti-Chinese hysteria swept through the world during the upsurge in Chinese immigration to the New World in the 19th century. Recruited by greedy employers to work as cheap laborers, the Chinese faced resentment from earlier settlers and suffered racial attacks. The U.S. Congress enacted unprecedented race-based immigration restrictions to stem "the threat of the yellow peril." The movie industry jumped in to perpetuate negative stereotypes, such as the evil Dr. Fu Manchu, contributing to more than a century of mistreatment. Today's simmering conflicts in many more parts of the world, mixed in with the widespread resentment against Chinese imports, and the lingering Cold War-era fear of China, could easily ignite even worse reactions.

The Chinese government remains indifferent to this ominous prospect. It has no incentive to tamper with the exodus of its citizens, which is helping it solve domestic unemployment. It also benefits from the remittances the émigrés send home - some \$20 billion dollars a year. What particularly frustrates me, as a Chinese American and an immigration expert, is that politicians in host countries, mine included, seem more interested in exploiting anti-immigrant sentiments to generate populist support at home than in multilateral discussions aimed at coming to terms with this critical issue.

Peter Kwong (pkwong@hunter.cuny.edu) is the author of "Forbidden Workers: Illegal Chinese Immigrants and American Labor" and co-author with Dusanka Miscevic of "Chinese America: The Untold Story of America's Oldest New Community."

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: IMMIGRATION (90%); ASIAN AMERICANS (89%); DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS (89%); POPULATION ESTIMATES & PROJECTIONS (89%); POPULATION & DEMOGRAPHICS (89%); RURAL COMMUNITIES (87%); ECONOMIC CONDITIONS (87%); EMERGING MARKETS (78%); POPULATION SIZE (77%); CITIES (74%); CITY LIFE (74%); EMIGRATION (74%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (73%); ETHNIC & CULTURAL STUDIES (73%); FARM LABOR (70%); JOB CREATION (67%); URBANIZATION (67%); ECONOMIC GROWTH (67%); EMPLOYMENT SEARCH (62%); ECONOMIC POLICY (62%); PRICES (62%); AGRICULTURAL PRICES (50%)

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Industry: COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (73%); FARM LABOR (70%); AGRICULTURE (50%); AGRICULTURAL PRICES (50%)

Geographic: SHANGHAI, CHINA (79%); JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA (79%); EAST CHINA (79%); CHINA (94%); UNITED STATES (94%); AUSTRALIA (79%); MAURITIUS (79%); SOUTH AFRICA (79%); CANADA (79%); ARGENTINA (79%); UNITED KINGDOM (79%); FRANCE (77%); OCEANIA (77%); RUSSIAN FEDERATION (70%)

Load-Date: March 4, 2007

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