

SOCIETY

Inkstone index: China's migrant workers

*Photo: Reuters*by **Grace Tsoi**

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In the [Inkstone index](#), we break down China into the simplest possible chunk: a single number. What can one number tell us about China? Quite a lot.

287 million: The number of rural migrant workers in China in 2017, according to the National Bureau of Statistics.

That's more than a third of China's labor force.

"Rural migrant worker" is the term used to refer to those who live and work in China's cities, but are not registered under the nation's official registration system as urban dwellers.

As China embarked on [economic reforms in 1978](#), the restrictions on population flow were relaxed. Migrant workers provided the cheap labor needed to propel the nation's economic growth, contributing to at least 20% of China's GDP between 1990 and 2010.

But for all that, they are often seen as second-class citizens. Many are [poorly paid](#) and denied social welfare support such as pensions and medical insurance. They work [the dirty, dangerous jobs](#) no one else wants to.

Chinese state media even refers to them as the "low-end" population.



China has millions of 'left-behind children.' Photo: AFP/Johannes Eisele

Kids left behind

Migrant workers have helped power China's economic development, but it's come at a significant social cost: the country's [left-behind children](#).

There are almost 70 million children living away from at least one parent, often left in the care of grandparents or relatives in the countryside.

Lacking parental guidance and supervision, many left-behind children are poorly educated and, one study has found, [more vulnerable to mental health problems](#).

Some migrant workers choose to bring their children to the cities, but there they are faced with a new set of problems.

"Public schools are in theory available to all migrant children but in order to secure a place for their child, parents routinely have to negotiate a maze of obstacles erected by local education departments, especially in big cities that jealously guard their education resources," wrote the China Labor Bulletin, adding that local authorities might demand a long list of documents from parents.

Instead, many of these children can only attend private migrant schools, which are often unlicensed and unsafe.

Sending children to migrant schools is getting increasingly difficult too, as authorities have shut down many of these establishments.



In late 2017 Beijing authorities evicted tens of thousands of migrant workers from low-quality housing in the capital. Photo: Reuters/Jason Lee

Not part of the dream

“The Chinese government doesn’t really want to shoulder the responsibility of taking care of migrant workers,” Jenny Chan, who researches China’s migrant workers at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, told Inkstone.

She said that authorities have been promoting the idea of the [Chinese dream](#), a nationwide rise to prosperity. But this dream excludes migrant workers from the grand scheme.

In winter 2017, Beijing started a 40-day campaign to [demolish unauthorized housing](#) and evict tens of thousands of migrant workers after a fire in a migrant workers’ village killed 19.

The crackdown on the “low-end” population is likely to continue. China’s top cities have set up targets to limit population growth. Beijing wants to keep the population below 23 million by 2020, while Shanghai is seeking a cap of 25 million by 2035.



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