

# Floating Youth:

## China's Migrant Workers and Their Daily Life in Kunshan



**Figure 1.** Two young workers who were unable to rent a house could only sleep on grass with cardboards in Zhonghuayuan (Photo by Hao Xu)

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It was a Sunday morning in March in the Zhonghuayuan residential quarter, where migrant workers were the majority as we walked in.

A hunchbacked landlady guided us up to the sixth floor of a decades-old building. “*Most migrant workers don’t stay long, some of which even just live for a weekend*” said the landlady. As we stood in the doorway, we saw six dwelling compartments crammed in the space equivalent to

two normal apartments. Light bulbs and wires were exposed in the air. The strong odor emitting from the only public bathroom penetrated the whole space.

Doing her management job as always, the landlady knocked on doors and shouted at tenants. Behind a rusty door, *“Come on! What’s going on there?”* the man muttered with a shivery voice, *“I haven’t got up yet! I told you I’d find a job tomorrow!”* The landlady didn’t show any empathy, yelling at the man, *“You’re supposed to move out immediately!”* She opened the door directly, trying to make it clear that the man could no longer stay in the space. At the sight of the tiny room, we saw an L-shaped space filled by a single bed. The man owned nearly nothing. Even the pillow belonged to the landlady. The window was not larger than a piece of A4 paper. The iron bars outside the window hindered ventilation, making the room damp and musty.

At the only corner where the floor was visible, we saw a huge but poor-quality red and blue striped plastic bag loaded with all his last belongings—it seemed he had already anticipated an unknown journey after leaving the shelter, where he could temporarily hide from sizzling sun and stormy rain.



Figure 2. Sale of cheap bedrolls for new young workers in Zhonghuayuan (Photo by Tianwei Lin)

### **Migrant workers and their communities in Kunshan**

What we experienced in the landlady’s property may not be strange to migrant workers within China. In China, migrant workers especially refer to young labor leaving hometowns and wishing to find favorable jobs in cities. Kunshan, where the story took place, is a manufactural hub in the promising Yangtze River Delta and one of the destinations for workers from rural areas of China. From our survey, most laborers in Kunshan come from nearby relatively poor towns. Most of them are recruited as workers at assembly lines in factories in Kunshan’s industrial zones.

Kunshan's Industrial Zone, situated between two large metropolises in the Yangtze River Delta, was established by the government in 1985 to drive local economic growth. The accessibility to considerable low-cost labor, excellent geographical location, loose production regulations, and huge Chinese market attracted a huge amount of overseas investment, much of which is from Taiwanese-invested enterprises. Industries in Kunshan are mostly labor-intensive electronics manufacturing and assembly, which require a large amount of working population. As considerable workers and their families settle down in Kunshan, there we see a giant agglomeration of migrant workers across the city.

Manifold reasons drive migrant works to the industrial city. Based on our survey, some consider believe Kunshan is a hub for manufacturing job opportunities, some are satisfied with the price level in Kunshan, and some even think it is just a "getaway" where they can earn a living and stay from their families and hometowns. Additionally, these communities are not where they live after work but "hubs" for job- and labor-seeking parties. In worker communities of Kunshan, labor resources institutions are established not only for migrant workers to find jobs but for manufacturing employers to recruit labor. However, the "golden age" of the Kunshan industrial zone has become history. Constant factory closures in Kunshan has driven outflows of labor to elsewhere in China. *"Workers normally go to some inland emergent industrial cities to seek jobs,"* said a job agent we interviewed, *"and most human resource agencies also follow the trend and relocate to new job center."*

*"This job does not need an ID card, and you can get your job right away today,"* said another human resources agent who introduced latest local job opportunities to us. When we asked about job insurance, with her head shaking, she said, *"Laborers are qualified to have insurance only if they have job contracts of more than two months from an employer, which means only long-term contracted workers are able to be insured."* Obviously, most workers living in Zhonghuayuan, especially those working for high-risk manufacturers, still lack some crucial labor rights.

The story in the beginning was the scene we saw in Zhonghuayuan, where migrant workers account for most population. From our survey, the rent level of migrant worker communities is usually low, but such communities are equipped with fundamental infrastructure and facilities which can meet their daily demand for commodities and services. Moreover, short distance between where they live and work largely reduces their commuting costs. Hence, despite poor cleanliness and small space area are not favorable by the contemporary standard those communities are the only optimal choices for migrant workers.

## A migrant worker profiled

Xu Wenhao, aged 26, emigrated from Anhui, lives in Zhonghuayuan now. He came to the Yangtze River Delta only a month ago to seek better jobs. He found a job at assembly lines with the help from a job agency and settled down in the city. His storytelling shows that the working environment in Kunshan's industrial zones is unpleasant, particularly to workers at assembly lines. Jobs in Kunshan's industrial zones are labor-intensive—manufacturing work is stressful and repetitive, and the wages are sometimes lower than job descriptions. The labor condition in the industrial zones is thought to be detrimental to the mental health of workers.

Apart from the working environment, the living condition is also unsatisfied to him. He lives alone without the company of any friends. He is still not accustomed to the local dietary culture yet. His accommodation is a 15 square meter compartment without a private bathroom. The only entertainment he has, in his trivial free time, is video games on his phone. Albeit the poor living condition, he always encourages himself, *"I came for earnings. I can't just hide from challenges."*

In his talk, he also added that environmental protection, manifested in national industrial policies, had become a requirement for manufacturing. Running cost of factories rises—profits that should be redistributed to labor would be more intangible. Therefore, Kunshan's industrial zones could face oscillation along future trajectories. Due to increasing operational costs, there might be fewer factories and less demand for labor. Such a change could lead to a subsequent crisis of large-scale unemployment.

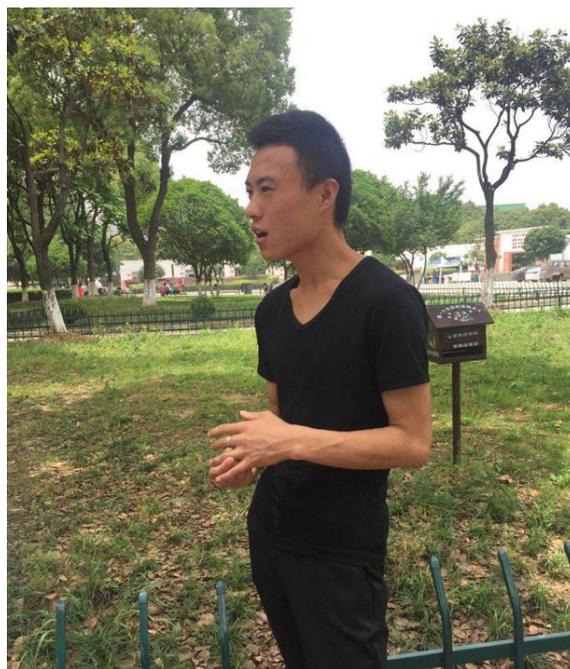


Figure 3. Interview with Wenhao Xu, 2019 March 31 (Photo by Hao Yang)

## **Dreaming about a better future in the floating life**

Communities for migrant workers are not considered as permanent domiciles. When it comes to their planning for future careers and lives, most migrant workers still bear dreams in mind that they can get better living conditions, run their own businesses, or ultimately reach an ideal lifestyle in the end.

Lin Yuhao, aged 28, a worker at an assembly line doing daily monotonous routine work, plans to start her own barbershop business with her hairdo skills acquired in her apprentice days. She thinks the work at an assembly line is time-consuming and challenging, but the salaries she can earn do not reflect the difficulties she faces every day and are insufficient to sustain her daily expenditure. Running a barbershop, to Lin, would be a dream job that has more time flexibility and could ensure her a better living quality.

As industrial development changes in China, laborers may be faced with uncertainties and difficulties they should adapt themselves to. There are multiple reasons why they come along in a destination of migrant workers, but their “dream” to strive for better living is consistent across their minds regardless of foreseeable adversities.

The industrial city offers 2 and more times higher wages than in their hometown, while labor-intensive and low-skilled jobs limit the competitiveness of workers. Workers doing repetitive work such as assembling laptops can be replaced with any newcomers, as long as they are no longer “valuable” to employers. What’s more, living costs would account for a relatively large proportion of their salaries, and it hinders them from achieving goals. To save every penny, the migrant workers’ only choice would probably be live in unsatisfactory conditions. Some would rent cheaper rooms in old and dirty buildings like those in Zhonghuayuan.

Kuo Chiahsin, aged 27, has lived there for 3 years. We asked her about the difficulties she had in Kunshan. she told us that financial difficulties would be the greatest challenge to her since she wished to open a small restaurant in Kunshan in her career plan. Although Kuo earns 5,000 Yuan monthly, she usually sends an average of 2,000 Yuan back home every month for her family to raise her 4-year-old daughter hundreds of kilometers away in Anhui Province. The rest of her monthly income mostly goes to house rent, meals, and other living expenses, which means that there is limited money for further investment. Therefore, hardly can she save up for initializing a restaurant business. She sighed deeply as she told us her struggle between ends.

## **The way forward**

In China, there are about 240 million people living in similar or even worse conditions. The prospect of industrial development will never be optimistic at all times, and workers are powerless and usually have no choice but to adapt to industrial transition at different scales. We can imagine Kunshan's industrial zones are just miniatures of the gigantic phenomenon of worker migration in search of better living and achieving personal dreams within China.

On the bright side, over the past few years, the government has gradually improved working conditions of migrant workers in specific aspects. For example, the government forced illegal human resources agencies out of the labor market, and regulated that the industry should be governmentally licensed. A local grocery shopkeeper shared the good piece of news with us. *“All illegal job agencies near Zhonghuayuan have vanished or at least moved elsewhere in April last year,”* she said, *“and such a change sounds great to workers because illegal job will no longer take half of their salaries, and workers are no longer subject to unlawful and instable short-contract jobs.”*

When will the floating life end? This is unanswerable to most migrant workers. All they can do is keep floating, count on their youth, and believe tomorrow will be a better day.