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## China's Migrants See Jobless Ranks Soar

By IAN JOHNSON and ANDREW BATSON

**SHUANGYAO, China** -- The global slowdown is taking a toll on China, claiming the jobs of an estimated 20 million migrant workers and dimming their prospects as they set out in search of work after the New Year holiday.

The year ahead appears no more promising: Officials forecast the number of migrants looking for jobs will reach at least 25 million.

Chen Xiwen, who heads the Chinese Communist Party's office on rural policy, said Monday that about 20 million migrant workers -- nearly a sixth of the total -- lost their jobs in recent months. That number, the first official estimate, underscores the government's challenge in maintaining employment and avoiding unrest.

"For those migrant workers who have lost their jobs, what are they going to do for income when they return to their village? How are they going to manage? This is a new factor affecting social stability this year," Mr. Chen said at a news conference in Beijing.

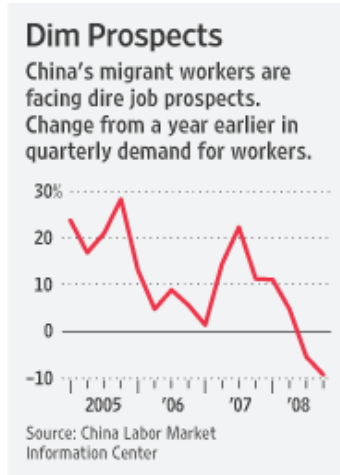
The government estimates the total population of rural migrants -- those working outside their home village -- at approximately 130 million people.

China doesn't conduct regular surveys to gauge nationwide unemployment; Mr. Chen's estimate of 20 million job losses covered only migrant workers. He said his figure was based on an official survey in January of migrant workers in 15 provinces, which showed 15.3% of respondents had lost their jobs or been unable to find work. He said the total number of migrants seeking work this year will likely be at least 25 million, since usually six million to seven million people join the migrant work force each year.

China's government worries that if migrants cannot find jobs, they will be a force for unrest. The uncertainty is being felt in Shuangyao, just north of the Yangtze River in central China's Anhui province. Roughly 150 people from this village of 60 families -- or almost all able-bodied adults between ages 20 and 60 -- work elsewhere, in cities such as Beijing or factory towns in China's export hub, the Pearl River Delta.

The Lunar New Year holiday, which officially ended Saturday, is the main annual opportunity for these workers to reunite with family and take stock of the year. In Shuangyao, this year's celebration was far more subdued than in the past, residents said.

Firecrackers, which on the new year's eve once went on all night, stopped shortly after midnight. About a quarter of the



village's migrants didn't even make it home -- mainly because they had lost their jobs, and were unable to afford the trip or loath to show up with bad news.

### *Search for Jobs*

This week, migrants are setting out to look for jobs. How much work is available -- and how the government handles the disappointment of those who can't find any -- will help determine how much the crisis strains China's system.

"Without our work, this village would have nothing," says Ye Guangzhao, who sells grain and seeds in neighboring Jiangxi province. "We have to go back out and find something."

Shuangyao's migrant workers each send home between \$1,400 and \$2,000 a year. Without that, those remaining behind -- mostly children and grandparents -- couldn't afford things such as school fees, extra clothing or television.

Farming isn't really an option, because Shuangyao is massively overpopulated. The average family's landholding is just two *mu*, or about a third of an acre, enough that a family can usually survive off their harvest, but not to provide any real cash income.

Consequently, few migrants feel they can stay. Ye Xiangbin, a 24-year-old demobilized soldier, used to work in a factory making shoes for export, but lost his job when his Taiwanese bosses closed shop late last year. Depressed, he came back home a few months early for the festival, but next week he will set out again in hopes that conditions have improved. "I will try it for a few months. I have no choice," Mr. Ye said.

Government efforts have helped to alleviate poverty in Shuangyao. Last year, a dirt path to the local town was paved, allowing motorbikes to cut an hourlong walk to a 12-minute ride. Rural taxes have been cut and a rural health plan is being implemented.

Estimates in China put the number of protests each year in the tens of thousands, although most are quickly defused by authorities. The current downturn, however, is the most serious since 1989, when a weak economy helped to spur the Tiananmen Square democracy protests.

### *Focus on Layoffs*

Central-government officials have in recent weeks asked companies to avoid layoffs if at all possible, and have stepped up subsidies and training programs directed at migrant workers. The government is also stepping up monitoring of job losses, since China's official unemployment statistics don't cover migrant workers and hence have shown little change despite the economic turmoil.

Mr. Chen, the Chinese official in Beijing, appealed to local government leaders to handle any protests personally and avoid using force. "If a mass incident occurs, leading cadres must all go to the front line, and talk to the people directly, face-to-face, to explain things and convince them," Mr. Chen said.

Residents in Shuangyao say they don't blame the government for the downturn -- but do expect officials to act to turn it around.

Ken Roberts, a professor at Southwestern University in Texas who studies Chinese migrants, says the rising unemployment among rural workers could exacerbate problems in the countryside, such as illegal taxation of farmers and local corruption.

"The burden is going to be higher on people, so they may have less tolerance for these existing problems," Mr. Roberts

says.

Local governments across rural China have set up programs to encourage migrants to open businesses and other enterprises, hoping that this will soak up labor that the country's once-booming coasts cannot.

In Shuangyao, this doesn't seem an option. Farmers say poverty is too widespread for a business to gain traction.

"There's no way not to leave the village," says Wu Luo, a 35-year-old construction worker who has been a migrant laborer since leaving school at 16. "The conditions here are too poor and there's nothing for us to do."

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