



Eco-Terre

Travail. D'ici à 2010, le géant asiatique pourrait manquer de travailleurs et craint pour sa croissance.

La main-d'oeuvre se fait précieuse en Chine

Par Pascale NIVELLE

QUOTIDIEN : lundi 14 mai 2007

Pékin de notre correspondante

Les réserves de main-d'oeuvre bon marché s'épuisent en Chine. Un rapport de l'Académie chinoise des sciences sociales de Pékin tire la sonnette d'alarme : «*La Chine est en train de passer d'une ère d'excédent de main-d'oeuvre à une ère de pénurie, qui sera effective d'ici à 2010*», rapporte le *China Daily* de samedi. Estimée jusqu'à présent à 100 ou 150 millions de travailleurs, la réserve d'«ouvriers à tout faire» de moins de 40 ans ne serait plus que de 52 millions, hommes et femmes confondus.

«Adaptations». Il faut s'attendre, annoncent-ils, à une hausse conséquente des salaires dans les années qui viennent et donc à une baisse de la compétitivité du géant asiatique. «*Des adaptations sont nécessaires*», affirme Cai Fang, l'un des auteurs du rapport : «*Le pays doit modifier son mode de croissance en ne se reposant plus uniquement sur un seul facteur de production, mais en ayant recours à des méthodes plus avancées.*» Le rapport montre que la politique de l'enfant unique, dont près de 100 millions sont arrivés récemment sur le marché du travail, est en grande partie à l'origine de la baisse du nombre de travailleurs : elle aurait privé la Chine de 400 millions habitants.

Paysans chassés de leurs campagnes par la pauvreté, attirés par les lumières de la ville, les *mingong* («travailleurs migrants») sont pour beaucoup dans la croissance à deux chiffres du géant asiatique. Qu'ils travaillent dans les mines, les chantiers et les usines locales ou étrangères, ils acceptent souvent des conditions infernales : douze heures de labeur quotidien, une unique journée de repos hebdomadaire, des droits sociaux minimum, pour des salaires de 80 à 200 euros par mois. Il n'est pas rare que les employeurs, pour piéger cette main-d'oeuvre volatile, retiennent les premiers salaires pendant deux ou trois mois. Après les vacances de printemps les trois ou quatre uniques journées accordées aux *mingong* dans l'année, de nombreux patrons de la région du delta des Perles, autour de Canton dans le sud de la Chine, s'étaient inquiétés de ne pas voir revenir leurs employés.

Délocaliser. Du jamais vu dans «l'usine du monde», qui emploie des millions de travailleurs exilés sans aucune qualification et donc peu revendicatifs. Le phénomène semble s'étendre progressivement des zones côtières les plus industrialisées, vers l'ouest du pays. Déjà, des entreprises occidentales comme l'allemand Siemens ont anticipé le mouvement et envisagent de délocaliser leurs usines vers le Vietnam et le Laos.

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Nation may face labor shortage

By Li Fangchao (China Daily)

Updated: 2007-05-12 05:48

The supply of low-cost labor, widely considered to be fueling China's sizzling economy, could start drying up as early as 2010, a report warns.

One of the biggest reasons for the potential shortage is that the rural labor force may not be as large as previously thought, the report, issued by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences on Thursday, says.

"China is moving from an era of labor surplus into an era of labor shortage," the report cautions.

One of the architects of the report, however, said it doesn't necessarily mean the country will lose the advantage it enjoys in the international market because of its labor-intensive products.

Experts believe the turning point, when the new labor force will fail to meet demand, could be as close as three years. This will trigger a general increase in wages, the report says.

Rising labor costs will pose the question: how long can China rely on its "population bonus". Some foreign investors have already moved their businesses to countries with lower labor costs, Wang Yiming, deputy director of the Academy of Macroeconomic Research, under the National Development and Research Commission, wrote in a column published on Wednesday.

The quality of labor has to be improved and industrial structures urgently upgraded, he said.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Security has also raised fears that further appreciation of the yuan will result in millions of jobs being lost.

"It's still too early to say whether China will lose its competitive edge as labor costs increase... But it can be said that the country needs to change its growth mode from relying solely on one production factor (labor) to advancing production methods," said Cai Fang, director of the Institute of Population and Labor [Economics](#), and the report's leading draftsman.

The number of redundant workers below the age of 40 in rural areas is only about 52 million in absolute terms, far less than the estimated 100-150 million, said Cai.

The transformation of the population under the family planning policy and economic and social development is complete, he said, and the country has now entered a period of low birth and death rates, with a very gradual increase in population.

The effect of this will be a gradual labor shortage in the country.

The recent labor shortage in the Pearl River Delta region, a hub for labor-intensive industries, is a sign of this trend, said Cai. "The phenomenon is spreading gradually from coastal areas to central China or even some provinces that boast huge labor surpluses," said Cai.

The labor force, however, is and will comprise a large proportion of the population for a long time, added Cai. In fact, the labor force will continue growing until 2015, the first year likely to see "zero increase".

(China Daily 05/12/2007 page1)

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Population economics

(China Daily)

Updated: 2007-05-12 05:50

China's status as the world's most populous country gives it plenty of reasons to closely monitor demographic shifts that could significantly impact its course of development.

So, policymakers should not turn deaf ears to the possibility that the country's seemingly inextinguishable surplus of cheap labor could soon dramatically diminish.

The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences released on Thursday a report pointing out that the country's surplus of rural laborers is not as plentiful as presumed.

Contrary to the popular belief that there is an excess of rural laborers between 100 million and 150 million in China, the report suggests that the absolute number of rural laborers under the age of 40 is only about 50 million.

For a developing country such as China that has so far relied heavily on its comparative advantage in labor cost to boost economic growth, an abundant supply of cheap labor remains crucial to the sustained growth of the economy in the foreseeable future.

So, the sharp drop of the estimated labor supply the report indicated should be of great concern to authorities. If true, the government should respond swiftly with all necessary policy adjustments to prepare for the demographic changes.

If the growth of the labor supply begins to lag behind that of demand as early as 2009 and boosts salaries, as the report predicted, the country may need to speed up reforms of labor-intensive manufacturing sectors.

Since 2004, cries of labor shortages have been heard not only in coastal manufacturing bases but also in some inland cities. The phenomenon apparently lends some credibility to the report.

But in absence of credible statistics on the actual amount of rural labors, policymakers should not rush to any conclusions.

Since the first national agricultural census a decade ago, the mix of the rural population has changed significantly, as more rural labors leave the countryside seeking jobs in urban areas.

It is difficult to ascertain the actual mix and amount of the rural labor force before the ongoing second national agriculture census' results come in later this year.

But the warning of a possible labor shortage could never come too early. The aging of the Chinese population makes it more than likely that the country would bid farewell to cheap labor, sooner or later.

(China Daily 05/12/2007 page4)

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