



MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes, January 2021

Point-to-point labour transport: the securitization of mobility after lockdown

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Abstract

After the lockdown, the Chinese government organised the return of rural-to-urban migrants to work through point-to-point transport and rigorous health checks, while creating a new business niche for intermediaries.

Keywords

point-to-point transport, rural-to-urban migrants, China, platforms, intermediaries, securitization of mobility, COVID-19

Theme

Securitizing mobility

To be quoted as:

Xiang, Biao. 2021. Point-to-point labour transport: the securitization of mobility after lockdown. *MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes*. Department 'Anthropology of Economic Experimentation'. Halle/Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.

Doi: 10.48509/MoLab.3265

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After the Chinese New Year celebrations in January 2020, the central government urged employers and local governments to bring back to work the 170 million rural-urban migrants, the majority of whom went home for the holidays and were subsequently confined in the countryside. Their return to the cities was organised in a ‘point-A-to-point-B’ manner: migrants are transported from home to the workplace directly in groups, led by designated personnel, on designated vehicles, following designated routes, to the designated enterprise. Buses were half-full to allow for social distancing, reserving the last two rows as an isolation area in case passengers developed a fever. Each migrant had to go through a health check before departure, and have their temperature checked throughout the journey. All the information about the migrants, compiled and updated by the designated organizer, was handed over to the employers on arrival.

In this way, more than 5 million migrants were transported on 200,000 chartered coaches and 367 chartered trains between mid-February and the end of March 2020.² This has happened outside China too. For instance, thousands of agricultural workers have been airlifted from Eastern Europe to Germany and the UK, and from Mexico to Canada, since early April.³

Mobility as an economic necessity and as a security concern

‘Point-to-point’ is precisely how I have characterized unskilled labour migration from China to Japan, South Korea and Singapore since the early 2000s. The transnational migrants ‘are extracted from their hometowns and inserted in a foreign workplace...migration in this case is not about how migrants move and explore, but is about how they are moved with great precision’.⁴ The control of labour in the worksite is supplemented, or even substituted, by the control of transnational mobility. For instance, when labour disputes arise, enterprises and labour intermediaries would send the worker back to China as a way to ‘settle’ the case, which effectively disciplines workers in their daily activity.⁵ Migrant workers are regulated more as mobile subjects than as workers.

During the current pandemic, the double pressure of containing the virus and of reviving the economy renders mobility both a necessity and a security concern. The securitization of mobility means that (1) mundane mobility is associated with existential threats to the collective; (2) surveillance is imposed on all, in order to prevent exceptions that may cause harm. Proportionality is thrown out of the window: a single terrorist attack, or a single infection case, is considered too many; (3) normal rules are suspended, and extraordinary measures are introduced.⁶

The securitization of international migration is not new, as widely documented in border studies. However, point-to-point transport is not concerned with *who* the foreigner is or *what* he/she wants to do, but instead focuses on *how* a person, in most cases a perfectly legitimate citizen, can move

² People’s Daily. 2020. *Let migrant workers return to work smoothly and do their jobs contently*. 13 April 2020. Available online at: <http://society.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0413/c1008-31670439.html>. Last accessed 15 January 2021.

³ Ziady, Hanna. 2020. Farmers are chartering planes to bring in workers and save their crops. *CNN Business*. 16 April 2020. Available online at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/16/business/farmers-fly-in-workers-to-beat-coronavirus/index.html>. Last accessed 15 January 2021.

⁴ Xiang, Biao. 2012. Labor transplant: ‘Point-to-point’ transnational labor migration in East Asia. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 111(4): 721–739.

⁵ Xiang, Biao. 2013. Transnational encapsulation, compulsory return and migration control. In: Biao Xiang, Brenda S. A. Yeoh, and Mika Toyota (eds.). *Return: Nationalizing Transnational Mobility in Asia*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 83-99.

⁶ Buzan, Barry, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde. 1998. *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

physically in a way that would not undermine health security. Borders appear irrelevant. The emphasis is on ‘tunnelling’ labour from one point to another directly,⁷ bypassing the space in between, including all the borders.

Government and platforms

The distinction between ‘human security’ and ‘state security’ has collapsed in the pandemic. The role of the Chinese administration is central in point-to-point transport. Provincial governments, in both labour-sending and -receiving places, take charge of overall planning, and prefecture governments identify demands and supplies, according to which counties of origin monitor the transport to eliminate gaps between ‘the home gate, the bus gate, and the factory gate’.⁸ The Ministry of Transport has set up emergency telephone lines in its Logistics Security Office to deal with incidents during transport.⁹

Provincial and prefectural governments on the receiving side are the main funders of this operation. They pay for the transport and even hand out cash to migrant workers on arrival.

The Chinese government also set up multiple online platforms to securitize labour mobility. The Platform for Rural-Urban Migrants Returning to Work, launched by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, enables governments and enterprises to coordinate and arrange transport. The National Road Passenger Service Management Platform, managed by the Ministry of Transport, collects detailed travel plans to make sure that the feeder stations on the way carry out health checks and provide food and water without delay. There are also platforms and apps for enterprises or migrants to seek help.¹⁰ Health QR codes generated by mobile phones in real time, showing whether the individual has COVID symptoms and whether he/she contacted possible infection sources in the previous 14 days, are checked all the time. This code is necessary for boarding a local bus or even, in many cities, stepping out of one’s gated community.

Intermediaries: securitization of mobility + casualization of work?

Clearly, the government may not carry out point-to-point labour transport for long. But other actors have used this as an opportunity to flourish. Commercial labour intermediaries, ranging from individual gangmasters to large labour dispatchment corporations, are explicitly encouraged by the government in the resumption of mobility. Guangdong province in south China promised to reward an intermediary US\$25 for recruiting a worker, and US\$700 for organizing an online job fair that would attract over 300 corporate participants. Intermediaries that specialize in domestic helpers,

⁷ Graham, Stephen, and Simon Marvin. 2001. *Splintering urbanism: Networked infrastructures, technological mobilities, and the urban condition*. London and New York: Routledge.

⁸ Shang Jianhua (Deputy Director, Poverty Alleviation Office of Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security). 2020. Presentation at the State Council press conference on the work of guaranteeing ‘point-to-point’ service for the return of migrant workers. 7 March 2020. Available online at: <http://www.mot.gov.cn/2020wangshangzhibo/yqfk9/>. Last accessed 15 January 2021.

⁹ Ministry of Transport. 2020. *Notice on Guaranteeing Transport Service for Migrant Workers’ Return to Work*. Code: 2020-03068, Transport [2020] No. 56. 11 February 2020. Available online at: http://xxgk.mot.gov.cn/jigou/ysfws/202002/t20200211_3331884.html. Last accessed 15 January 2021.

¹⁰ Zhang Ying (Director, Employment Promotion Department, Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security). 7 March 2020. Presentation at the State Council press conference.

whose mobility is considered key in the battle against the virus, are singled out as a priority for support: high-performing agencies are given one-time grants of US\$30,000-40,000 each.¹¹

In addition to recruiting and managing a flexible labour force, intermediaries are now organizing labour mobility. As mobility becomes a security concern, its organisation emerges as a new business niche for intermediaries. The securitization of mobility may become the other side of the deepening casualization of work.

The author would like to thank Jiaying Tu's assistance with the research.

¹¹ Guangdong Provincial Government. 2020. *Several policy measures to stabilize and promote employment in Guangdong Province*. 20 February 2020. Available online at: http://www.gz.gov.cn/xw/jrgz/content/post_5731279.html. Last accessed 15 January 2021.