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Adult Education for China's "Floating Population": A Conceptual Framework to Guide Policy, Practice and Research

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Since the 1980s, the demand for workers in the China's industrial cities, coupled with the extreme poverty of rural villages, has resulted in a massive migrant population comprised of adult workers from the countryside who move to industrial cities seeking work while maintaining strong ties to the villages in which they have permanent residence permits. Approximately 200 million *Nong-ming-gong* (rural migrant workers) now constitute the largest mass migration in human history. These migrant workers have provided China with an indispensable resource for city construction and economic prosperity. However, the cost to the migrant workers themselves has been extreme, as geographic relocation results in widespread psychological and social dislocation.

The migrant workers are vulnerable and their rights such as equal employment opportunity and access to children's schooling still cannot be guaranteed. In the last 30 years, Chinese policy-makers have made great efforts to improve the situation of the migrant workers, including the establishment of basic endowment insurance, opening some public services to migrant workers in some cities, and providing regional authorities with guidelines for workers' rights. In general, measures taken by central and regional governments in the 1990s tended to focus on the *management* of migrant workers to avoid the social tensions between migrant workers and city residents. At that time, some urgent issues such as social public safety, family planning, and equal employment opportunity were the priority. In the last decade, more emphasis has been placed on the rights of migrant workers, as well as on their access to social public services, welfare, healthcare and education.

Economically driven mass migrations have been a part of human history, and such migrations have always been accompanied by human suffering. In most cases, the geographical relocation has resulted in widespread social and psychological dislocation that causes personal pain and reduces social cohesion in communities and nations. One of the most important functions of adult education is the alleviation of human suffering by ensuring that struggling populations have the opportunity to engage in meaningful adult learning opportunities that can empower them to improve their lives.

Through careful study of this population, as depicted in government reports, popular press reports, scholarly writing, and more informal sources, we propose the following framework of needed adult education policy, research, and practice to address the learning needs of this population.

1. Educational Policy.

- 1.1. **Foster and Support Adult Learning among Migrants.** At both the national and municipal level, China needs to foster and support adult learning among the migrant population. Such learning should address one of two foci:

1.1.1. **Life improvement.** The social, economic, and psychological hardships faced by China's large and vitally important migrant population are well documented. Although the Chinese government has taken policy actions to try to alleviate the suffering, adult learning can play a vital role in helping individuals and groups of workers take action to solve the problems they face in their everyday lives.

1.1.2. **Workforce preparation.** As China shifts from a manufacturing-based economy to one increasingly based on service and technology, migrant workers need increased opportunities to improve their work-related knowledge and skills. Such learning will enhance both the individual workers' employability and the quality of the nation's workforce.

2. Research

- 2.1. **Maintaining and Redefining Family Support among Migrant Workers.** We need to better understand the social and psychological impacts of migration on workers and their families. In order to work in cities, parents often leave grandparents or other family members to raise their children, making meaningful parent-child relationships strained and difficult to sustain. Elderly parents, once able to count on the younger generation to assume the more onerous duties of farm and home, now must manage such tasks on their own. Married couples sometimes find themselves living thousands of miles apart without the resources necessary to maintain regular physical and emotional contact. Interview based studies could help us understand the common family problems faced by migrant workers and how some migrants successfully handle these issues.
- 2.2. **Obstacles to Continuing Education.** Common wisdom suggests that migrants often fail to participate in further education because of monetary costs. However, social and attitudinal factors also influence participation decisions. Interviews or surveys could result in a better understanding of dynamics involved in participation decisions.
- 2.3. **Community Engagement.** One of the challenges of migration is the loss of social status and power that accompanies geographical relocation. Interviews could help us understand how some migrants become active members of their new communities and why others do not.
- 2.4. **Education and Information Delivery.** Migrant workers have difficult lives. They often work long hours, have limited education, and lack the resources necessary for many educational endeavors. Research should explore the suitability of various delivery systems, with respect to both technology and course structures, in reaching this population of potential learners.

3. Practice

- 3.1. **Pre-planning and Managing Migration.** Migrant workers and potential migrant workers need opportunities to learn how best to manage all aspects of the migration experience.

- 3.2. **Strengthening Families Affected by Migration.** Migrant workers and potential migrant workers need opportunities to learn the how best to keep their families strong in the face of the significant challenges caused by relocation and separation.
- 3.3. **Surviving and Thriving in the City.** Migrant workers need opportunities to learn how to adapt to city life and become part of their new communities.
- 3.4. **Basic Education.** Many migrant workers have limited education and need access to programs that will enable them to increase their basic language and computational abilities.
- 3.5. **Occupational Skills Training.** Migrant workers need access to occupational skills training that will enhance individual skills to ensure future employability in China's evolving economy.
- 3.6. **Empowerment Education.** Migrant workers need the opportunity to learn their rights as workers and citizens.