

# Work: Attraction of overseas jobs fades as higher salaries, innovation sway youth

From page 1

According to the Ministry of Commerce, the number of people applying to work overseas has fallen in the past four years, and between 2014 and 2017, the number moving overseas for work fell from 562,000 to 522,000.

By the end of 2014, an extra 153,000 Chinese were working overseas, compared with 2013. However, last year, the number was just 10,000 more than in 2016.

"Many of our applicants are ages 45 to 60. They find it difficult to adapt to the domestic labor market and earn incomes equivalent to people working overseas," Zhang said, displaying the dozens of applications the center has received in the past few weeks.

Most are middle-aged, while a few are age 20 and younger but they have poor education backgrounds, most just hold high school graduation certificates.

The most popular destinations include Singapore, South Korea and Japan, which require plumbers, workers for automobile assembly lines and electricians. Some countries require applicants to hold professional certificates, while others provide training for new employees. The agency charges applicants 50,000 to 80,000 yuan (\$7,960 to \$9,550) depending on the type of work they are seeking.

In countries such as Australia, France and New Zealand, chefs are in high demand, but the agency charges a higher fee to arrange those jobs, usually 150,000 yuan to 170,000 yuan.

## Boom time

Things were very different during the boom time in the late 1990s and early part of this century, when going overseas was seen as a courageous move. Those who returned with the money they had made were treated as heroes, and special arrangements were made to help them reintegrate with life in rural China.

As in many villages, the people of Nanzhanglou traditionally live in single-story houses, and some families have to share a public latrine because the underground sewage system doesn't reach every house.

However, in 2015, two modern apartment buildings, resembling those found in large cities, were built in the northern part of the village and boasted modern amenities such as gas cookers, flushing toilets and electric water heaters.

"Many people who returned after working overseas for years found it difficult to acclimatize to the poor living conditions, especially the dry latrines. So we built these modern apartments to meet their requirements," Yuan said.

Yuan Hengjun, 69, and his 70-year-old wife Yang Zhengxiang share a 112-square-meter apartment in Nanzhanglou. Yuan Hengjun doesn't dress like a farmer; instead, he wears a white shirt and cashmere sweater, and his hair is neatly combed. In the living room, a calligraphy scroll hangs on the wall, bearing a traditional maxim, "Happiness consists of contentment".

"The contentment in my life comes from my two sons, who work



Top: Yuan Hengjun and his wife Yang Zhengxiang in their 112-square-meter apartment built in 2015 in Nanzhanglou village, Qingzhou city, Shandong province.

Above: Apartment blocks built in 2015 for locals returning from working overseas. PHOTOS BY WANG JING / CHINA DAILY

overseas and changed their lives from farmers to businessmen," he said. The couple's sons, Yuan Antian, 45, and 43-year-old Yuan Anguo both manage supermarkets in Argentina, where they have permanent residence.

In 1995, Yuan Antian was one of the first villagers to venture overseas to make money, when he joined seven other residents who chose to move to Argentina and work on a farm. Before that, the farthest he had been was Weifang, a city about 60 kilometers from Qingzhou.

His life improved immediately. "My eldest son got his first month's salary and called us immediately — he sounded excited and astonished," Yuan Hengjun recalled.

"He told us he had earned \$200, which was a lot of money to most Chinese people. In 1995, a rich fami-



**There was a slogan in Qingzhou — 'A worker overseas brings fortune to the whole family'. At least half of the people in the village have worked overseas."**

Yuan Xiangsheng, head of Nanzhanglou village, Qingzhou



ly with three people in our village only earned about 3,000 yuan a year."

The work brought Yuan Antian a bright future. A year later, his fiancée moved to Argentina and they got

married. In 1997, the couple had their first child, who was granted Argentinean nationality the same year. The young family continued to look for new chances and soon sensed a business opportunity.

More than 100 workers on the farm needed to be fed every day, but their daily supplies could be only purchased at a supermarket more than 100 km away. Yuan Antian made a bold decision: he borrowed 400,000 yuan from his father and opened a supermarket to meet the demands of his peers.

The move paid off quickly. Making an annual income of \$80,000, he was able to pay back all the money he had borrowed within a year. Now, he owns four supermarkets in Argentina. His younger brother decided to follow Yuan Antian's lead and also moved to Argentina to start his own supermarket.

The original eight villagers who moved to Argentina became legends in the village. Many other residents followed in their footsteps and headed overseas. The trend quickly

spread from Nanzhanglou to other parts of the city, according to Yuan Xiangsheng, the village head.

"There was a slogan in Qingzhou — 'A worker overseas brings fortune to the whole family'. At least half of the people in the village have worked overseas," he said.

In the late 1990s, Qingzhou became one of the first few cities in China to establish a center to help arrange work for those determined to head overseas.

## Applicant numbers falling

Now, the boom time is over. The decline in the number of people who plan to work overseas has also been witnessed in Zhenjiang city, Jiangsu province, which, along with Qingzhou, was one of the places where residents frequently moved to look for work overseas.

Statistics from the city's International Travelling Healthcare Center, which provides health checks for residents who apply to work overseas, show that applicant numbers fell by 10 percent in the first quarter of the year.

The reasons include concerns about diseases, such as the ebola virus, in some African countries, and the suspension of a number of construction projects, according to Feng Jinxiang, the center's director.

"Concerns about a stable future life with their family members and the rise in wages in China are prompting more young people to stay at home," Feng said.

"The wages paid to Chinese workers overseas are no longer the lowest in the international market, and the younger generations, those born after the 1980s and 1990s, do not value working overseas as highly as previous generations."

In the first quarter of this year, China's per capita disposable income stood at 7,815 yuan, a year-on-year rise of 6.6 percent, according to the National Bureau of Statistics. Per capita disposable income has risen to 10,781 yuan in urban areas and 4,226 yuan in rural areas, rises of 5.7 percent and 6.8 percent in real terms, respectively.

Last year, the average monthly income of rural people who moved to large cities in search of work was 3,450 yuan, a year-on-year rise of 5.3 percent. The government aims to double per capita incomes of both urban and rural residents by 2020, from 2010 levels, to build a moderately prosperous society.

Wang Peiyun, a consultant with the Shandong Lexin Labor Force Exportation Co, said the number of people in the province moving overseas for work witnessed a significant decline between 2008 and 2012 as domestic wages almost doubled during the period.

"China's stable economic condition and the booming new industries, such as the internet and internet of things, are prompting more young people to stay at home," he said.

"As a result of preferential policies from the government, including financial support and tax breaks, many young people are now becoming inspired to run their own businesses in innovative industries."

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# Foreign experience provides determination to change lives

By YANG WANLI

Yuan Xiangsheng has been the head of Nanzhanglou village in East China's Shandong province for 42 years. "I am probably one of the few village heads who made business trips to foreign countries in the 1980s," he said.

Starting in 1989, all the cultivable land in Nanzhanglou was redeveloped in a systematic way and leveled to facilitate mechanization, assisted by the Hanns Seidel Foundation from Germany, which works to promote civic society.

Out-of-season vegetable planting, livestock rearing and agricultural byproduct processing were introduced to the village during the project, raising farmers' average annual incomes.

The Sino-German cooperative project expanded the horizons of people in Nanzhanglou.

In the 1990s, the first group of

eight villagers traveled to work in Argentina as part of a cooperative project. "The trip was also the first such attempt in Qingzhou, a city with a population of about 940,000," Yuan said.

As a village that enjoys no advantages in terms of natural resources or transportation convenience, Yuan said the labor force is Nanzhanglou's only real resource. In the past three decades, many villagers have worked overseas.

"As China's power has grown, people are finding more opportunities to work, and wages are higher than ever before. In recent years, nearly 80 percent of the workers who went overseas have returned. Their experiences overseas brought vitality and new ways of thinking to the development of the village," Yuan said.

Unlike most women in the village, Du Yongzhu wears light makeup. "That is a habit from my



Du Yongzhu plays with her daughter at their home in Nanzhanglou.

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experience of working in Japan. Women there always wear makeup, even at home," the 30-year-old said with a gentle smile.

Du only received a high school education. In 2011, she paid 50,000

yuan (\$7,940) to an agency that could arrange work overseas and found a job as an automobile production worker in Japan. She spent four months training in language, work skills and Japanese etiquette,

but she made more than 200,000 yuan in three years.

What makes her life different from before is not simply the money, but the determination and encouragement she gained while working overseas which made her determined to make a better life for herself when she returned to China.

"I gained good professional ethics and professionalism in Japan. The people there work conscientiously and rigorously. Also, they pay strong attention to hygiene and environmental protection. I think the same spirit could be practiced in China, which will definitely make my hometown a better place to live," she said.

After reuniting with her husband and child in 2014, Du refurbished their one-story brick house with the money she had made in Japan and expanded it into a 30-room family inn. In 2016, she had her second child.

"I hope this small business will bring us a stable and more prosperous life. Then my children will be able to receive a good education and have a chance to go overseas, not as migrant workers, but to study. They will have open minds and better lives," she said.

Yuan Yonghong and her husband worked in a restaurant in France for three years before returning to China in 2015 to care for their parents. Now, they run a store in Nanzhanglou, earning about 80,000 yuan to 100,000 yuan a year.

"The villagers are getting richer now. Many local families can afford a can of baby milk formula priced at more than 200 yuan. This growing consumer power needs to be fed by a sufficient supply of commodities. We chose to return, both to be with our families and because there are more chances at home now," she said.