

Brokers play important role in regulating migrant workers in China

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New research authored by a Cornell University ILR School doctoral student examines the interplay between private labor brokers and local state actors in Chinese migrant worker regulations.

Published in *International Migration Review* on Nov. 21, [the work](#), titled "Capacity and Priority: Explaining the Regulatory Roles of Labor Brokers in China's Newly Established Guestworker Program," found that the capacities and interests of the Chinese local government contribute to private [labor](#) dispatch agencies. The agencies act as labor brokers and play an important role in regulating guest workers.

Chuling "Adam" Huang, Ph.D. said he wanted to better understand the involvement of labor brokers in regulating migrant workers in China by looking closely at the capacities and interests of local state actors. Huang focused on Pingxiang, a city located near the Sino-Vietnamese border in Guangxi Province, along with two nearby counties.

"My fieldwork focused on Pingxiang because this is where the policymaking and regulation are happening," Huang said in an interview. "Pingxiang is the first stop where they apply for their migrant documents. The labor dispatch agencies are also primarily registered and located in Pingxiang."

The research reveals that China has been experimenting with large-scale labor importing through guest worker programs to mitigate labor shortages. Nearly 400,000 work permits were issued to Vietnamese [migrant workers](#) in the two-and-a-half years of the program before it was paused due to the pandemic.

"This research challenges the perception that China is not a labor-importing country. For a long time, China has been viewed as a country of abundant labor and the world factory," Huang said. "Many excellent researchers have challenged this view by studying the labor shortages and the relocation of the manufacturing industry to southeast Asia and Africa. What is less talked about is the possibility of China becoming a labor-importing country. My research shows that it is possible and experiments have been done with relative success."

The management and governance of the guestworker program are left to the local government of border cities like Pingxiang, which outsources its regulatory responsibilities to private labor brokers.

"When we think about the migration policy, we often think about this grand policy that is imposed from the top," Huang said. "This is far from what I found in my research. The very starting point of the guestworker program in Pingxiang was merely a single sentence in a policy document published by the State Council of China. The lower-level governments filled out the details of the policy. The policy's implementation resulted from negotiation among [local government officials](#), labor brokers and employers."

More information: Chuling (Adam) Huang, Capacity and Priority: Explaining the Regulatory Roles of Labor Brokers in China's Newly Established Guestworker Program, *International Migration Review* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/01979183231216083](https://doi.org/10.1177/01979183231216083)

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