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LA Times: People, people everywhere in China, and not enough to work

Sunday, March 28, 2010

Source: [LA Times: People, people everywhere in China, and not enough to work](#) 

March 28, 2010 - By Barbara Demick and David Pierson

Reporting from Shanghai and Beijing — In the labor market's pecking order, Chen Xiulan is at the very bottom. She is female, middle-aged and from the countryside and stands barely 5 feet tall. (Height requirements are common with Chinese employers.)

Yet when the nearly 60-year-old grandmother from Sichuan province showed up in Shanghai last fall looking for work on the construction site of the sprawling World Expo, nobody laughed. Chen was handed a hard hat and a broom and put to work with the crew that sweeps up debris.

"If you're willing to work, you can get a job here even if you're old," said Chen, her dimpled face disappearing under the oversize hard hat at a Kentucky Fried Chicken construction site next to the U.S. pavilion. She said she earned the equivalent of \$190 a month, 35% above the minimum wage in Shanghai.

FOR THE RECORD:

China's labor market: An article in Sunday's Section A about labor issues in China referred to the China Labor Watch. The organization's name is the China Labor Bulletin. —

It is a sign that even a country of 1.3 billion people might run out of workers.

Once thought to be an endless resource, the Chinese worker has suddenly become hard to find in some east coast cities, where factory bosses and real estate developers are scrambling for labor.

The shortage became glaringly apparent last month at the end of the Chinese New Year. Millions of workers headed to the countryside for the holidays, but they didn't return.

"We may be coming to a point where China is tapped out of cheap labor," said Patrick Chovanec, an associate professor at Tsinghua University's School of Economics and Management in Beijing.

Shanghai has a particular problem: It is in the throes of a \$45-billion makeover and up against a May 1 deadline for the opening of the World Expo.

Clocks counting down the days to the fair are on display throughout Shanghai, underscoring the urgency. With heavy rains turning the fairgrounds next to the Huangpu River into a sea of mud, many of the showcase pavilions appear to be behind schedule.

Nearly 40,000 workers are involved in the construction phase, most of them migrants to Shanghai.

Zhu Yonglei, deputy director of the Shanghai Expo Coordination Bureau, said the local government had paid bonuses to construction workers who came back early from their 2 1/2 -week New Year's holiday or who skipped it entirely.

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