

# A MIGRANT FAMILY'S ACCOUNTS

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Migrant workers are an indispensable element in China's drive toward economic reform, yet enjoy few of development's long-term benefits. This article describes the vulnerability of a relatively well-off migrant family, which faces the threat of destitution if circumstances of employment or health change even slightly.

Zheng Wanxian, Wu Wanqin and Zheng Zhongjie make up an ordinary migrant worker family from a village near Zigong City, Sichuan Province. Over the years the family has endured all manner of hardships, supporting and depending on each other as they've moved from Zigong to Guiyang, then to Kunming, Nanning, Xiamen, Ningbo and Beijing. Most recently they moved to Foshan, Guangdong Province, where they live in the suburban town of Nanhai.

Zheng Wanxian, born in 1953, is a construction worker with no fixed wages. During a busy season he may earn 30–35 yuan per day. Wu Wanqin, his wife, born in 1958, was forced to give up working four years ago for health reasons. She now looks after the family's home and has no income. The couple's son, Zheng Zhongjia, born in 1980, graduated from a vocational school and began working at the age of 17. He learned to drive and now has quite a good job making deliveries for a peanut oil factory. Adding in bonuses and extra income, his monthly income can reach around 3,800 yuan.

Zheng Wanxian's family enjoys a measure of prestige among the residents of Nanhai. Their standard of living is no worse than that of the average urban resident, and they make a point of helping out neighbors in difficulty. They are considered honest, amiable and generous. Because they have made friends locally, they don't have to pay rent, an enviable situation. However, they actually face the possibility of financial ruin at any moment, as I learned through more detailed discussion with the family after having the good fortune to make their acquaintance at a meal. The main evidence of their impending peril is in the careful household accounts kept by Wu Wanqin.

## Huge expenses

Zheng Wanxian's family recorded the following expenses in 2004:

Month	Living expenses	Coal	Water	Medical	Other	Total
Jan	468.90	60.00	52.00	566.00	169.50	1,316.40
Feb	457.70	60.00	36.00	304.00	102.00	977.70
Mar	521.60	65.00	31.00	473.90	1,900.00	2,991.50
April	841.20	137.00	32.50	445.50	352.60	1,808.80
May	710.00	82.00	41.00	620.00	557.70	2,010.70
June	554.10	80.00	45.50	577.00	883.80	2,142.40
July	540.00	21.00	39.70	289.50	1,212.90	2,103.10
Aug	568.70	87.00	46.00	394.50	284.10	1,380.30
Sept	778.00	90.00	44.00	240.00	367.00	1,519.00
Oct	888.60	103.00	44.00	279.00	724.60	2,039.20
Nov	737.00	103.00	37.00	144.50	951.90	1,936.40
Dec	722.50	98.00	39.00	257.00	450.50	1,567.00
Total	7,806.30	986.00	452.70	4,590.90	7,956.60	21,792.50

The basic costs of the family (living expenses, coal and water) totaled 9,245 yuan for the year. Medical expenses refer only to Wu Wanqin's expenses; Zheng Wanxian's and Zheng Zhongjie's are included under living expenses.

Zheng Wanxian's family recorded the following expenses in the first half of 2005:

Month	Living expenses	Medical	Other	Total
Jan	561.70	190.00	478.30	1,230.00
Feb	794.10	122.00	657.50	1,573.60
Mar	620.80	222.00	307.70	1,150.50
Apr	689.00	305.50	1,297.40	2,291.80
May	670.00	995.00	278.30	1,943.30
Jun 1–9	211.00	174.50	790.50	1,176.00
Total	3,546.60	2,009.00	3,809.70	9,365.30

This time coal and water are included under "living expenses," along with the medical expenses of Zheng Wanxian and Zheng Zhongjie.

The total expenditures recorded here (21,792.50 yuan in 2004 and 9,365.30 yuan in the first part of 2005) do not

include the money the family donates to others in need. Zheng Wanxian's family readily extends a helping hand to those facing hardship, and routinely passes along numerous additional small sums of money that they don't bother to record. Their more substantial donations include payments of 250 to 4,000 yuan for a total of 13,050 yuan in donations between February 2004 and June 2005.

When all of these expenditures are tallied up, the Zheng family's total expenditure for the period of January 1, 2004 to June 9, 2005 was 44,207.80 yuan, averaging 2,555.30 yuan per month or 85.20 yuan per day.

### A heavy burden

There are three problems that become apparent in examining the family's accounts:

1. Zheng Wanxian's family eats well. They have a balanced diet of vegetables, meat, fruit, nutritional supplements, snacks and sometimes eggs, and their home is stocked with a 40 liter bottle of mineral water and several six-packs of beer. The current price of rice is 1.50 yuan per catty (approx. half a kilogram), and the three family members consume a total of 50 catties of rice per month. They enjoy entertaining guests, and their food expenses are considerable. For example, it is not unusual for the family to purchase 35 yuan to 75 yuan worth of meat for a meal, while a typical three-member household can enjoy a meal of meat, vegetables and beer for about 10 yuan per day.
2. The Zheng family has very high medical expenses. From January 2004 to early June 2005, Wu Wanqin's medical expenses totaled 6,599.90 yuan, an average of 381.40 yuan per month or 12.70 yuan per day. In June her medical expenses increased to an average of 19.40 yuan per day. Wu says, "My illness is very troublesome. Now I'm preparing to go for treatment in a hospital in Hunan. The medicine will cost me 300 yuan every five days, and the course of treatment will last three months." That means Wu's medical costs will total 6,000 yuan over those three months. Because of her frail condition, Wu opts for medical treatment regimens that put additional pressure on Zheng Zhongjie's meager savings. Zheng Wanxian and Zheng Zhongjie have their own medical expenses to contend with. In April and May of 2004, Zheng Wanxian required medical treatment costing a total of 420.50 yuan. Zheng Zhongjie's medical expenses in March and April of 2004 totaled 496 yuan.
3. A large proportion of the Zheng family's expenditure is made up of their contributions to other. The following chart shows the percentage of total expenses devoted to each type of expense during the period from January 2004 to early June 2005:

Type of expense	Percentage of total
Charitable contributions	29.52
Living expenses	28.93
Other	26.62
Medical	6414.93

In fact, there is another expenditure not recorded in the family's accounts: financial support for Zheng Wanxian's parents (Wu Wanqin's parents have passed away), which includes basic living expenses as well as medical expenses. The family sent a total of 2,300 yuan to Zheng Wanxian's parents in 2004, an average of 132.90 yuan per month.

### The family's background

This is a very strong family unit. Twenty-five-year-old Zheng Zhongjie is currently the family's main earner. In October 2002, Zheng Zhongjie, who was 22 at the time, resigned from his factory job and started from scratch in Foshan. He hands his entire paycheck over to Wu Wanqin to manage, and never carries more than 100 yuan.

Zheng Zhongjie observes, "Our family definitely operates on a collective system; father operates as a private enterprise, mother as a shareholder enterprise and aid organization."

As to why the family runs this way, Zheng says, "My parents are around 50 years old. From a personal standpoint, I'm repaying my obligations to them; from a family standpoint, this responsibility is growing heavier by the day, and I have to carry the bulk of it for now."

"How much?" I asked.

"At least 90 percent." The family accounts bear this out.

From October 2002 to June 2005, Zheng Zhongjie toiled away for total earnings of 116,000 yuan, an average of 3,591.30 yuan per month or 119.7 yuan per day. But his father spends the money as soon as it comes in; Zheng Wanxian is a gambling addict and loves to socialize, and his income can hardly keep up with his spending. From October to December of 2002, Zheng Wanxian was paid a total of 2,940 yuan for pouring concrete at several building sites in Fushan's Nanhai District, but he only brought home 460 yuan, leaving his son to carry almost the entire financial burden for the family during those three months. After a period of unemployment, in March 2003 Zheng Wanxian found another construction job in Guangzhou's Baiyun District, working for 15 days before returning home for a break. Nineteen days later he found a job as a watchman at a workshop, where he worked for 44 days. He earned 1,960 yuan for these 59 days of work, but brought home only 320 yuan.

This pattern has become quite typical. In the course of a year, Zheng Wanxian usually works at most eight months. A worker with his level of experience could expect a net income of 10,000 yuan for that amount of work, but in actuality Zheng brought home only 3,430 yuan during the period from October 2002 to June 2005, an average of 106.20 yuan per month or 3.50 yuan per day, about the price of a pack of cigarettes.

Zheng Wanxian is a rather unusual character in three respects: First, he has a particularly capable son; second, he has an unusually broad range of friends and acquaintances; third, he has the mindset and habits of China's traditional "knights errant" in his conception of fair play and shared interest. He involves himself in everything, and is able to rally support among workers from Guizhou, Sichuan and Chongqing, allowing him to deal with matters in a way that few others can. After experiencing much hardship in his life, Zheng has established many bonds of loyalty among his fellow workers, and

there are few workers who see any advantage to themselves in offending him. At the same time, Zheng himself never seems to expect any repayment for his assistance to others, and operates largely on the basis that he should extend a helping hand to anyone in need, whether that person is a relative, fellow villager or friend. Zheng Zhongjie has inherited this trait from his father; he operates more cautiously, more by the book and less by the rules of the road, and he thinks more than he acts, but when it comes to helping others, the father and son are of one mind in their willingness to do whatever is necessary.

### Looming perils

**1. Assistance to others.** I would like to say first that I deeply admire the impressive support that Zheng Wanxian's family offers to those less fortunate. By devoting 29.52 percent of the family's income to charitable causes without consideration of practical return puts this migrant worker family in a class of charity exceeding that of many philanthropists. But this only goes to show the dearth of resources offered to members of disadvantaged groups—migrant workers can only obtain help from each other. And migrant workers as a group occupy probably the lowest stratum in China's economy. Particularly in the Pearl Delta region, many factories fail to meet even the minimum wage. Many factories craftily claim to offer the minimum wage, but then deduct various expenses and fees, giving a legitimate veneer to their illegal practice. The economic status of migrant workers really calls for a workable mechanism that they can genuinely embrace for regular assistance.

**2. Ingrained migrant characteristics.** It is with deep regret that I feel obliged to point out this problem, which helps to answer the question of why migrant workers find it so hard to integrate themselves into an urban environment. The migration of rural residents from the villages to the cities and suburbs is not only a shift of labor, but also of customs, practices, mentalities and languages. The comparatively conservative village ways of life are not adapted upon arrival in the urban areas, but rather are imported wholesale to the margins of the urban system. The areas where migrants settle can be easily divided into two types: the first is an urban system, characterized by rules and procedures and a mainstream culture; the second is a rural system, characterized by provincialism and chaos and a marginalized, murky counter-culture. Zheng Wanxian's gambling and penchant for hospitality is a genuine calamity for his family. Zheng Zhongjie can deal with any kind of impediment except his father's intemperance, guilelessness and extravagance, and has come to the deep conviction that migrants bring some of their ills upon themselves, and that there is a real need to gain a better understanding of this special disadvantaged class.

**3. Future risk.** Zheng Zhongjie has already exhausted his best effort, and is unlikely to substantially increase his income in the short term, yet three major problems already loom before him: first, he has not yet married; second, he has no

permanent home; third, his mother's illness is proving extremely difficult to cure. Another problem has been suggested to him: According to available information, Zheng Zhongjie has sent his surplus funds back to his home village, where his aunt is holding it for him. His savings currently total only 49,000 yuan. If any of the four problems mentioned above should become acute, Zheng will only be able to look on in horror. Under the present circumstances, even if none of these problems arise, he is well aware of his family's vulnerability.

Of course, this is not only for economic reasons. Another factor is the complicated relationship between Zheng Wanxian and Wu Wanqin, whose marriage has encountered many a rocky road due to their divergent viewpoints. As their son, Zheng Zhongjie plays a crucial role, not only as their financial bulwark, but also as his mother's protector and his father's communicator, as a decision-maker and as a sounding board for viewpoints, information and feelings, and even as a teacher. If a major change takes place in Zheng Zhongjie's role, this family could very easily move toward collapse.

**4. Every family has its inscrutable side.** My investigation into the Zheng family's situation eventually led the family to sit down behind closed doors and spend six hours discussing how they might reduce their expenditures.

I made the following suggestions: first, the family's financial resources are limited, so money should be spent efficiently and with as little waste as possible. Second, financial strength alone is not enough to guarantee the family's stability, just as economic prowess cannot guarantee a country's stability; even more important is an atmosphere of equality, unity, understanding, caring, acting according to one's capabilities and exercising volition, in short, a free and democratic family system.

Third, one-way benefit is not the most desirable situation. The Zheng home is not a sanctuary or an aid station, but should establish itself as a place for developing mutual benefit and mutual aid. My meaning isn't that they should make money off of their fellow migrants, but rather that they should find a way by which they and other migrants could make money or otherwise benefit together. In this way, one-way benefit can be transformed into mutual benefit and even multiple benefit. Otherwise, if someone loses his pants at gambling and comes to them for a handout, they are not necessarily helping by giving him money.

I'm a charitable person myself, and others have often accused me of an unworldly and foolish outlook, so I can genuinely relate to the Zheng family's problems. If they're going to solve them, they'll have to apply their brains as well as their hearts.

Translated by Stacy Mosher

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