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Chaguan

Intercity commuters are a puzzle for Chinese officials

They struggle with the idea of people living and working in different cities



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FEW CHILDREN grow up dreaming of being a commuter. But there is a logic to a life spent between a city job and a home in some quiet, affordable spot. The first modern suburbs sprang up to greet trains puffing out of Victorian London. As countries such as Japan, France and Spain invested in high-speed trains, travelling at 250kph or more, new pairs of cities found themselves an hour or so apart, allowing for previously unthinkable commutes.

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Now it is China's turn. Planners did not have commuters in mind when they began building the world's largest high-speed rail system just over a decade ago. They started with national trunk lines and regional spurs, to bind together a vast country and boost growth. Now, with more than 35,000km of lines laid, planners are building more intercity routes, creating conditions for fast, short hops. One study in 2018, using mobile-phone data to track movements, found tens of thousands of people commuting from neighbouring cities into Shanghai, a megalopolis of 24m. Most of them came from Suzhou, a historic city half an hour away by fast train.

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Last year the *Journal of Transport & Health*, an international outlet, published a survey of such pioneering riders. The typical respondent was a married man with

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More of them describe intercity travel as a route to a better job than to a higher quality of life. Indeed, many call commuting stressful, and something to do “when they are young”, notes a co-author of the survey, Chia-Lin Chen of the University of Liverpool. China’s high-speed railways do not sell season tickets to commuters, who must often scramble to secure daily tickets on trains meant for long-distance travellers. Moreover, to promote newly built districts, high-speed railway stations are often built far from existing city centres, obliging commuters to travel long distances from stations to workplaces. All this exacts a toll on marriages and families, says Ms Chen.

The Xiao Langfang housing complex is a cluster of apartment blocks in the small, nondescript city of Langfang, 60km from central Beijing. It is an excellent base for commuting—a seven-minute walk from a high-speed railway stop that is, in turn, a 21-minute ride from Beijing South station. The one-way fare is 28 yuan (\$4.33). It is a friendly spot. On a mid-week afternoon, its landscaped grounds are thronged with children flying kites, yapping lapdogs and old women playing cards in the winter sun. Above all, here in the northern province of Hebei, just outside Beijing’s city limits, property is cheap. Apartments in Xiao Langfang sell for 15,000 yuan a square metre. A comparable flat in Beijing could easily cost six times as much.

Shao Zeyu, a young father playing with his five-year-old son in the compound’s gardens, met his wife in Beijing and rented a home with her there for years. They left the capital after their child was born. Mr Shao’s legally registered hometown is Langfang, while his wife is from Tianjin, a nearby coastal city. Mr Shao’s mother lives in Langfang, so she can offer both love and free child care. But the family faced constraints, too. It is very hard to obtain a new household-registration permit, or *hukou*, from Beijing, a city that Chinese leaders consider full. Without a Beijing *hukou*, the Shao family could not easily gain access to many public services in that city, including school places. So they left.

The train has been a boon. Initially, his wife carpooled from Langfang to her job in northern Beijing. She left at 5:30am and reached her desk before most colleagues, allowing her to return home early to see her son. In bad traffic the journey could take three hours each way, and left her exhausted. The fast train to Beijing enables her to leave home at seven. That makes the Shao family lucky. Many friends work such brutal hours, until nine or ten each evening, that they come home only at weekends. Mr Shao himself used to work similar hours for a computer-games firm in Beijing, and is now looking for a job he can do locally. Because Tianjin is affordable and offers better schools and an easier route to university, the family expects to move there when their son is older. Mr Shao’s wife plans to commute by train from Tianjin.

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urban development that embraces multi-city clusters, including one uniting Beijing and Tianjin. But the aim is to make it more appealing to live in a wider range of secondary cities and new towns, not to create alternative routes to work in central Beijing. In 2016 the Communist Party boss of Hebei said that Langfang “absolutely cannot become a dormitory town for those who work in Beijing”. Indeed, China’s tax system currently punishes commuter towns. Someone who works in Beijing pays taxes and social-security contributions into the capital’s coffers, even when sleeping each night in Langfang. Locals murmur that officials in Langfang blocked moves to call a housing development “Shouzhan”, meaning “First Stop” on the line from Beijing.

The authorities in Langfang want new residents to live and work in their city. They recently eased restrictions on outsiders buying property there, allowing them to invest if they make six months’ worth of social-security payments to Langfang’s fund (on top of payments made elsewhere). But Langfang should be realistic, suggests a local property-salesman. He calls his home town a place where newlyweds and those starting families will choose to live until they can afford to move on.

In truth, Langfang’s greatest asset is being a convenient stop on the way to bigger places. That is a puzzle for officials rewarded for developing the place under their charge, not for facilitating the restless ambitions of individuals. China’s high-speed railways are a spectacular economic achievement. Their impact on society may prove as dramatic, if officials allow it. ■

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