



Migrants reported the lack of social security was the most important social problem they faced in their new lives, but they also complained of employment discrimination and insecurity. “Migrant employment can be unpleasant and insecure, and this depresses migrant happiness,” the report found.

In other words: Migrants working in construction may have built China’s great cities, and migrants operating small business may be the lifeblood of those cities, but life for them in those same cities can be very tough.

By one count, there were 225 million rural-hukou migrant workers in China’s cities in 2015, up from 125 million in 2005.

So why do they come? Partly, it seems because they have unrealistic expectations of a pot of gold at the end of the urban rainbow: “excessively high expectations of the conditions they would experience in the city.”

But their aspirations also rise when they move, often faster than their ability to fulfill them. Living alongside richer people doesn’t help. Although migrants got richer by moving, two-thirds of those who said they weren’t happy gave low income as the reason. Migrants, the report say, may have been able to predict that their incomes would rise when they moved, “but not how their aspirations would rise as they became part of a very different urban society.”

But if migrants are unhappy, why don’t they just go home?

Some may have lost their land in China’s great urbanization drive, but others may realize that once their aspirations have risen in their new urban environment, there simply isn’t any going back: it is impossible to be satisfied with a rural life of narrower horizons and lower expectations once you have experienced the bright lights of the big city.

That may partly explain another puzzling finding from the data: no fewer than 56 percent of migrants felt that urban living gave them greater happiness than they had experienced in their previous lives, 41 percent reported themselves equally happy in rural or urban settings, while only 3 percent said they were happier in the villages. Even if the people left behind were happier, the people who moved did not regret their choice.

The paper forms part of an annual examination of subjective well-being in more than 150 countries, published by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, an initiative of the United Nations.

Last year’s report also contained some fascinating conclusions about China in a study by Richard A. Easterlin, Wang Fei and Wang Shun: The past quarter century has seen personal incomes go up roughly five-fold in China, but happiness fell sharply from 1990 to 2005. Today Chinese people are probably less happy, on average, than they were 25 years ago — partly because economic reforms demolished job security and the social safety net.

[Money can’t buy happiness: Why a massive rise in wealth left Chinese people less happy]

The annual rankings published this year saw Finland take top spot as the happiest country in the world. The United States came in 18th, Taiwan took 26th spot, Hong Kong 76th and China was in 86th place out of 156 nations.

It is a reminder that for all the media coverage of China's dramatic economic success story, per capita incomes and happiness levels in this country still lag behind many other nations, including many developing nations.

Simon Denyer is The Post's bureau chief in Beijing. He previously worked as The Post's bureau chief in New Delhi; a Reuters bureau chief in Washington, New Delhi and Islamabad, Pakistan; and a Reuters correspondent in Nairobi, New York and London. ? Follow @simondenyer