

# A Historical Perspective on the Phenomenon of Chinese Spring Festival Travel Rush



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**Abstract:** The Chinese Spring Festival Rush Phenomenon (Spring Rush) is a focal reflection of contemporary China's economic and social development. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, industrialization began, the population of cities and industrial and mining areas increased, and the number of passengers during the Spring Festival increased. In 1954, the country first clearly defined the Spring Rush as a month before and after the Spring Festival, and the Spring Rush officially appeared. Due to the industrialization strategy and the dual urban-rural social structure caused by the identity society, social mobility gradually stagnated before the reform and opening up, and the overall passenger flow during the Spring Festival was not large, and the Spring Rush was not obvious. Since the reform and opening up, with the rapid development of industrialization and urbanization, identity barriers have gradually been broken, and the speed of social mobility has accelerated; however, the country's investment in social construction focusing on household registration, employment, social security, and other systems is insufficient, making it difficult for migrant workers and other lower-class people in society to urbanize. Their "pendulum"-like the one-way flow of "returning to the countryside before the New Year and returning to the city after the New Year" has been repeated, and the Spring Rush has become more and more serious.

**Keywords:** Chinese style; spring rush phenomenon; historical perspective; social mobility

The Spring Rush is a large-scale high transportation pressure phenomenon that occurs in China around the Lunar New Year. After the founding of the PRC, especially since the reform and opening up, with the development of China's economy and the changes in social structure, the door to social mobility has been opened. To change the face of poverty and pursue happiness, people in backward areas leave their hometowns after the Spring Festival to make a living. Before the Spring Festival, due to the lag in social construction and the attraction of the cultural and emotional magnetic field of the New Year, the wanderers who make a living in a foreign land but cannot settle down in the local area, with a strong sense of homesickness, rush back to their hometown like a pilgrimage; the short-term one-way passenger flow overwhelms the transportation department, forming the largest and most cyclical Spring Rush. The Spring Rush is a focused reflection of the contemporary economic and social development of China. On the surface, it is caused by the contradiction between the increase in passenger flow and the insufficient transportation

capacity of the transportation department. At a deeper level, the Spring Rush reflects a disconnect between contemporary Chinese social structures and economic development. As times change, the phenomenon has intensified. Scholars have long studied this issue, with research spanning sociology, economics, demography, and institutional studies since the early 21st century. However, the academic community has not fully explored the historical changes and social history related to the Spring Rush. This article aims to analyze the Spring Rush from a social history perspective, uncover its historical causes, and suggest practical solutions to alleviate it.

## 1. Historical Changes of the Spring Rush

The Spring Rush was born before the reform and opening up and developed in the new era of reform and opening up. With the development of the contemporary Chinese economy, influenced by factors such as changes in social structure, changes in social mobility, the historical inertia of New Year culture, and the lag in social construction and development, the Spring Rush has continued to

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develop and present different characteristics of the times.

### **1.1. The Spring Rush was conceived and developed before the reform and opening up**

In 1951, to ensure the safety of passengers during the Spring Festival, some railway bureaus set up “Spring Festival Homecoming Passenger Service Committees”, which kicked off the Spring Rush and the Spring Rush began. In 1954, it was first clearly stated that the Spring Rush would last for a month before and after the Spring Festival. The Ministry of Railways’ Spring Festival Passenger Transportation Office was on duty day and night, and the Spring Rush officially appeared. To ensure the smooth transportation of passengers during the Spring Festival, on January 11, 1959, the People’s Daily editorial “A Few Hopes for Passengers Going Home for the Spring Festival” pointed out that those who want to go home for the festival should leave early or late, and not all of them should leave in the few days before the festival. In previous years, Spring Festival passenger transportation was mostly arranged for a month. This year, based on the tight transportation situation and the doubling of passengers, the transportation department has decided to arrange Spring Festival passenger transportation for one and a half months, that is, from January 15 to the end of February (“A Few Hopes for Passengers Returning Home during the Spring Festival,” 1959). On the one hand, this shows the tense situation of the Spring Rush, and on the other hand, it shows that the work of the Spring Rush has become more meticulous. The Spring Rush time has been changed from one month to one and a half months, encouraging people to stagger their travel time during the Spring Rush.

In November 1960, a large number of migrant farmers returned to their hometowns. In addition, the combination of work and rest was implemented in various places at that time. The number of employees in government agencies, factories, mines, and enterprises who took vacations increased and the vacations were longer. At the same time, universities and middle schools began their winter vacations. During the Spring Festival of 1961, the number of long-distance passengers was large and the duration was long. In addition, rural markets were opened, and cadres who were sent down to work returned to their hometowns. The number of short-distance passengers increased significantly, and the Spring Rush was obvious (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Central Archives. *Selected Economic Archives of the People’s Republic of China from 1958 to 1965*, 2011, p. 287). To ensure

that passengers could return home smoothly during the Spring Festival before the Spring Festival transportation began in 1974, the railway transportation departments of various places sent people to factories, mines, government agencies, schools, troops, and other units to investigate the flow and direction of passengers during the Spring Festival and compile a passenger transportation plan for the Spring Festival. To meet the needs of educated youth supporting border construction in the northeast, northwest, and southwest and employees participating in the construction of inland and coastal areas, the railway transportation department added some direct temporary passenger trains between the coast and these areas (“Strive to Do a Good Job in Transportation during the Spring Festival. Railway Employees across the Country Fight the Wind and Snow and the Severe Cold, Serving the People with Full Enthusiasm and Wholeheartedly,” 1974).

In short, before the reform and opening up, industrialization started, the door to social mobility was opened, and the Spring Rush emerged. The development of industrialization and the educated youth going to the countryside led to the development of the Spring Rush. Before the reform and opening up, the passenger flow during the Spring Rush was mainly enterprise employees and educated youth who went to the border areas. The characteristics were that the passenger flow was relatively concentrated and there was a single “visiting relatives flow”. The main mode of Spring Rush was rail passenger transportation. Although some routes had transportation pressure during the Spring Rush, due to the limited number of travelers, the Spring Rush was not too tense, and the phenomenon of “Spring Rush difficulties” was not obvious.

### **1.2. The Spring Rush has intensified since the reform and opening up**

The full resumption and rapid development of the college entrance examination in 1978 led to a group of rural students entering the city. The passenger flow of the Spring Rush changed from the single “visiting relatives flow” before the reform and opening up to the main flow of visiting relatives and students, concentrated in Shandong, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang, mainly soldiers supporting the border areas visiting relatives during the Spring Festival, students returning home during the holidays, and small and medium-sized industrial and commercial operators in Jiangsu and Zhejiang who were doing business in other places. With the implementation of the “responsibility system for linking output to

production” in rural areas, there was an increasing number of “surplus” laborers, and hundreds of millions of farmers left their hometowns to “work” in cities, like a flood flowing into the city after a dam broke. Since then, from south to north, from rural areas to cities, the large-scale and high-density population flow from spring to winter in China has created a busy Spring Rush scene every year. The concentrated outbreak of the “migrant worker flow” has a single and obvious passenger flow direction, which has put great pressure on the Spring Rush (Liu, 2014). In the 1980s, the Spring Rush time was fixed to 40 days before and after the Spring Festival. The Spring Rush mode changed from mainly railway passenger transportation to railway, road, shipping, and civil aviation, and the mode gradually diversified.

The relaxation of the policy of migrant workers in cities has gradually loosened the dual social structure of urban and rural areas and accelerated social mobility. With the deepening of reform and opening up, labor-intensive enterprises in the eastern coastal areas have flourished, attracting a large number of rural laborers to the eastern coastal areas. At the same time, the implementation of the policy of expanding college entrance examination enrollment has led to an increasing number of students studying outside the city, and the scale of student flow has expanded; with the emergence of the Spring Festival “Golden Week”, people have more leisure time and travel time, and the flow of visiting relatives has increased accordingly. As a result, in some media reports on the Spring Festival phenomenon, the new term “three flows overlap” has appeared, which is the combination of migrant worker flow, student flow, and family visit flow (“Lu Yanan. What Are the Problems of Spring Rush? Where Is the Solution? ,” 2008). Faced with the new changes in the passenger flow of the Spring Festival in the 1990s, the state attached great importance to organizing the orderly flow of migrant workers and issued a notice to provide specific guidance. Before and after the Spring Festival, in areas where migrant worker passenger flow is concentrated, the transportation department can organize collective ticket sales and organize the operation of special trains, special cars, and special ships for migrant workers (“Han Zhenjun. The State Economic and Trade Commission Issued a Notice Requiring Careful Preparation for the 1999 Spring Rush,” 1998).

In the 21st century, with the development of the economy and the implementation of the seven-day holiday, the number of people traveling during the

seven-day Spring Festival holiday has increased year by year. The tourist flow during the Spring Festival reflects that the holiday economy has become an indispensable part of my country’s economic life. Taking advantage of the seven-day Spring Festival holiday, the number of people traveling abroad increases year by year (“Zhang Xudong, Lin Hongmei. Judging from the Flow of People during the Spring Rush, Economic Vitality Is on the Rise, Residents’ Education Consumption Is Growing, and Labor Transfer Is Gradually Becoming a Large-Scale Holiday Economic Benefits Have Emerged,” 2001). Universities continue to expand their enrollment, which objectively leads to a continuous increase in the number of students traveling during the Spring Festival. Rapid urbanization has attracted a large number of rural laborers, which has led to a rapid increase in the number of passengers during the Spring Festival. In terms of the scale of population mobility during the Spring Festival, it exceeded 2 billion in 2006, exceeded 3 billion in 2012, and reached a peak of 3.4 billion in 2014 (“Detailed Discussion of New Changes in the Spring Rush,” 2019). During the Spring Festival, chartered car services for returning home are more common in areas where universities and factories are concentrated, and are jokingly called “Different Spring Rush” or “Copycat Spring Rush”. Compared with chartered cars, the “carpooling home” craze among urban white-collar workers is even more popular. On almost all major commercial websites, there is a special section for “ride-sharing” (“Zhang Zhifeng, Deng Xu, Shen Wenmin. Spring Rush Enters Peak Period. Carpooling and Chartering Attract Many Passengers Returning Home - This Is How They Go Home,” 2009). Cars can travel on highways for free during the Spring Festival, making self-driving travel popular during the Spring Festival. In short, since the reform and opening up, with economic development and social transformation, the flow of people has accelerated. The passenger flow of Spring Rush has evolved from the flow of visiting relatives before the reform to the interweaving of five flows: visiting relatives, tourism, students, migrant workers, and business. The phenomenon of Spring Rush has become more and more serious. The development of the transportation industry and the change of life concepts have changed the travel mode of Spring Rush from mainly railway passenger transportation to railway, highway, shipping, and civil aviation, which has gradually diversified.

## 2. Historical Causes of the Evolution of the Spring Rush

Through the historical perspective of the Spring Rush over the past 60 years, we can understand that the Spring Rush is a focused reflection of the economic and social development of contemporary China. Under the combined effects of factors such as the development of contemporary China's economy, the changes in social structure, and the historical inertia of the Spring Festival culture, social mobility has accelerated, and the travel subjects and methods in the Spring Rush have changed accordingly.

### 2.1. Contemporary China's economic development promotes the breeding and evolution of the Spring Rush

Since China's reform, the development of industrialization and the movement of educated youth to the countryside fueled this trend. However, before the reform and opening up, China's industrialization was incomplete. Urban-rural policies aimed to support agriculture with labor and restrict rural migration to cities, leading to a buildup of surplus rural labor and a strengthening urban-rural divide. Given the early post-foundation conditions, it was practical for the government to use limited resources and maintain urban-rural separation to advance industrialization. However, the long-term rigid administrative management system blocked the flow of technology and labor resources ([“Wang Baoan. Structural Adjustment and Institutional Innovation,” 2000](#)). Incomplete industrialization and the “anti-urbanization” strategy, coupled with the urban-rural dual social structure caused by the identity society, caused social mobility to gradually stagnate before the reform and opening up, and the Spring Rush was a period of rapid development. The overall passenger flow is not large.

Since the reform and opening up, with the rapid development of industrialization and urbanization, the Chinese government has implemented an unbalanced development strategy in regional economic development strategy, giving priority to the development of coastal areas, which has enabled the coastal areas to develop rapidly and widened the economic development gap between the coastal areas and the inland areas. China's economic development is unbalanced. During normal times, a large number of labor forces move from the central and western regions to the eastern regions. They all go back home during the Spring Festival and then come back again after the festival. This “one-way street” effect has doubled the pressure of the Spring Rush ([“Li Zhiyong. On ‘Olympics Are Not Difficult, Spring](#)

[Rush Is Difficult’ ,” 2011](#)). Farmers leaving their hometowns and rushing to cities and coastal areas is a rational choice driven by the tide of reform. The unbalanced development pattern between urban and rural areas and regions has led to the flow of social structure space, which has to be manifested in the geographical space of population flow in many cases, objectively exacerbating the Spring Rush ([Dong & Chen, 2008](#)).

### 2.2. The changes in contemporary Chinese social structure have accelerated the development of the Spring Rush

In the early days of the founding of the PRC, the urban economy was backward. To solve the problem of urban unemployment, a policy was adopted to restrict the free entry of rural labor into cities. The household registration system implemented after 1958 clearly distinguished the urban population from the rural population. The rural population could not change their rural household registration without the permission of the relevant government departments. In addition, the system of rationing living resources according to household registration and supplying them with tickets was implemented nationwide, and the personnel and archives system and labor employment system were highly planned. These interconnected systems were closely combined with the “commune system” in rural areas and the “unit system” in cities, placing all members of society under strong administrative control and controlling urban and rural social mobility by controlling living resources ([Sun et al., 1994](#)). In particular, the mutually closed urban-rural dual social structure blocked the mobility channels of farmers, who accounted for the vast majority of China's population. In rural areas, when farmers generally transferred to advanced cooperatives in 1956, due to the public ownership of the means of production and the loss of the possibility of leaving the cooperative, farmers were fixed in their collective economy except for recruitment, education, and military service according to national plans ([Wu, 2010, p. 303](#)). With the development of society, the identity society has gradually become a shackle of social development, blocking the mobility of social classes. Objectively, it caused the small passenger flow and the unobvious phenomenon of Spring Rush before the reform and opening up. Since the reform and opening up, along with the social transformation, the identity barriers have gradually been broken, the channels for social class mobility have increased, the mobility speed has accelerated, and the whole society is full of vitality. More than 40 years of reform and



opening up have broken down various identity barriers. Every year, hundreds of millions of farmers go to cities to work, and some have integrated into the city and become “city dwellers” (“Hua Shansong. *Does Identity Determine Destiny, or Does Struggle Determine Destiny?*,” 2010). With the transformation of Chinese society from “unit people” to “social people”, the traditional identity society is increasingly disintegrating, and the new social rule system is gradually being improved. In this process, the traditional phenomenon of “identity determines destiny” has not been eliminated, and various “identity barriers” stubbornly exist within a certain range. In the urban labor market, urban employees and migrant workers in the same enterprise for the same type of work and the same position receive different remuneration, and enjoy different public services and social security; migrant workers and local employees are treated differently in employment services and even housing, labor security, and social welfare (Zhang & Tang, 2019). Due to the lag in social construction, the urbanization of migrant workers is slow. Under the dual structure of urban-rural division, they are still regarded as “passers-by” in cities. The cities “accept migrant workers economically but exclude them socially” and “want them to work but not settle down”. The threshold for migrant workers to settle in cities is high and they cannot enjoy the same treatment as urban residents (“Han Jun. *Coordinate Urban and Rural Development and Break the Dual Structure*,” 2010). Various “identity barriers” make migrant workers in foreign lands only able to make a living in cities but not settle down. As a result, these migrant workers without a sense of belonging move with the seasons like migratory birds. During the Spring Festival, tens of millions of migrant workers travel thousands of miles to go home day and night before the festival and rush to cities after the festival, forming a huge group of people traveling during the Spring Festival.

### **2.3. The historical inertia of the New Year culture makes the Spring Rush continue**

The Spring Festival is an ancient festival in China. Over thousands of years of historical development, the Chinese nation has created a rich New Year culture, which is the largest intangible cultural heritage of the Chinese nation. It is the carrier of the inheritance of the Chinese nation’s spirit, culture, morality, values, and aesthetics. It most clearly reflects the unique cultural genes of the Chinese nation and is the soft power of the Chinese nation’s spiritual heritage and tradition (Feng, 2010).

The New Year culture accumulated over thousands of years of history has been integrated into the hearts of every descendant of the Yellow Emperor. It has a powerful force that drives people to return to their hometowns like a pilgrimage during the Spring Festival. The most obvious evidence is the Spring Rush. During the Spring Festival, people from all over the country rush to a common goal — home. Going home during the Spring Festival is a call of the soul, a conscious choice flowing in the blood, and a living embodiment of the influence of traditional Chinese New Year culture. Behind the Hot Spring Rush is a vivid interpretation of traditional Chinese New Year culture (Wei, 2012, p. 58). The historical inertia of traditional New Year culture makes those who cannot settle down in the city feel homesick before the Spring Festival and fight hard to go home for the Spring Festival to reunite with their families and experience the strong family affection and New Year atmosphere.

### **3. Conclusion**

To sum up, the evolution of the Spring Rush is a microcosm of the economic and social changes in contemporary China; the disconnection between contemporary Chinese social construction and economic and social development is the fundamental reason for the intensification of the Spring Rush. In the early days of the founding of the PRC, due to the backward urban economy, to solve the problem of urban unemployment, the state adopted a policy of restricting the free entry of rural labor into cities, which was in line with the actual social development at that time. However, this policy was continuously strengthened afterward, gradually forming an urban-rural dual structure, restricting social mobility, and deviating from the normal track of social development. Since the reform and opening up, after solving problems such as the shortage economy, the necessary reforms of the household registration, employment, personnel, and social security systems formed during the planned economic system have not been carried out promptly, resulting in a serious lack of investment in social construction with the focus on improving people’s livelihood. In the changes in the Spring Rush over the past 60 years, the flow of migrant workers has played a leading role in the volume and direction of the Spring Festival passenger flow and is also the root cause of the sudden passenger flow. The lag in contemporary China’s social construction has led to the existence of institutional barriers such as household registration, employment, and social security, making it difficult

for migrant workers and other people at the bottom of society to rise to “urban people”. In this way, migrant workers and other people from the lower classes of society repeatedly move back to the countryside before the New Year and back to the city after the New Year to reunite with their families during the Spring Festival. This is a “pendulum”-like one-way flow.

### Conflict of Interest

The author declares that he has no conflicts of interest to this work.

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