Examining How Employment Influences Economic Growth

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Abstract. This study investigates the interdependent relationship between employment and economic growth. Through an analysis of existing domestic and international research, it highlights how economic growth serves as a driving force for employment while employment itself reinforces economic expansion. Focusing on China's current context, the paper examines the causes behind the phenomenon of high economic growth coupled with low employment levels, identifying factors such as governmental priorities, technological advancements, and imbalanced industrial structures. Finally, it proposes strategic measures including redefining government roles, adopting employment-friendly technologies, restructuring industries, and promoting the tertiary sector to achieve balanced and sustainable growth in both employment and the overall economy.

Keywords: employment, economic growth, interdependence, structural analysis, policy recommendations

1. Research Background and Significance

Since the late 1990s, the relationship between economic growth and employment has undergone profound transformation, particularly in emerging economies such as China. While the nation has achieved sustained and impressive rates of economic expansion, this growth has not been paralleled by a proportional increase in employment opportunities. This phenomenon, often termed "jobless growth," reflects a growing structural imbalance in the economy where productivity and output rise, yet labor absorption remains stagnant or even declines.

In macroeconomic terms, economic growth and full employment constitute the twin pillars of national economic policy, serving as indicators of both material prosperity and social stability. However, the persistent challenge of achieving synchronized progress in these two areas has raised pressing questions for policymakers and scholars alike. China's experience of "high growth, low employment" underscores the complexities of modern economic development, where technological advancement, industrial restructuring, and shifts in labor demand can weaken the traditional linkage between growth and job creation.

Employment, beyond being a source of individual income, is a fundamental determinant of social welfare, equity, and national stability. It directly influences household consumption, poverty alleviation, and the overall quality of life. A healthy labor market also contributes to economic dynamism by promoting human capital accumulation, innovation, and consumer confidence. Conversely, persistent unemployment can lead to social discontent, reduced productivity, and fiscal burdens on the state.

In this context, examining the interrelationship between employment and economic growth in China carries profound practical and theoretical importance. Understanding how employment dynamics respond to economic fluctuations, policy interventions, and structural transformation can provide valuable insights into designing more inclusive and sustainable development models. Moreover, identifying the causes of the current employment pressures such as government policy orientation, automation and digitalization, regional disparities, and industrial imbalances is crucial for formulating effective countermeasures.

Therefore, this study aims to explore how employment and economic growth can reinforce each other in a mutually beneficial cycle. By analyzing empirical trends and policy implications, it seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on creating a growth model that is not only rapid but also inclusive and employment-driven, ensuring long-term economic resilience and social harmony.

1.1 Foreign Research Status

The relationship between employment and economic growth has long been a central theme in classical and modern economic theory. The roots of this inquiry can be traced back to Adam Smith, who, in The Wealth of Nations, emphasized that the annual labor of a nation's people forms the fundamental source of its wealth and determines the production of goods and services essential for consumption and comfort [1]. Smith's assertion laid the intellectual foundation for later discussions linking labor input with national prosperity.

Following this, David Ricardo expanded upon Smith's ideas, arguing that the expansion of labor and improvements in labor productivity are key determinants of social wealth. Ricardo also introduced the distinction between the material and value forms of wealth, recognizing that the true progress of an economy lies not only in the increase of goods but also in the efficient utilization of labor and resources to generate higher value [2].

After the Great Depression of the 1930s, employment emerged as a dominant policy concern across capitalist economies, prompting a shift in economic thought toward understanding unemployment and demand deficiencies. John Maynard Keynes, in his landmark contributions, proposed a macroeconomic framework where total employment (L) is determined by total demand (D) and the average social demand per laborer (R), summarized mathematically as $L=D/R$. Here, total demand encompasses both consumption and investment demand, suggesting that insufficient aggregate demand can lead to involuntary unemployment a revolutionary concept that transformed economic policy thinking in the mid-twentieth century [3].

Building on Keynesian foundations, Roy Harrod and Evsey Domar in the late 1940s extended this static analysis into a dynamic model of growth. Their Harrod–Domar model expressed economic growth (g) as a function of the savings rate (s) and the capital-output ratio (v), formulated as $g = s / v$. In equilibrium conditions, output growth must correspond with labor force growth ($g = gL = s$). Their analysis demonstrated that sustaining full employment requires continuous investment growth to expand productive capacity in line with labor force expansion. This model underscored the necessity of balancing savings, investment, and population growth to maintain long-term employment stability [4].

A major milestone in post-war development economics was W. Arthur Lewis's seminal 1954 paper "Economic Development with Unlimited Supplies of Labour," which introduced the dual-sector model. Lewis divided the economy into a traditional agricultural sector with surplus labor and a modern industrial sector that absorbs this excess labor as capital accumulates. His structural analysis illustrated how capital accumulation drives labor transition between sectors, promoting both industrialization and economic growth. This dual-economy framework profoundly influenced subsequent theories of development and employment [5].

In the decades that followed, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, research attention shifted toward international trade and its implications for employment in developing economies. Anne O. Krueger, a prominent American economist, conducted extensive studies on the interplay between trade strategies, employment generation, and economic growth. She argued that for developing nations, maintaining both rapid employment expansion and vigorous foreign trade are strategic imperatives for sustained development. Krueger emphasized that the choice of trade policy whether inward-looking or export-oriented can directly or indirectly shape employment growth patterns by influencing industrial competitiveness and market access [6].

Collectively, these foundational contributions from classical economists to contemporary theorists demonstrate the evolving understanding of how employment interacts with economic growth. The transition from the classical emphasis on labor as a wealth-producing factor to the modern focus on structural transformation and policy dynamics underscores the complexity of achieving inclusive growth. These international perspectives provide a valuable theoretical framework for analyzing the employment-growth nexus in emerging economies such as China.

1.2 Current Research in China

In China, scholars have continuously advanced theoretical inquiry by both extending classical frameworks and adapting them to the country's distinct institutional, demographic and structural context. On one hand, research based on Marxist economic theory has been deepened, underscoring its ongoing guiding role in China's development strategy and policy orientation in the present era. On the other hand, Western economic theories and analytical methods have been widely adopted and empirically applied, with Chinese scholars conducting rigorous work in microeconomics, macroeconomics, industrial economics and labor economics. This pluralistic theoretical approach provides multiple lenses for analyzing and resolving China's economic challenges.

Recent domestic studies highlight several emerging themes:

A detailed decomposition of China's growth from 1989-2019 found that labour input and labour reallocation together contributed on average approximately 1.45 % per year to growth, but in the most recent five years this contribution fell to around 0.56 % annually signalling a significant weakening of the employment-growth linkage.

A provincial-level study of structural change, labour reallocation and productivity growth (1993-2016) found that only provinces where labour moved from agriculture into manufacturing and services captured a "structural bonus" in productivity. In other provinces, labour reallocation either had minimal effect or negative effect on productivity growth. OUCI

Research on rural pensions, labour reallocation and aggregate income found that expanding the New Rural Pension Scheme (NRPS) increased young rural workers' chances of moving to non-agricultural urban employment, boosted daily earnings and when scaled up could raise GDP by an estimated ~4.2 %. hkujcesgri.hku.hk

Studies on wage dynamics and industry relocation show that rising local wages in China's advanced regions led labour-intensive industries to relocate to lower-cost regions, increasing income and complexity in the receiving regions while reducing employment in the original high-wage locales. SpringerLink

Labour market research during the COVID-19 pandemic shows large-scale shifts in job-search behaviour and regional labour flows, with a marked reduction in blue-collar manufacturing demand and a migration of workers from large cities toward smaller cities or southern regions. arXiv

Recent inquiries into minimum wage policy, using nonlinear panel models, show that in China increases in minimum wages are significantly negatively correlated with employment rates, suggesting complex trade-offs for labour-market policy. arXiv

In the domain of emerging technologies, research on large language models (LLMs) in China's labour market finds that occupations with high wages and experience are more exposed to AI/automation disruption, raising questions about how employment and growth will interact in the new technological era. arXiv

Collectively, these findings reflect a shift in Chinese research: from an earlier optimistic growth-led employment model (where high GDP growth implied high job creation) to a more nuanced view in which employment creation is increasingly selective, skill-biased, and constrained by structural factors such as demographics, technology and sectoral change. The literature emphasises that for China to restore strong employment–growth synergy, it must undertake deeper structural reforms (in industry, labour markets, and migration), enhance human-capital development, and tailor labour-market policies to regional and demographic realities.

2. Definition of Related Concepts

2.1 Employment

Employment refers to a form of organized economic activity in which individuals with the ability to work participate in productive labor and obtain corresponding remuneration, wages, or business income. It encompasses both formal and informal sectors, including wage-based employment, self-employment, and entrepreneurial work. In economic terms, employment reflects the utilization of a country's human resources and serves as a vital indicator of socio-economic well-being, income distribution, and development stability. A higher employment rate implies more efficient use of labor resources, while unemployment or underemployment often signals structural or cyclical imbalances in the economy.

2.2 Economic Growth

Economic growth refers to the sustained increase in the total output of goods and services produced within an economy over a certain period, typically measured by the growth rate of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or per capita GDP. It is not only a quantitative measure of production but also a qualitative indicator of a nation's economic progress, technological advancement, and improvement in living standards. Modern economic analysis also links growth with productivity enhancement, industrial diversification, capital accumulation, and institutional efficiency. Thus, economic growth represents both the expansion of production capacity and the continuous improvement in social and economic welfare.

2.3 The Relationship between Employment and Economic Growth

2.3.1 The Determining Role of Economic Growth in Employment

Economic growth acts as a fundamental driver of employment creation. As the economy expands, enterprises increase investment and production to meet higher demand, leading to a greater need for labor. This process generates new job opportunities across manufacturing, services, and related industries, particularly when growth is inclusive and labor-intensive. Additionally, economic expansion encourages entrepreneurship, enhances market confidence, and stimulates small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), all of which are major sources of employment. However, the employment elasticity of growth meaning the degree to which growth translates into jobs depends on the structure of the economy, technology adoption, and sectoral composition. In cases where economic growth is led by capital-intensive or automation-driven industries, job creation may lag behind GDP growth, leading to what is termed "jobless growth."

2.3.2 The Reciprocal Role of Employment in Economic Growth

Employment, in turn, serves as a key engine of economic growth. When employment levels are high, household income rises, thereby stimulating consumption and expanding aggregate demand the foundation of sustained economic activity. Moreover, employed individuals continuously improve their skills, productivity, and innovation capacity, which enhance the efficiency of production and contribute to long-term economic growth. From a macroeconomic perspective, full employment strengthens fiscal stability through increased tax revenues and reduced welfare expenditures. It also promotes social cohesion and human capital development factors that further reinforce growth dynamics. Therefore, the relationship between employment and economic growth is reciprocal and interdependent: economic growth drives job creation, while productive employment sustains and amplifies economic expansion.

2.4 Global Perspectives on Employment and Economic Growth

The relationship between employment and economic growth has long been a focal point of global economic research, reflecting diverse experiences across developed and developing nations. The dynamics of this relationship are shaped by structural, institutional, and technological factors that differ markedly from one country to another.

In developed economies, such as the United States, Japan, and members of the European Union, economic growth is typically driven by capital accumulation, innovation, and productivity gains rather than by labor expansion alone. As these economies undergo technological transformation and automation, the employment elasticity of growth tends to decline meaning that a higher output does not necessarily correspond to higher employment. For example, technological innovation in advanced industries such as robotics, artificial intelligence, and digital services increases efficiency but can displace low- and medium-skilled workers. However, these economies often offset such displacement through policy measures like upskilling programs, investment in human capital, and the creation of high-value service-sector jobs. Thus, while the structure of employment changes, the overall balance between growth and job creation remains relatively stable.

Conversely, in developing economies, including China, India, and several countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia, employment remains more tightly linked to economic growth. Growth in these economies is often labor-intensive, particularly in sectors such as manufacturing, agriculture, and services. In such contexts, rising output typically leads to higher labor absorption, providing significant poverty reduction and livelihood improvements. However, as industrialization and modernization advance, a shift from agriculture to manufacturing and then to services known as structural transformation can introduce transitional unemployment and sectoral imbalances. The challenge for developing nations is to ensure that growth remains inclusive and capable of generating sufficient employment to match the expanding labor force.

Moreover, globalization and trade liberalization have altered the employment–growth nexus. Economies integrated into global value chains often experience job creation in export-oriented sectors, but these gains can be offset by vulnerability to external shocks and competitive pressures. Similarly, digitalization and the platform economy have transformed labor markets worldwide, fostering flexible employment models such as gig and remote work. While these trends enhance efficiency and participation, they also raise concerns about job security, income inequality, and labor rights.

International organizations, including the International Labour Organization (ILO), the World Bank, and the OECD, emphasize that sustainable economic growth must be accompanied by "decent work," fair wages, and social protection. The ILO's concept of productive employment that provides adequate income, security, and prospects for advancement has become central to the global development agenda. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 8) further reinforce this linkage by calling for "inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all."

In summary, while the relationship between employment and economic growth is universal, its expression varies according to each nation's stage of development, industrial composition, and policy framework. Advanced economies focus on managing the quality and adaptability of employment amid technological change, whereas developing economies prioritize expanding employment opportunities to sustain inclusive growth. Recognizing these variations is crucial for designing country-specific strategies that balance efficiency, equity, and sustainability in the employment–growth equation.

3. Analysis of the Causes of High Growth and Low Employment in China

In recent years, China's economy has continued to exhibit a paradoxical pattern of relatively high GDP growth accompanied by sluggish employment expansion. Despite robust advances in productivity, industrial output, and technology-driven sectors, job creation has not kept pace with economic growth. This "high-growth, low-employment" phenomenon reflects both structural and policy-related issues in China's development model.

3.1 Government Preferences

Local governments in China have historically prioritized rapid GDP growth as a key performance indicator, often using investment-led strategies to boost short-term economic indicators. This growth model, however, tends to emphasize capital-intensive and infrastructure-driven projects, such as large-scale industrial zones, transportation networks, and real estate developments. These sectors contribute significantly to GDP but have limited labor absorption capacity compared to labor-intensive industries.

In the post-pandemic recovery phase (2023–2025), local administrations have renewed efforts to stimulate economic recovery through public investment and industrial upgrading. However, the emphasis on capital formation and technological advancement rather than on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) or service-sector development has constrained employment growth. Additionally, fiscal constraints and the rising debt levels of local governments have reduced the capacity for job-creation programs, particularly in rural and less-developed regions.

3.2 Technological Progress

Technological advancement has been a double-edged sword for China’s labor market. While automation, artificial intelligence (AI), and digital transformation have enhanced production efficiency and global competitiveness, they have simultaneously displaced workers in traditional and low-skilled sectors. Industries such as manufacturing, logistics, and retail have undergone rapid automation, reducing the demand for manual labor.

For example, the proliferation of industrial robots and smart manufacturing systems under the “Made in China 2025” initiative has improved output but reduced factory employment. Similarly, the rise of digital platforms and e-commerce has transformed employment patterns creating high-skilled digital jobs but eliminating many traditional retail and clerical positions.

In recent years, China’s focus on high-tech self-reliance amid global supply chain shifts has further accelerated this trend. The demand for high-skilled labor has grown rapidly, but structural mismatches between education/training and job requirements have limited employment absorption. This has resulted in a “skill-biased technological change”, benefiting educated urban workers while disadvantaging low-skilled and rural laborers.

3.3 Unreasonable Industrial Structure

China’s industrial structure remains in transition, and imbalances continue to constrain employment generation. The secondary sector (manufacturing and heavy industry) still occupies a substantial share of GDP, but many traditional industries such as steel, coal, and construction materials face overcapacity and declining demand. These sectors, once major employers, now experience consolidation and automation, leading to job losses.

Meanwhile, the tertiary sector (services), which typically has a high capacity to absorb labor, has not fully realized its potential. Although modern services such as finance, logistics, and information technology are expanding, they tend to require higher qualifications and offer limited opportunities for low- or medium-skilled workers. Sectors like education, healthcare, and cultural industries which could absorb more diverse labor remain underdeveloped relative to the needs of a modern economy.

The uneven regional development also contributes to structural imbalance. Coastal provinces continue to dominate high-tech and export-oriented industries, while inland regions struggle to attract investment and generate jobs. Furthermore, the slowdown in the real estate sector since 2022 has reduced employment in construction and related supply chains, further weakening overall job creation.

3.4 Demographic and Labor Market Challenges

Demographic shifts represent another crucial factor behind China’s low employment growth. The nation’s population is aging rapidly, with the working-age population (ages 15–59) shrinking since the mid-2010s. According to recent data from the National Bureau of Statistics (2024), the fertility rate remains well below the replacement level, intensifying long-term labor shortages in certain regions and industries.

Moreover, the youth unemployment rate has surged, surpassing 20% in urban areas in 2023 before the government adjusted reporting methods. This reflects structural mismatches between education output and labor market needs many university graduates pursue degrees in fields with limited demand, while vocational skills necessary for manufacturing, technical services, and logistics are in short supply.

Rural-to-urban migration has also slowed due to rising living costs, housing challenges, and weakened demand in construction and manufacturing. As a result, a significant segment of the labor force remains underemployed or informally employed, contributing to weak overall employment growth despite positive GDP trends.

4. Suggestions and Countermeasures for China's High Growth and Low Employment Situation

To address the persistent problem of high economic growth accompanied by insufficient employment expansion, China must adopt a more balanced and employment-oriented development strategy. The following measures outline the policy directions and structural adjustments required to enhance the employment elasticity of growth and ensure that economic progress translates into broader labor market benefits.

4.1 Transforming Government Functions

The transformation of government functions is a crucial prerequisite for achieving inclusive and sustainable employment growth. Historically, local governments have prioritized GDP growth and fiscal revenue as primary performance indicators, often overriding employment quality and inclusiveness. Going forward, the government should adopt a people-centered development philosophy and incorporate employment creation, income stability, and job quality as essential criteria in performance evaluations.

When formulating macroeconomic and industrial policies, employment impacts should be thoroughly assessed. Fiscal incentives, tax reductions, and credit support should be directed toward labor-intensive sectors and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which play a vital role in job creation. Furthermore, the government should improve the public employment service system, strengthen entrepreneurship support programs, and promote flexible employment models such as part-time, remote, and platform-based work to absorb labor across diverse sectors.

4.2 Choosing Employment-Promoting New Technologies

While technological innovation is a major driver of productivity and modernization, it must be guided toward inclusive and employment-friendly outcomes. The government and enterprises should carefully evaluate the employment implications of emerging technologies such as automation, robotics, and artificial intelligence (AI).

Policies should encourage the integration of technology with human labor rather than pure substitution. For example, the adoption of collaborative robots, digital tools for microenterprises, and AI-assisted service platforms can enhance human productivity without eliminating jobs. In addition, enterprises should be incentivized to invest in worker training and reskilling programs, enabling employees to adapt to new technologies and transition into emerging occupations.

Government agencies can also establish public–private training partnerships and digital skills development centers to bridge the gap between technological progress and labor readiness. This approach ensures that innovation becomes a source of employment transformation rather than employment reduction.

4.3 Adjusting Industrial Structure

Optimizing the industrial structure is key to improving the employment absorption capacity of the economy. China should accelerate the upgrading and transformation of traditional industries, such as manufacturing, textiles, and construction, by integrating green technology and smart production systems. This would enhance productivity while maintaining and expanding job opportunities through new forms of industrial employment, such as maintenance, system management, and logistics coordination.

At the same time, the development of emerging strategic industries—including renewable energy, digital economy, biotechnology, and advanced materials—should be coupled with employment-oriented planning. These sectors can become new growth engines for both economic output and high-quality jobs if linked with inclusive labor strategies.

Furthermore, policies should strengthen the regional coordination of industrial development. Encouraging industries to relocate or expand in central and western provinces can balance regional employment distribution, reduce urban pressure in megacities, and promote equitable growth across the nation.

4.4 Vigorously Developing the Tertiary Industry

The tertiary sector (services) holds the greatest potential to alleviate China's low-employment problem due to its high labor elasticity and wide coverage of occupational categories. It encompasses a diverse range of activities such as wholesale and retail trade, hospitality, transport, education, healthcare, culture, entertainment, and information services all of which offer large-scale employment opportunities.

To stimulate growth in this sector, the government should:

Issue supportive policies to improve the business environment for service enterprises, particularly small and micro businesses.

Encourage private and social capital investment in education, healthcare, logistics, tourism, and eldercare services.

Simplify administrative procedures and reduce entry barriers for service-based entrepreneurship.

Promote digital service industries, such as e-commerce, online education, telemedicine, and cultural content creation, which can absorb a technologically adept young labor force.

Developing the tertiary industry also contributes to consumption upgrading and regional employment balance, particularly in urban and suburban areas. As the sector's share in the national economy expands, it can effectively serve as an "employment reservoir", providing both direct and indirect job opportunities for diverse skill levels.

4.5 Enhancing Human Capital and Labor Market Flexibility

In addition to industrial and technological measures, strengthening human capital formation is essential for improving employment quality. Expanding vocational and technical education, upgrading curricula to match market demands, and integrating lifelong learning systems can increase worker adaptability and competitiveness.

China should also modernize its labor market mechanisms, improving mobility between regions and sectors. Reforming the household registration (hukou) system, expanding urban social protection to migrant workers, and improving digital labor market platforms can make employment more inclusive and efficient.

4.6 Strengthening Social Security and Inclusive Growth Mechanisms

Employment security depends not only on job availability but also on the stability and quality of work. Strengthening unemployment insurance, public employment assistance and social protection for informal workers can cushion short-term shocks caused by structural adjustment or technological change. Inclusive growth policies should aim to narrow income disparities, ensuring that the benefits of economic expansion reach low-income and rural populations.

By combining economic modernization with human-centered social policy, China can build a resilient and inclusive labor market that supports sustainable development.

5. Conclusion

There exists a close and dynamic interdependence between employment and economic growth, as each reinforces the other in sustaining long-term prosperity and social stability. In China's case, the phenomenon of high economic growth accompanied by low employment expansion reflects structural and institutional challenges that have emerged amid the nation's rapid modernization and industrial transformation.

The root causes of this imbalance lie primarily in governmental preferences for investment-driven growth, the accelerating pace of technological advancement, and an industrial structure that remains insufficiently optimized for inclusive labor absorption. Over the past few years, while output and productivity have increased substantially, the capacity of the economy to generate sufficient and diverse employment opportunities has lagged behind.

To reconcile this divergence, China must pursue a more employment-oriented development strategy. This involves transforming government functions to emphasize job creation as a central performance goal, integrating employment considerations into macroeconomic and industrial policymaking, and providing targeted support to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and labor-intensive sectors.

At the same time, technological progress should be directed toward inclusive innovation one that complements rather than displaces human labor. Continuous investment in training, re-skilling, and lifelong learning is essential to ensure that workers can adapt to the changing demands of a digital and automated economy.

Furthermore, restructuring the economy through the upgrading of traditional industries, fostering emerging strategic sectors, and vigorously developing the tertiary industry especially services such as healthcare, education, logistics, and culture can significantly enhance employment absorption capacity. Expanding the service sector not only provides diverse job opportunities but also contributes to higher living standards and domestic consumption growth.

Ultimately, achieving the coordinated development of economic growth and employment requires a comprehensive, human-centered policy framework that balances efficiency with equity. Through institutional reform, technological inclusivity, industrial optimization, and sustained investment in human capital, China can alleviate employment pressures, narrow regional and social disparities, and move toward a model of sustainable, stable, and inclusive economic development.

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