

Migrant Workers' Children and China's Future: The Educational Divide 出稼ぎ労働者の子どもと中国の未来 教育格差

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According to official figures published by China's National Bureau of Statistics, there were 252.78 million internal migrant workers in China at the end of 2011 – one-third of the country's labor force and its fastest growing sector.¹ These workers, mainly rural migrants to cities and periurban areas, have contributed to China's impressive economic growth, helping generate over two trillion U.S. dollars' worth of exports in 2012. But there is also a less felicitous side to their rise. At the bottom of the Chinese urban hierarchy, migrant workers have formed a new underclass, caught in the urban-rural divide as the country undergoes rapid growth and urbanization. While these internal migrants' cheap labor has fueled urban and industrial growth over the last 30 years, their rural residency permits (*hukou*) prevent them and their children from accessing the social services that urban governments provide to local city dwellers. Those services include public education.

While some migrant workers who move from rural areas to Chinese cities for work leave their children behind in their hometown villages, more and more elect to bring their children along or to raise their city-born children in urban areas. In recent years it has become common for entire households to move to large cities. China's fifth population census found that in 2000 there were 19.82 million mobile children below age 14, of whom 15 million (about 75 per cent) had a rural *hukou*.² Forty-four per cent were aged 6-14 years old, meaning they were at the age to receive compulsory primary or junior secondary

education. The number of school-aged, city-residing migrant workers' children entitled to compulsory education is expected to rise by 1.5 million every year. In two of China's largest cities, Beijing and Shanghai, there are now approximately 450,000 and 500,000 migrant workers' children, respectively. An increasing proportion of these young second-generation migrants were born in the cities to which their parents migrated for work.³

One of their greatest needs is, of course, education. But in Beijing and Shanghai and many other cities in China that attract migrants these children have limited access to public primary and middle secondary schooling. And many who are able to attend public schools must pay hefty fees. Many, therefore, attend private, profit-driven, low-quality schools operated for migrant students only. But whether they attend private or public primary and middle secondary schools, the education of all migrant students in cities abruptly stops upon middle school graduation. That is, after completing six years of primary school and three years of middle school, the door shuts on them. Because students by law are not allowed to take the college entrance examination outside of the location of their *hukou* registration, public high schools in the city do not admit students with non-local *hukou*, and there are no private high schools catering to migrant children. The only option for migrant students to attend high school is to return to their hometowns. This situation creates many difficult decisions and challenges.

With most of their lives spent in cities, these young second-generation migrants have very

different career aspirations and quality of life concerns from their first-generation migrant parents. They embody a community of new urban dwellers, raised in the city's most disadvantaged socioeconomic circumstances. As they transition from school to work, their abilities to survive in the urban educational system and find upwardly mobile jobs in the local labor market are key to breaking inter-generational poverty cycles. They are also key to economic development and social stability in China.



A typical Beijing migrant neighbourhood located in front of a newly developed residential complex.

In studying the education and labor market decisions of migrant students, I focused on Shanghai and Beijing, each with migrants making up close to forty percent of the entire city populations. These cities also had high concentrations of migrant families (as opposed to single adult migrants) and play critical roles in shaping the country's future national policies.

Migrant students' educational opportunities highlight the intricate relationship between *hukou* status and social services entitlement. China's public welfare system has long been bifurcated along the rural-urban divide. A

citizen is entitled to different levels of welfare support from the government – such as healthcare, pension, low income insurance, and education – depending on his or her *hukou* status, and particularly whether that status is "agricultural" or "non-agricultural." Large-scale internal migration has resulted in a mix of both "agricultural" and "non-agricultural" populations residing in the same locality with access to different levels of public services. This augments the sense of unfairness in the society and poses significant challenges to the existing *hukou*-based welfare system. Moreover, recent economic reforms have brought about increasing marketization of public services, with migrant workers priced out of many private services. In many instances, privatization has spawned greater inequality in basic welfare services received by the prosperous and the poor. The Chinese government faces the task of redesigning a social system that can adapt to rapid economic development—one that can simultaneously tackle the challenges of population mobility and urban-rural and regional inequality. The education of migrant workers' children is at the forefront of this challenge.

The education of migrant students in urban areas illustrates the tension between central and local governments in Chinese governance. Since the 1980s, with increasing government decentralization and fiscal reforms, local governments have become more reliant on self-generated revenues and hence less subject to central authority. As a result, translating central government policies into local government practices has become more difficult. When it comes to providing social security and various services to migrants, we observe a growing gap between central government and local government practices and priorities. While inclusive education is beneficial to the nation as a whole, local governments find it politically unpopular and/or financially unfeasible to use the local education budget to educate migrant children or to

expand access to urban schooling. The central government has repeatedly issued policy directives stating that the education of migrant children is the host cities' responsibility, but provinces and cities have adopted the policy at their own pace and using different measures, with varying success.



"My Motherland, My Home." A map in a migrant classroom shows how the students come from all across China.

Internal labor migration in China has many parallels to international migration because of the social structural barriers discouraging permanent settlement, the vast differences between China's rural and urban cultures and discrimination against migrants. Thus, the study of second generation migrants in China has a unique place in the modern migration literature, opening up a window for the investigation of integration patterns, some of which are seldom observed elsewhere. For example, although children of Chinese immigrants to many countries, such as the United States, Canada and Australia, have been found to outperform the mainstream populations in those countries, children of internal migrant workers in China lag behind their peers.⁴ In addition, as we will discover, the identity development of migrant workers' children holds rich lessons for understanding

the international migration integration literature.

The educational challenges facing migrant students in Chinese cities today remain formidable. Until about ten years ago, migrant children were denied access to public schooling in Beijing, Shanghai and other cities. Many public schools now officially accept migrant children, but their enrollment in these schools is severely limited in practice by the documentation and financial requirements imposed by the local governments and local schools. Migrant children have the option of enrolling in private migrant schools, but these are of poorer quality. Nevertheless, approximately one-third of migrant students in Beijing and one-half of those in Shanghai enroll in private migrant schools. Whether they enroll in public or migrant schools, however, migrant children are not allowed to take the public high school entrance examination (or the college entrance examination) in their host cities. Thus, they are formally barred from attending local public high schools, regardless of their academic performance or the number of years they have lived in the city.

The migrant parents of second-generation migrant children living in Beijing and Shanghai earn less than local parents and have more erratic and unpredictable income streams. Many of them work in very segregated job markets, such as the construction industry, in which all workers are non-locals; payment is often deferred for months or until the end of a job. Most migrant families I encountered had more than one child, in violation of China's one-child family planning policy. Consequently, some younger siblings in the migrant families did not have a *hukou* registered anywhere, posing special problems for the children.

Migrant children, on average, arrive in the city at the age of 6, the official age for starting formal education. Most of those in middle school have spent more than half of their lives

in cities. Those who enroll in public schools tend to have spent a longer time in the city than their counterparts who enroll in migrant schools. The migration process of migrant families is often a serial or even cyclical one, with family members following each other between their hometowns and cities.



A bustling, self-sufficient migrant community.

Most migrant workers in the cities, especially those in Beijing, live in segregated neighborhoods and seldom venture into the city centers. Their living conditions are considerably poorer than those of their local counterparts, even those with a similar income level. Because of their parents' often precarious work lives and their rural backgrounds, migrant children are frequently involved in maintaining their families' livelihoods-involving substantial housework, childcare responsibilities, and even income-generating tasks often start from a young age. Migrant parents seldom have the time or knowledge to help their children with schoolwork or networking, beyond verbally emphasizing the importance of an education. Migrant children recognize that the education they receive at migrant schools is inferior, or even illegitimate. In forming friendships, migrant children from both migrant and public schools express a

preference for fellow migrant children.

The vast majority of the migrant students I interviewed, including those born in cities who had never set foot in their families' hometowns, self-identified with their hometowns rather than their cities. Consciously or unconsciously, most migrant children accepted their hometown *hukou* status as an identity virtually akin to ethnicity. In the face of de facto rejection by the public education system and local people, migrant children have chosen to identify with a place where they have legal rights, even if they personally have grown up in the city and have few sentimental ties to their rural birthplace or place of registration. Second-generation migrant students have adopted a "pan-migrant" identity, one closely related to the concept of "reactive ethnicity" in the international second-generation migration literature.

The provision of education for migrant children

Migrant parents basically have two options for educating their children in the city: the public system and the private system.

The public system

If given a real choice, almost all migrant families would jump at the opportunity to educate their children in a public school, where the quality of the teachers and school facilities are unquestionably better than in migrant schools. Unfortunately, three factors make the public system irrelevant to many migrant students and their parents: access, public examination requirements, and examination syllabi.

Before 1996, public education in urban areas was mostly financially inaccessible to migrant children. They could not enroll in public schools unless their parents paid exorbitant "sponsorship fees (*zanzhu fei*)," which were often charged illegally. These fees levied

exclusively on migrant children were commonly tens of thousands of RMB, at a time when an average migrant worker was only making a few hundred RMB a month. In short, public schools were only accessible for children of the richest non-locals.

In 1996, the Ministry of Education drafted the "Provisional Act regarding the Education of School-Age Children of the Floating Population." It stated that public schools had an obligation to enroll children with local residence permits. However, most migrant workers find it next to impossible to obtain such permits (Chen and Liang 2007).

In 1998, the Ministry of Public Security and the Ministry of Education jointly drafted the "Temporary Act on Migrant Children's Education." The Act stipulated that both the governments of the hometown origin and the host city were responsible for migrant children's education, and that the host government was obliged to ensure that migrant children had access to education if the migrant family could not provide caregiving support to the children in their hometowns. The State Council further clarified the sharing of responsibilities between the origin and host governments in 2001 with the release of "The State Council's Ruling over Basic Education Reforms and Development". This policy document established the "Two Primaries (*liangge weizhu*)" principle: in migrant children's education, "the host government has the primary responsibility, and public schools have the primary responsibility (*yi liurudi weizhu, yi gongban xuexiao weizhu*)" (State Council 2001). But local governments have implemented this legislation differently and to various degrees. They were slow to assume the financial costs associated with its implementation, and for some time many local governments accepted the rent-seeking behavior of public schools which charged migrant parents high "sponsorship fees".

In 2006, the newly revised "Compulsory Education Law" again emphasized the host government's responsibility for migrant children. But it also mentioned the principle of "enrolment in nearby schools (*jiujin ruxue*)," which is interpreted by some local governments as "enrolment in schools near the locality of *hukou* registration." This policy document promised the elimination of tuition fees (*xue fei*) in public schools, as well as the gradual elimination of "miscellaneous fees." In 2008, the National Development and Reform Commission officially categorized the collection of "sponsorship fees" as a criminal offense, and several high-profile cases against school management were reported (Xinhua News Agency 2008b). The practice of charging sponsorship fees thus finally stopped officially, making the public school option more affordable to migrant parents. However, there are not enough spaces in city public schools to satisfy the demand of all migrant students without additional government investment. This has allowed many schools to continue charging migrant families illegally. Eager to secure limited spots for their children, migrant parents often end up paying fees mandated by the public schools because of their non-local *hukou*, with the fees disguised in various ways. As recently as 2012, I encountered migrant families who had to pay such fees—for example, in the form of a donation to an earthquake relief fund—in order to enroll their children in public schools.

In addition to fees, local governments and schools routinely use paperwork as a barrier to limit migrant students' access to public schooling. For example, before 2008, migrant students in Beijing and Shanghai were only entitled to public schooling if their parents could produce the "Five Licenses": temporary residence permit, proof of employment, proof of residence, certificate from the place of origin showing that the family could not provide caregiving support to its children there, and *hukou* booklet. It is estimated that as many as

90 per cent of migrant workers do not have all five licenses (Human Rights Watch 2006). In 2008, the Shanghai government reduced the license requirement from five to two (identity cards of parents and proof of residence or employment) (Shanghai Baoshan District Political Consultative Conference 2012). In Beijing, however, the five license requirement is still in place and even seems to have become more stringent in recent years.⁵ A public school principal in Beijing told me that at least one of the documents (usually the proof of residence) was almost impossible for migrant parents to obtain on their own, but that the schools could arrange for the documents to be provided through connections with the district police offices. As a result, the public schools have de facto power to decide which and how many migrant students they will accept.



Recess at a migrant school located adjacent to newly developed residential complexes.

While the migrant population has shown progress in overcoming the barriers it faces to attending public schools—the official statistics suggest that about two-thirds of migrant children in Beijing now attend them (see Zhongguo Jiaoyu Bao 2002)—another hurdle has proven much more difficult, if not impossible, to overcome: the *hukou* restriction of the public

examination system. This restriction has the practical implication that students can only return to their hometowns for high school. The policy barring migrant students from taking the national college entrance examination (*gaokao*) outside of their *hukou* residence has historical roots: colleges in China practice an affirmative action based on residential location, which means that students from different provinces have different cutoff scores for admittance to the same tertiary institution. In the past, many students migrated to take the college entrance examination in provinces where the cutoff scores were lower, in hope of maximizing their college admission chances. This is commonly known as "*gaokao* migration." The policy to exclude non-locals from taking the college entrance examination was originally meant to prevent *gaokao* migration and to ensure fairness in the examination system. However, the policy also effectively robs migrant students of the chance to take the college entrance examination where they live and go to school, and by doing so it disrupts and blocks the passage of many migrant students through the educational system. For many students, returning to their *hukou* origin is not a feasible option. College entrance is extremely competitive in China, which means that any reform of this policy would be highly politically sensitive.

Even in cases where migrant students can relocate to their hometown to take the public examination, they face the additional hurdle of overcoming examination syllabus differences across regions. China's college entrance examination used to be unified throughout the country, using the same examination and the same syllabus, known as the "national syllabus." However, due to regional differences in education quality and resources, more and more provinces have replaced the national syllabus with a localized version of the college entrance exam and syllabus. Shanghai was the first place to localize its examination syllabus in 1987, and Beijing followed suit in 2002 (Xinhua

News Agency 2007). In 2012, 16 provinces had localized examinations. For migrant students who are from these provinces, going to public or migrant schools in the city means following a different syllabus from that of their hometown's, jeopardizing their chances of performing well once they return to their hometowns for further schooling and the examination. In the name of promoting educational decentralization and reform, more and more provinces are expected to localize their examination, which means syllabus mismatches will become an increasingly prevalent problem among migrant students in the coming years.

The private system

Theoretically, migrant children without local *hukou* can enroll in high-quality, expensive private urban schools—the "aristocratic" schools, as some people call them. In reality, however, only the privileged few can afford these schools—they are not a realistic option for the vast majority of low-skilled, blue-collar migrant parents. For these parents, the "private system alternative" for their children's education only refers to one type of school—"migrant workers' children schools (*mingong zidi xuexiao*)," or, simply, migrant schools. These schools are mostly founded and owned by non-locals, and often hire staff and teachers who themselves do not have local *hukou*. It is common for the schools to be housed in converted warehouses or factory sites. Many of these schools are run as for-profit businesses, and some are even managed as "business chains." In recent years, however, a few explicitly non-profit, "charitable" migrant schools have sprung up.

Most of the migrant schools are unlicensed, and hence not regulated by the government. Licensing is not a fully-transparent process and often requires the satisfaction of many conditions regarding the quality of teachers, facilities, and even the amount of liquid assets possessed by schools.⁶ Schools that operate

without a license can be forced to relocate or to close by government authorities at any time. Ironically, sometimes schools that operate *with* a license can also be shut down by government authorities without advance notice. Moreover, schools can be "registered to operate" under the government without being officially licensed. Thus, the concept of licensing is ambiguous and lacks transparency.

A migrant school principal I interviewed in 2007 provided the following ballpark estimates of educational costs, tuition, and profits, which illuminate the educational inequality between migrant and public schools. The variable cost of educating a primary student in the public system was about 800 RMB per term. This cost was highly subsidized by the local government, and local parents only had to pay about 200 RMB in various fees. On the other hand, a migrant school charged a primary tuition of about 500 RMB per term, while making about 100 RMB off each student. A migrant school with about 1,000 students thus made about 100,000 RMB in profits in one semester. This means that only about 400 RMB was spent on each student—half the amount for each student in the public system. The migrant schools keep their costs of operation very low. Some even hire teachers who are barely middle school graduates and pay them a few hundred RMB a month plus room and board.⁷

Migrant schools might offer classes from nursery level to grade 9, but only a small minority of them have a middle school section. Even for licensed migrant schools, licenses are almost always restricted to their primary section. The implications of graduating from a licensed or unlicensed migrant middle school vary depending on the city. In Beijing, graduates from licensed migrant middle schools are allowed (but not mandated) to participate in the public middle school examination (*zhongkao*) regardless of their *hukou*. This examination is officially a system to place middle school graduates in public high

schools according to their examination scores. However, only students with local *hukou* are assigned a public high school spot after participation in the examination; migrant students from licensed schools are allowed to participate, and receive an examination score, but they are not admitted to a public high school. In Shanghai, students with non-local *hukou* who are middle school graduates from both licensed and unlicensed schools are barred from taking the public middle school examination.



A migrant student plays table tennis without a bat at school.

The percentages of migrant children enrolled in public schools and migrant children's schools vary by city and over time. In northern Guangdong province, almost all migrant students reportedly enrolled in state schools in 2006, while in Guangzhou slightly less than one-third of students did. In Shenzhen and Dongguan (two other big cities in Guangdong), about 50 percent of migrant students attended public schools in 2006. In general, the smaller the migrant population relative to the local population, the higher the percentage of students enrolled in public schools. For example, in Hebei province, which is a migrant-exporting province, over 90 percent of migrant children go to public schools (ADB 2007). In

Beijing and Shanghai, about two-thirds and half of the migrant children attend public schools, respectively.⁸

Since the first appearance of migrant schools around 1992, government policies toward them have undergone significant changes, and their reception by local governments has varied dramatically by district, even within the same city.⁹ At the beginning, many migrant schools were forcibly closed. In March 1998, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Public Security jointly issued "Provisional Regulations on the Schooling of Migrant Children," which established a legal space for licensed migrant children's schools to exist (Ministry of Education and Ministry of Public Security 1998). Probably because of the relative leniency implied by this policy document, local governments' treatment of migrant schools eventually became "do not close, do not recognize (*bu qudi, bu chengren*)," although district governments still periodically closed the schools for purposes of redevelopment or other unstated reasons. Some district governments adopted a more active approach in incorporating migrant schools into their educational systems, even providing financial assistance to schools that met the operational standards for a license. In recent years, however, there have been reports of new waves of school closures by district governments.

The Situation in Beijing and Shanghai

Migrant Workers and their Children

Beijing and Shanghai are the two richest and most important cities. Both their economies and their non-local populations have grown exponentially over the years, and both attract migrants from all over the country. In Beijing, the non-local population grew one hundred-fold from 70,000 in 1985 to 7 million in 2010, which was 35.9 per cent of the city's population. In Shanghai, the number of non-locals increased from 1.7 million in 1986 to 9 million in 2010,

which was 39 per cent of the city's population (Chen & Liang 2007; Jiefang Daily 2011; Sixth National Population Census Beijing Office 2011).

In 2008, there were 405,000 migrant children in Beijing; there were 385,703 in Shanghai in 2006 (Cheng 2008; Tian and Wu 2009). These are the most recent official figures to have been made publicly available. However, conservative estimates put the current number of migrant children in Beijing and Shanghai at about 700,000 in each city. A survey in Beijing conducted in 2000 found that 72 per cent reported living with their spouses. In addition, over 36 per cent of those who lived with a spouse in Beijing had children studying locally (Chen & Liang 2007). An increasing proportion of migrant children were born in Beijing. Han (2007) found that the proportion more than tripled, from 5 per cent in 2000 to 16.2 per cent five years later.



Ninth-grade migrant students participating in our survey.

In mid-2007, there were roughly 300 migrant schools in Beijing, of which about 50 were licensed. Each school enrolled about 1,000-3,000 students. In 2012 there were around 200 licensed and unlicensed migrant schools in Beijing. Many unlicensed schools

were closed down between June and October in 2006, as directed by the "Notice of the General Office of the Beijing Municipality People's Government on the Work of Strengthening the Safety of Non-Approved Migrant Population Self-Schools" issued by the Beijing government in July 2006 (Human Rights Watch, 2006). During my fieldwork in late 2007, I came across abandoned sites of newly shut down schools. In subsequent years, reports of migrant schools being shut down have surfaced every summer before the start of the new school year. In 2011, the demolition of 24 migrant schools, which enrolled 140,000 students, made international headlines. No new licenses have been offered to migrant schools since 2006.

Shanghai had 277 migrant schools in 2007. In 2012 there were around 160, and they were all licensed. Since 2006, the Shanghai government has issued a series of policies to officially incorporate migrant schools into the official education system, in essence "contracting out" the city's responsibility to educate migrant children. These schools now receive subsidies from the government, both as funding for hardware improvement and as a per-head student subsidy. The subsidies are substantial, and are expected to bring about drastic improvement in the schooling quality: in 2009 the hardware subsidy was 500,000 RMB per school, and the student subsidy was 1,500 RMB per head (Human Rights In China Bi-Weekly 2011; China Education Daily 2009).

Both the Beijing and Shanghai city governments have implemented some policies to incorporate migrant children into the public school system. In 2002, Beijing drastically reduced the "placement fee (*jiedu fei*)" charged to non-local children who enroll in public schools. The fee was eliminated altogether in 2004. As mentioned above, however, such fees are still being illegally charged. Chen and Liang (2007) report that the Beijing government's budgeted special subsidy for

educating migrant children in public schools increased from 68 million RMB in 2004 to 100 million RMB in 2005. But they also note that the budget increment was insufficient to put all migrant children into public schools. In Shanghai, the paperwork requirement for migrant families to send their children to public school has been reduced, and a specific per-school quota system was put in place to mandate the enrolment of migrant students in public schools (Tian and Wu 2009).

Student Profile

Wang Mengmeng and her mother

Wang Mengmeng stood out among our interviewed students from the beginning. This ninth grader from Beijing was confident, expressive, and very eloquent. When asked the question we used to start all student interviews—"how do you like your school?"—she responded with details of the organizational structure of the educational chain that owned her school and seven others, complete with an analysis of how the school compared in size and structure with other Beijing migrant schools. She had the best grades in her class, she told us. It soon became apparent that her mother, unlike all the other migrant parents we met, played a vital role in motivating her to work hard and in helping with her studies. This was no accident: Mrs. Wang was a teacher at a migrant school, and, with her junior college diploma, she was one of the best-educated parents in our sample.

I had had an inkling of how hardworking students in China could be, but I was still surprised by how much time Mengmeng spent studying in spite of the relatively relaxed curriculum of migrant schools. She described a typical school day:

Wake up at 5 a.m. to memorize English vocabulary, then make my lunch and go to school. Do

homework after returning from school. After the assigned homework, work on the extra exercises that we have bought from stores outside. If there is still time at night, learn more vocabulary. If Chinese lessons require memorization, wake up earlier to memorize. It is a full life. If there is time on Sundays, mother would take me out. Basically I spend the whole day studying. Study at school, study at home—except during meal times.

Mengmeng had been in Beijing for eight years, and had attended the same migrant school since second grade. Back in their hometown in Henan, Mrs. Wang had also taught, but she decided to move to Beijing with Mengmeng because Mengmeng was her second child and she did not want to be penalized by the one-child family planning system in her hometown. Mr. Wang followed soon after, when he was laid off from his hometown job. Since the move, he had been working at a factory in the suburbs of Beijing, and usually visited his wife and daughter twice a month. Mengmeng's elder sister was attending high school in their hometown; both her mother and Mengmeng did not think the elder sister was "half as smart" as Mengmeng.

The parents each earned 800 RMB per month, and spent 300 RMB per month to rent a small living area of about ten square meters (slightly more than 100 square feet). Mrs. Wang laughingly recalled her family's first reactions to Beijing, warning us to treat it as "a joke":

When we first arrived... I was with my child. She was so small then, only seven or eight. We were walking on a street in this neighborhood. The first question she asked was, "Mom, is this

Beijing? Why isn't it even as nice as our hometown?" This is to say, children's impressions of Beijing were all formed by what they saw from books and television, only sparkling images. But where we live [in Beijing], to put it bluntly, is too "marginalized." After a while, the children would learn that those who migrate to work in the cities occupy the lowest ranks in society. It is impossible to be so high up there. Hence, a real understanding of Beijing was formed only after we arrived in Beijing.



Migrant students taking a shortcut to return home after school.

Mengmeng's name contained the word for "dream" in Chinese, and she had some big dreams of her own. She told us that she actually hated studying, but loved singing and dancing. Her schoolmates loved to hear her sing, and she sang in the classroom every day. She wanted to go to music school, and she dreamed of becoming a professional singer. Her mother said that this dream was crazy, and told her that with her family background her only path to success was to study.

This "path to success" was not without obstacles, however. Three minutes into our interview, without our prompting, she told us that she was "facing a problem-where to go for high school after ninth grade." Similarly, when we asked Mrs. Wang "how is your daughter doing in school?" she immediately responded by expressing her own greatest worry: "The biggest difficulty my child is facing now is where she should go to school after middle school graduation next year." Whenever the topic was touched on in the interview, Mrs. Wang sighed. It was "the topic I talk about most with my friends," she told us. "There is simply no way out."

Everyone in the family worried. Mrs. Wang knew that Mengmeng was "under immense pressure" and "could not see where her tomorrow leads." Mengmeng told us that she grew sad whenever her mother brought up the topic, that she sometimes could not sleep at night because of it, and that she had bad dreams about it. Still, Mrs. Wang emphasized repeatedly throughout our interview that "there is no path to follow except the path of studying." She asked if we knew of any solution to the problem; unfortunately, we could not provide one.

Mrs. Wang was fully aware that her daughter had only two options-stay in Beijing and go to a vocational school, or return home to take the high school entrance examination, perhaps after repeating a grade, and attend high school there. "Only these two routes," she said wearily. The chance of getting into a selective high school in her hometown was slim, however, because the students there were exceptionally competitive. In fact, when Mrs. Wang first found out about the educational policy that prevented non-local students in Beijing from taking the public high school entrance examination in the city, she sent Mengmeng back to their hometown after primary school graduation for seventh grade. But Mengmeng could not get used to the

learning style there, which she described as "studying to death." Her grades dropped, from top of her class in Beijing, to below average in the hometown. Furthermore, she found it difficult to live alone in a rural village, without her mother by her side. In the end, Mengmeng asked to return to Beijing.

Returning to Beijing was a turning point in Mengmeng's life—after her return to the city, she knew that she would never agree to go back to her hometown again. Deep in her heart, however, she knew that her decision to return to the city was equivalent to forever giving up on a regular high school education. She knew she would greatly disappoint her mother, but she had made up her mind.

Mrs. Wang had pulled many strings to make connections with the better vocational schools. Someone gave her a book about the different vocational schools in Beijing, which was distributed by the government to all public middle school students. Most of the good schools required Mengmeng to have a score on the high school entrance examination, which students from her unregistered migrant middle school were not allowed to take. Another problem was that the best vocational schools would also not accept students with non-local *hukou*. Those that would accept non-local students, according to Mrs. Wang, "could not teach the children anything, even if they go." There was also the problem of choosing a specialization: Mengmeng knew that her mother wanted her to learn accounting, but she found the subject boring.

If she could go back in time, Mrs. Wang told us, she would not choose to migrate again. She felt that it had been a mistake to come to Beijing, although she wondered whether it would really have been much better if they had not migrated. There would probably not be a job for them if they returned home.

Six months after our initial interview with her, we called Mrs. Wang again to see how

Mengmeng was doing. After we reminded her of who we were, her first response was, "Have you found a way out for my daughter?"

Three months after that phone call, we visited Mengmeng and her mother again. Mrs. Wang had found a vocational school for her daughter, who would soon be enrolled in its accounting program. Both mother and daughter appeared to have come to terms with the arrangement—a compromise between the daughter's wish to stay in the city and the mother's wish for the daughter to study a practical subject. Both seemed quite excited about the next stage of Mengmeng's life.

Despite the obvious hurdles she faced, Mengmeng was actually one of the luckier ones among the migrant students we interviewed. No other student had a parent with as much information and persistence as Mrs. Wang, nor one as open-minded and willing to push for the best future for her children.

This article draws on and adapts material from Holly Ming, **The Education of Migrant Children and China's Future - The urban left behind (Routledge: 2014)**.

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Notes

¹ National Bureau of Statistics of China (2012)

² More recent statistics on the number of migrant children are not available, but it is probably safe to assume that the current number is larger than 20 million.

³ One 1997 study estimates that 20% of migrant workers' children aged under 5 were local-born. (Duan and Zhou, 2001)

⁴ Reitz, Zhang, and Hawkins (2012) provides international evidence for children of Chinese immigrants outperforming their local peers, confirming the pattern which has long been commonly observed across countries receiving Chinese immigrants.

⁵ For recent development in Beijing, see the Beijing News (2012) and Jinghua Times (2012).

⁶ During interviews with school principals, I heard that the facilities requirements for licensing include an athletic running track for a primary school, and even fully equipped

science laboratories for a middle school.

⁷ In a non-profit, licensed migrant children's school, I met a middle school teacher with a new college degree from a teachers' college outside of Beijing earning 800RMB a month. This is a lower salary than what her students, fresh out of ninth grade, make as a security guard in Beijing.

⁸ Data on the percentage of migrant students enrolled in public schools is highly speculative, and are mostly researchers/ newspaper columnists' ballpark estimates. The numbers are also changing very fast – mostly increasing over time. Particularly in Shanghai, many policies have taken effect since 2008 to promote the enrolment of migrant students in public schools. In the same article that gave the Shanghai figure, it was suggested that the figure was less than 50 per cent two years ago. See *Zhongguo Qingnian Bao* (2007) and *Zhongguo Jiaoyu Bao* (2002).

⁹ For further reading on this, see Han (2001), Xu (2001), and Tian and Wu (2009)