

An Education that Diminishes Hope

— An Examination of Migrant Schools in Mainland China

CAMD Scholar Project

By Xinyi (Joyce) Wang '15

Advisor: Susanne Torabi

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Self-introduction and Remarks on Being a CAMD Scholar

I lived in Beijing for fifteen years before coming to Andover as a new Lower. Born and raised in a traditional Chinese family, I was satisfied inside my little social bubble at a local public school, but at the same time curious about the world beyond. After I arrived at Andover, my new access to Google, Youtube, Twitter, and Facebook opened me up to an amazingly complicated global society and also allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the culture, history, and politics of my home country. At Andover, I was given a new identity, “Chinese international student,” which made me notice the uniqueness of my cultural heritage and experience. As I began to view China more critically, I gradually discovered both positive and negative aspects of it that I never noticed before.

During Thanksgiving break in Upper year, I found a documentary on Youtube called *The Fortune Teller* by Chinese independent filmmaker Tong Xu. With his realistic visual language, Xu describes the lives of several rural migrants living in the slums in Beijing. The film touched me deeply because it exposed me to a side of my hometown that I had never paid much attention to — a reality marked by a lack of resources and hope. To my surprise, the slums portrayed in the film were actually less than one mile away from where my family lived. I was shocked by how different people’s lives could be even if they lived right next to each other. After watching this documentary, I felt that I should not stay silent while my hometown had a dark side that was being ignored. The idea of social-responsibility is not prevalent in China, but as a Chinese international student from Andover, I felt the need to take actions and spread empathy for the Chinese migrants struggling at the bottom of the society.

My research as a CAMD Scholar has allowed me to achieve my goal of exposing the underprivileged world of migrants in mainland China to a diverse audience, both Chinese and American. While the media portrays China as a growing economic power, I want to remind my readers that there is another side to China by spotlighting the unfair social system migrant workers live in and the difficulties that they face in their daily life. During the three months in the summer when I stayed in Beijing, I was able to gather information there and focus a good amount of my paper on this city that I am most familiar with and most passionate about. I also interviewed and filmed migrant workers and their children. It was a great honor getting to know my interviewees, who showed me that despite limited resources, one could still be spiritually rich and full of love and optimism.



Me with some migrant children and fellow volunteers whom I worked with as teachers at a summer camp for migrant children in Zhufang Village, Beijing.

I am grateful to have this chance to study the social environment of my home country from a scholarly perspective, acknowledging the positive while addressing the negative. This research paper contains my new understanding of the educational system and urban inequality in China. I hope it can inspire others to see China not only as a booming economy, but also as a complex community that is full of potential but needs to be repaired.

I. Introduction of the Project

“Migrant slums are *the* global issue of this century,”¹ says Jonathan Hursh, an American social entrepreneur who founded INCLUDED, a non-profit organization that strives to improve the education of migrant children all over the world. Indeed, migrants are deprived of many resources that most urban dwellers take for granted in everyday life. Suffering from poverty, safety hazards, and discrimination, they are often trapped in a vicious circle where a rigid social structure forbids them from climbing the socioeconomic ladder. For most migrants, education is the key to upward mobility, leading to better jobs and prospects.

In China, like in other parts of the world, migrant workers seek education as a way to escape poverty. However, migrant children do not receive as many educational resources as urban children and are less likely to succeed. Rather than attending public schools like most urban children, many migrant children must go to private schools set up specifically for them. Unlike the private schools commonly known in America, which are often considered superior to most public schools and offer higher-quality education to relatively well-off students, these “private” migrant schools in China are in fact lower-quality and cheaper than many public schools. They are built in slums and generally only offer courses from grade one to six.² When

students graduate, some continue to attend middle schools, vocational schools, or college, while others quit schooling and go straight to work. As a spontaneous creation of modern China's complicated social structure, migrant schools play an important role in the education of migrant children in urban areas and serve as a stark illustration of educational inequality in the Chinese society.

By collecting and analyzing studies done by both American and Chinese scholars, this CAMD Scholar research paper aims to explore the relationship between migrant schools and educational inequality in mainland China. It will examine the backgrounds of Chinese migrant workers, discuss both the benefits and downsides of migrant schools, address the policy trend on migrant schools, analyze the role they play in educational and urban inequality, and finally, look for solutions that would solve the core problem behind migrants' educational and economic disadvantages. In this paper, the "migrant workers," "rural migrants," or "migrants" involved are those who, without an urban citizenship (which will be defined in the next chapter), work long-term in a city in mainland China (which does not include Hong Kong, Macau, or Taiwan). This paper will focus on the migrants who are lower-class, blue-collar workers, instead of those who migrate to cities by studying at an urban college or getting a job that gives them an urban hukou as an employment benefit. The children who follow their migrant parents to the city will be referred to as "migrant children" (打工子弟, *da gong zi di*). They do not have an urban citizenship and constitute the student body of migrant schools. These children are a separate group from the so-called "left-behind children", (留守儿童, *liu shou er tong*) who live at home in the rural area with their extended family members, while their parents work and live in a city. Many studies have been made on the psychology, education, and development of left-behind

children, yet they will not be the focus of this research paper. Another note I need to make is that in China, information is organized in a different structure from how it is done in America. A lot of data is unavailable to the public for all kinds of reasons. For the research, I tried to gather as many useful sources as possible but there were still places where I could not find reliable data. Also, in some parts of the paper, I made certain points based on common knowledge and personal experiences.

Migrant schools appear to be god-sends for migrant children, rescuing them from a complete lack of education. But in reality, migrant schools perpetuate and intensify the inequality between migrants and urban citizens, because the education they provide is so low-quality that they fail to prepare migrant students for their futures. This research paper will explore and explain why migrant schools are simply a “relief plan,” instead of a real solution for the inequality that migrant children suffer from. The failures of migrant schools also expose problems of bigger scales that account for educational inequality and the stagnant social mobility of migrant workers as a whole.

II. An Overview of Migrant Workers in Mainland China

China has one of the most complicated modern histories and social structures in the world. It is impossible to evaluate the role of migrant schools and the significance of education to rural migrants without understanding the larger social environment and policy shifts that migrant workers have found themselves in, such as the household registration system and

economic reforms. Therefore, the paper will begin with a background story which provides the historical, political, and social context for the study of migrant schools.

A. A Narrative of Internal Migration in China since 1978

The migration in mainland China starting in 1978 has been considered the largest migration in human history, triggered by the Chinese economic reform which generated an enormous urban labor demand and rural labor surplus.³ In December 1978, two years after the end of the Cultural Revolution and Mao Zedong's death, Deng Xiaoping, the virtual leader of China at the time, launched a series of economic reforms that lifted restrictive trade policies in four cities on the Pacific coast — Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou, and Xiamen.⁴ Since then, China stepped into a new era marked by economic liberation and change. Industrialization and urbanization took place all over the country. Cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen grew into centers of culture, business, and technology, generating a tremendous appetite for cheap labor. Meanwhile, as new policies abandoned the original collectivized agricultural system and spurred productivity, labor surpluses in rural area occurred, providing an incentive for farmers to migrate to the urban area.⁵ In this way, the gap between urban labor demand and rural labor supply stimulated internal migration in mainland China. More and more people left their hometowns in search of better employment and a more affluent life.

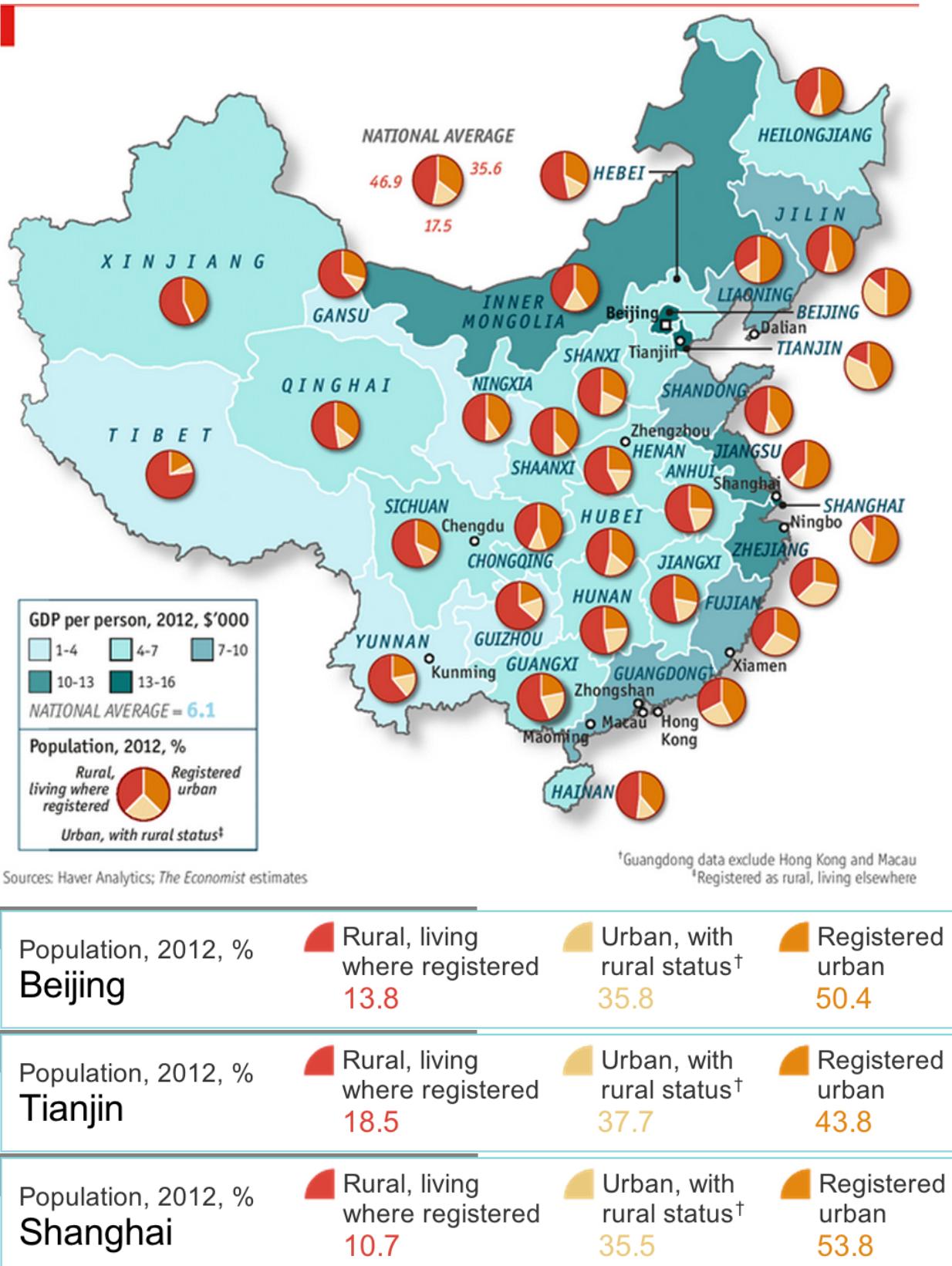
In spite of an economic environment that favored the influx of labor into cities, migration was tightly controlled by the *huji* (户籍), or *hukou* (户口) system in the 1980s. Rooted in ancient China, the hukou system, or the household registration system, is used by the government to keep records of every citizen since the 1950s.⁶ Every Chinese citizen is required by law to

register for “hukou,” which functions as a record of the citizen’s personal information and history, as well as a gateway to state-sponsored benefits such as Social Insurance and public education. A hukou designates a person as the resident of a certain area, which is usually their birth place or permanent residence location. One who registers for hukou in an urban area owns an urban hukou and thus becomes an urban citizen; one who registers in a rural area owns a rural hukou and becomes a rural citizen. In this way, the hukou system categorizes the entire Chinese population into two general groups: the urban class and the rural class. In the 1980s, in an attempt to stabilize labor situations in rural areas, the government set high thresholds for rural citizens to move to cities, putting migrants in a difficult situation.⁷ In order to settle down in a city, they had to go through an expensive and complicated process to acquire permits. Due to such restrictions, migration in the early years of the Chinese economic reform remained limited.

In 1992, responding to the increasing demand for migrant labor in eastern cities, the government relaxed hukou restrictions and lowered the threshold for migration.⁸ In the following years, the number of migrants in eastern cities skyrocketed. They were still required to submit several documents and obtain permits, but the process was easier and they were allowed to stay in the cities for a longer period of time.⁹ Countless number of rural migrants crowded into eastern cities and worked blue-collar jobs as cleaners, drivers, and factory workers. Although originally most of these migrants were adult men, they were increasingly accompanied by their wives and children, settling in the city as families.¹⁰

Today, migrant workers constitute an essential part of the Chinese society. According to the “National Report on Migrant Workers in 2013” by the National Bureau of Statistics of China, there were around 268,940 thousand migrant workers in mainland China in 2013, which is

Figure: China's Population and GDP per person in 2012



19.6% of the Chinese population, and the equivalent of approximately 85% of the entire American population.¹¹ As shown by the graph on the previous page, in 2012, more than 30% of the populations in major cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin consisted of migrant workers, who lived in an urban setting with a rural status.¹²

Nowadays, a considerable number of migrants who are relatively wealthy have switched their rural hukou to one of their residing city's through numerous ways such as buying a house in the area, or getting a job that enables them to change into a local hukou as a special employment benefit. Only with an urban hukou can one finally establish his or her identity as an urban citizen and integrate into the urban society. However, switching hukou is a very costly and complex process which differs by region. Those who live in a city for a long time as a college student or company employee might have a chance to do so; but for migrant workers, who are mostly uneducated and have no stable jobs, switching hukou is an unreachable dream.

B. Social Inequality and the Lives of Migrant Workers at Present

As *The Economist* points out, “Between 2001 and 2010, migration contributed nearly 20% of China’s economic growth, but it has all come at a personal cost.”¹³ Satisfying the labor demand of China’s growing manufacturing and service industries, migrant workers lay the foundation for China’s economic development. According to the fifth national census in 2000, 55.4% of migrant workers were employed in the manufacturing and transporting industry, and 22.5% in the service industry.¹⁴ They produce a variety of products that are sold and used all over the world, allowing China to become the world’s biggest exporter.

Despite migrant workers' huge contributions to the economy, they face all kinds of challenges in the urban society. One of the major problems they suffer from is their economic status. Growing up in poor, underdeveloped, agriculture-oriented rural regions, migrant workers move to cities without money or skills. On average, they receive 8.72 years of education,¹⁵ which binds them to the worst-paid jobs in the city. In a typical migrant family, the husband works as a construction worker, a truck driver, or a junkman, while the wife works as a maid in a household. In 2013, the average monthly income for a migrant worker in mainland China was 2609 yuan (= \$420)¹⁶, which is less than half of the average monthly income of the residents in major cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, demonstrating the income gap between urban citizens and migrant workers.¹⁷ Their level of income is far from enough to purchase a house or a car in a city. If their employers do not provide housing, most migrant workers would rent a room in the basement of a residential building, or build a hut by themselves with discarded construction materials in slum communities. Very few work their way up successfully, while the vast majority struggle as second-class citizens throughout their lives.

Along with financial obstacles, the hukou system poses great difficulties in the daily lives of migrant workers by depriving them of access to state-sponsored benefits. A hukou serves as a gate pass to social welfare. However, one can only receive benefits from the local government where they registered for hukou. Therefore, migrant workers with a rural hukou are unable to enjoy state-sponsored benefits in the urban area where they currently reside and work. In China, only a small portion of migrant workers have social insurance. According to the "National Report on Migrant Workers in 2013," only 9.1% of migrant workers had unemployment insurance, 17.6% had health insurance, and 15.7% had retirement insurance.¹⁸ In comparison, over half of

Image: The migrant slum in Guangzhou, Guangdong Province



Source: Xi Jiang Du Shi Bao

Image: Inside “Zhufang Village,” a migrant community in Beijing



Photographed by the author

Image: A glimpse into the home of a migrant couple, in the basement of a building in Beijing



Source: Sim Chi Yin & VII Magazine

the urban residents in Beijing have these types of insurance.¹⁹ Although this problem has slightly improved in recent years, the economic disparity between rural migrants and urban citizens is calculated to be around six-fold, considering the lack of welfares.²⁰ Due to the hukou system's discriminatory treatment of lower class citizens, many scholars describe it as "the caste system of China."²¹

Along with economic inequality and the absence of social benefits, migrant workers also face discrimination and segregation from urban citizens. Migrant workers abandoned their agricultural way of life once they made their decision to migrate, yet in the city, they are still often considered farmers and are addressed as "*wai di ren*," which means "outsiders," emphasizing their different origins in a derogatory way. Also, migrants are often treated with distrust and disrespect. In *Education and Social Change in China: Inequality in a Market Economy*, Hong Kong University professor Gerard A. Postiglione says:

*"As in many other societies, Chinese urban dwellers consider themselves more educated, informed, sophisticated, and cultured than their rural compatriots. The latter are considered dirty, rude, uncouth, and uneducated."*²²

Indeed, many urban citizens tend to treat migrant workers as second-class, inferior citizens and blame them for crimes, pollution, and even traffic.²³ Some even promote segregation. For example, in Qingdao, a northern coastal city in Shandong Province, several city residents advocated for separate seats on buses for migrant workers; in Beijing, migrant workers were fined for using certain public restrooms.²⁴ However, the Chinese government has done little to prevent these acts of prejudice, leaving migrant workers with no choice but to tolerate them.

C. Migrant Children, Their Story of Education, and the Emergence of Migrant Schools

In 2009, according to statistics published by the Chinese government, the number of migrant children in Beijing at school age had reached 300,000.²⁵ Migrant children, unlike their parents, behave similarly to their urban counterparts as modern technology has brought information and a modern lifestyle to almost every corner of the society. Growing up in an urban setting, migrant children live among skyscrapers, fancy cars, luxurious country clubs, and the newest electronics; they are updated on the latest movies, music, and celebrity news. However, migrant children have little in common with urban children beyond their urban living environment. Like their parents, migrant children face all forms of inequality and have enormous difficulties escaping the poverty trap. One of the most visible forms of inequality faced by migrant children is educational inequality, since they have very limited access to educational resources in the cities they live in.

Education is of great significance to migrants. For migrant families, education is the first step towards integration into the urban society.²⁶ Treated as second-class citizens all their lives, migrant workers hope that education will give their children access to a diploma — a key to the white-collar world — and eventually, a chance to rise up the socioeconomic ladder and blend into the urban society. Migrant children are the future for their parents, many of whom move to a city in order to provide their children with a better education.

However, not all migrant children are able to receive public education in the cities. The educational resources provided by the public school system can only support urban children and a limited number of migrant children, which resulted in the emergence of private elementary schools to satisfy the demand for education. In 1993, when migration was at its peak because the

government just relaxed hukou restrictions, the first privately-run school specifically for migrant children was founded in Beijing, and the concept of “migrant school” came into being.²⁷ Before the emergence of migrant schools, migrant children were most often left behind in the rural area while their parents worked away from home; or they followed their parents to a city and simply stopped receiving education. Migrant schools, however, gave migrant parents the choice of bringing their children along with them to a city while still being able to provide them with some sort of education.

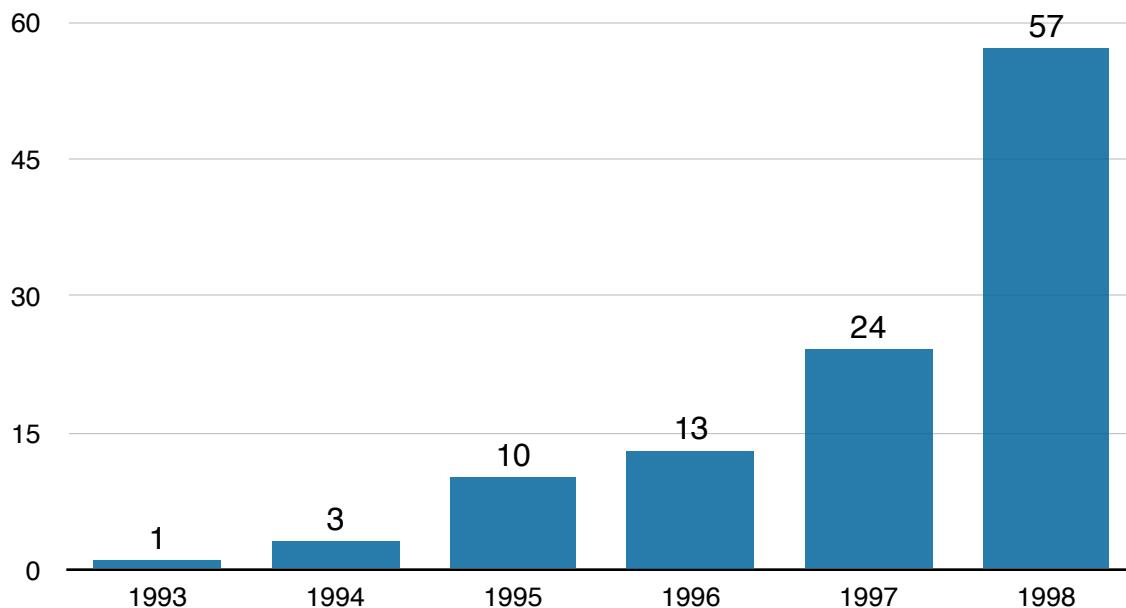
In 1998, the Ministry of Education and the Public Security Bureau enacted *Provisional Measures for the Schooling of Migrant Children and Youths*, which sought to officially acknowledge the legitimacy of migrant schools:

“Municipalities should allow migrant children aged between 6 and 14 to study full-time in the state-run and private schools with the status of temporary students.”²⁸

As a result, the number of migrant schools grew rapidly.²⁹ In 2001, around 30,000 migrant children in Beijing were attending more than 200 migrant schools, and in Shanghai, 250 migrant schools were providing more than 40,000 migrant children with access to primary education.³⁰

Although the Introduction chapter distinguishes between migrant children and “left-behind” children, it is important to acknowledge that these two definitions often cross over. In fact, most migrant children have “left-behind” experiences in some stage of their lives. A lot of migrant children spend the first few years of childhood at home in the rural region or a small city like left-behind children. When they grow older, if their parents’ economic situation allows them to migrate, they join their parents and attend elementary school in a city. Most migrant parents

Figure: The Number of Beijing Migrant Schools Founded Between 1993 and 1998



Source: *Sina Education*, (<http://edu.sina.com.cn/l/2001-11-14/18490.html>)

are aware of the importance of parental care for a child's psychological and intellectual growth, and that schools in big cities are generally better than those elsewhere. Thus, they prefer having their children with them in the cities to leaving them behind in the rural region. However, when migrant children reach the age for middle school or high school, most of them go back home and become "left-behind" again, because hukou policies require them to take the high school or college entrance exam in their native places.³¹ Therefore, their education experience often falls into the following pattern: kindergarten in a rural setting, elementary school in a city, and middle school back in a rural setting. Due to this pattern, most migrant children living in a city are elementary school-aged, and most migrant schools only offer courses from grades one to six, while migrant middle schools barely exist.³² After middle school, those who are financially and

academically capable attend high school, vocational school, and college, while many choose to find a job as soon as they graduate.

Today, migrant schools have become the most popular alternative for children who are unable to attend public schools. In 2007, there were around 400,000 school-aged migrant children in Beijing; about 250,000 attended public schools, while the other 150,000 all enrolled in migrant schools established by charities or individuals.³³ While migrant parents work long hours every day, migrant schools take care of their children five days a week from morning till the afternoon, teaching basic subjects such as math and Chinese. However, being the most *popular* choice does not make migrant schools a *good* choice. In the past decade, the horrible conditions of migrant schools have grabbed significant public attention, and a number of studies have examined the serious problems they face. Nevertheless, they have to be given credit for providing a place for migrant children to learn.

III. The Benefits of Migrant Schools

As an essential part of the educational system in mainland China, privately-run migrant schools help migrant children with their access to education. Their private status enables them to enroll students regardless of their geographical background, bypassing the hukou barrier. They charge relatively cheap tuition fees that most migrant parents can afford. And they gather a homogeneous group of students so that migrant children do not have to suffer from class differences. With such benefits, migrant schools have become extremely popular among children

neglected by the public school system. They save migrant children from illiteracy in a society that is becoming more and more competitive every passing second.

A. Bypassing the Hukou Barrier

In 2003, the government passed a new compulsory education law, which mandates a “free compulsory nine-year education for all children regardless of sex, nationality, or race,” including migrant children.³⁴ However, in order to apply to public schools, students without a local hukou are required to submit “five certificates” (五证, *wu zheng*) — “Temporary Residential Permit,” “Proof of Residency at Actual Residence,” “Migrant Worker Employment Certificate,” “Proof of No Local Monitoring Conditions Issued by the Government of the Place of Hukou,” and “Household Registration Book.”³⁵ Obtaining all five certificates involves a highly complicated and expensive process, which often requires migrant workers to take time off from work and travel to the place where they registered for hukou, and most migrants cannot afford the trip.³⁶ As a result, many migrant children do not have the required documents and cannot apply to public schools.

When public schools turn away those without a local hukou and the five certificates, migrant schools become the easiest and only solution left. As civilian-run institutions with no connection with the government, they do not have to select their prospective students based on hukou, and thus they can accept the migrant children excluded from public schools.

B. Alleviating Financial Burden

Even with all five certificates, many migrant children still cannot enroll in public schools, since the expenses of attending public schools pose another huge obstacle. According to a 2010 survey of 1060 migrant workers, 43% of them expressed that the biggest difficulty for their children's education was the high expenses (while 36.2% said it was the hukou barrier).³⁷ Although public schools do not charge tuition fees, there are still miscellaneous charges for textbooks, learning materials, and meals. For migrant families who earn unstable and meager incomes, these school fees are daunting.

Miscellaneous fees are not the only thing that migrants need to spend their money on to enroll their children in public schools. When migrants apply, public schools often charge them additional fees, or donations. According to a 2006 research, the amount of donations that migrants give to public schools can range from \$160 to \$4800.³⁸ Although the government has declared that all donations are "voluntary," it is common knowledge that without donating money, migrants have no chance of getting into a public school.³⁹

The phenomenon of giving donations originated from China's problematic educational funding system and the "enrollment by district" admission method. Under the hukou system, the central government allocates education funds to each city based on the number of school-age children who have registered for hukou in that very city.⁴⁰ In other words, the number of school-age children with a local hukou in a city determines how much funding the public schools receive from the government. When a migrant child moves to a city, the education funds for this city does not increase because a migrant child does not have a local hukou. In this way, due to the large number of migrant children in the urban region, public schools cannot always receive

sufficient funding to educate all school-age children in the area, both migrant and local. Therefore, they lose the financial incentive to admit migrant children. Additionally, elementary schools in most Chinese cities have developed an admission method called “enrollment by district,” or “enrollment at the nearest school,” which means that students with a hukou near the school are considered before others in the admissions process.⁴¹ Migrant children, with their hukou in the rural region, are always put behind local children and are thus less likely to be admitted.

In such a disadvantaged situation, the only method for migrant children to enroll in public schools is to pay more. Many public schools offer a greater chance of acceptance in exchange for donations, or “lend-lease schooling fees” and “financial sponsorship fees.”⁴² In reality, public schools often fabricate excuses such as over-enrollment and incomplete documents to intentionally request additional payment.⁴³ Those who are relatively well-off pay the extra fees and send their children to public schools. For most migrant workers, however, a donation might consume an entire year’s earning and is completely out of reach.⁴⁴

Research done by the National Bureau of Statistics indicates that the average expense in a year for migrant students in public schools is 1,025 yuan (=\$165), while those attending private migrant schools spend 980 yuan (=\$158) a year on average.⁴⁵ The difference may seem small for middle-class citizens in both America and China, but it is in fact very significant for low-income migrant families, most of which have multiple children. According to a survey in Beijing, about half of all adult migrants own small retail businesses, 20% work in factories, and 21% have part-time, unstable jobs.⁴⁶ Among all the migrant families, 34% earn an *annual* income below 12,000 yuan (=\$1,935), 43% between 12,000 and 30,000 yuan, and less than 3% above 30,000 yuan.⁴⁷

In a city like Beijing, migrant families spend at least 600 yuan (=\$97) every *month* on food, and the rest of their income is spent on other things such as water, electricity, and rent.⁴⁸ After paying for these necessities, migrant families have little left for their children's education.⁴⁹ Therefore, the \$10 price gap between a public school education and a migrant school education makes a significant difference for these families.

Facing higher tuition fees and exorbitant donation requirements, migrant workers most often choose to save money by sending their children to migrant schools.⁵⁰ In a gray zone where the government imposes little regulation, migrant schools control their own funding and do not have to abide by the implicit admission rules in the public school system.

C. Avoiding Discrimination

Migrant schools also have the benefit of creating an environment free of discrimination. According to a 2009 survey conducted in Beijing, 52% of migrant parents recognized discrimination as one of the reasons for transferring their kids from public schools to a migrant school.⁵¹ At public schools, migrant children face unequal treatment during the admission process and their interaction with peers. However, when they attend migrant schools, the class barrier is nonexistent, since all students belong to the same socioeconomic group.

Public schools discriminate against migrant children during admissions for several reasons. Along with the funding issue introduced earlier, migrant children also have a high drop-out rate, which reflects poorly on the school's records. When the government evaluates a school, it pays close attention to its drop-out rate.⁵² Since migrant children quit school much more often than others due to their mobile lifestyle, they tend to increase the school's overall drop-out rate

and hurt the school's ranking and reputation.⁵³ Another reason why public schools hesitate to admit migrant children is that many urban parents forbid their children to interact with migrant children. Migrant children are stereotypically viewed as wild, bad-mannered, and unruly, so many urban parents complain about their behaviors to the school administration. Under such pressures, public schools raise the threshold of admission for migrant children. In the city of Zhengzhou in Henan province, for example, several public elementary schools forced migrant children to take an IQ test before admitting them.⁵⁴

Discrimination also exists in the classrooms. Although all students study and play under the same roof, some school administrations place migrant students on a separate side of the room, give them different teachers and different curriculums, and treat them with a discriminatory attitude.⁵⁵ It is a common phenomenon that public school segregate migrant children from the rest of the student body; some have divided the school into the “west side” and the “east side.”⁵⁶

Discrimination at public schools negatively influences the psychological development of migrant children, leading to increasing social distance between children of different socioeconomic status. A research conducted in Chengdu, Sichuan province indicated that nearly 30% of migrant children attending public schools in the city felt a psychological barrier between themselves and their urban peers.⁵⁷ This barrier intensifies as migrant children grow up, causing significant impact throughout their lives.⁵⁸

To avoid discriminations at public schools, migrant parents turn to migrant schools, which provide a relatively comfortable environment for their children to grow and learn. At a migrant school, the student body, the faculty, and even the administration mostly consist of rural

migrants. In such a relatively homogeneous environment, away from economic inequality and urban segregation, migrant children are no longer afraid of the cruelty of their classmates and teachers, and are able to grow up with more confidence and ease.

D. Conclusion

Helping to overcome obstacles caused by the hukou system, tuitions, and discrimination, migrant schools open the door for thousands of children towards education. Ever since their emergence, migrant schools have made significant contributions to the improvement of school attendance rate of migrant children. According to a survey conducted by the Beijing Municipal Office for Migrant Affairs, the drop-out rate among migrant children in Beijing was as high as 13.9% in 1997.⁵⁹ By 2004, a survey of 3,864 migrant children and 2,157 migrant families in Beijing indicated that nonattendance rate had dropped to 2.8%.⁶⁰ Thanks to migrant schools, the children of migrant workers can finally access education, avoid illiteracy, and escape from a childhood roaming in the streets.

IV. The Downsides of Migrant Schools

As the only choice left for migrant children in an extremely unfair educational system, migrant schools can only help to a certain extent: other than putting migrant children in a classroom, they offer little. Founded in a legal gray zone, migrant schools are poorly organized and lack basic resources. They only teach the basics of the basics in terms of academics; and they

omit a great deal of other things which public school students are taught at a young age, such as art, sports, as well as moral values and discipline.

Although migrant schools help the migrants with *access* to education, the core problem of education — the quality of education — remains unaddressed. Migrant schools serve as a solution, but they are not a satisfactory one, because they cannot achieve the ultimate goal of imparting students knowledge and skills, and laying a solid foundation for their higher education and careers. The low quality of migrant schools is illustrated by a variety of problems they face in the following aspects: licensing, funding, faculty, safety, overcrowding, and lack of after-school assistance. All these problems impair the overall learning experience and academic performance of migrant children, making migrant schools the perpetrators of educational inequality, rather than mitigators.

A. Licensing

Founded and run by non-government organizations or individuals, a large proportion of migrant schools lack the government-issued license that is required for all educational institutions.⁶¹ According to a 2009 research conducted by *Beijing Youth Legal Aid and Research Center*, 100% of the migrant schools surveyed had tried to apply for a license, but only 50% of them eventually received it, and many of these schools waited for several years.⁶² Mengwan Wang, a teacher-administrator at Bainian Vocational School, which is a free private educational institution for migrant children, said that to obtain a license for the school required years of hard work by the founder Yao Li and her colleagues: they worked through the government and used many connections until they finally reached their goal.⁶³ From 2006 to 2008, the number of

licensed migrant schools in Beijing only increased from 56 to 63.⁶⁴ Even now, only a very small proportion of migrant schools in Beijing hold licenses. Without a proper license, migrant schools are deemed illegal and constantly face the danger of removal. They also cannot issue student identity cards, which act as a gateway to benefits and rights that are offered by the government to students with a legal status. In this way, the lack of licenses disrupts the stability of education and deprives students of legal benefits, largely damaging the educational quality of migrant schools.

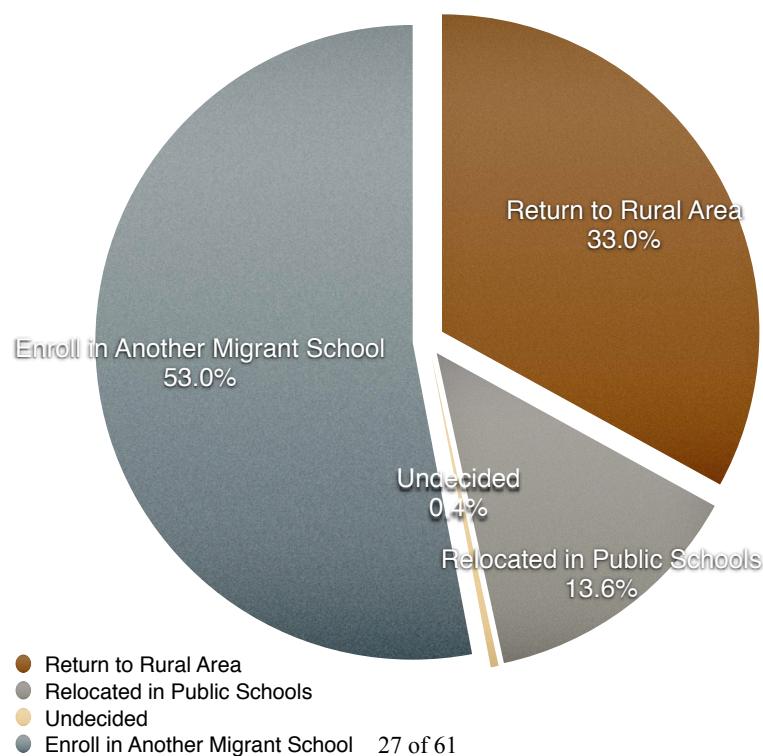
Unlicensed migrant schools face the possibility of “removal” (拆迁, *chai qian*) — a government order to shut down the entire school and dismiss all students and faculty members — which threatens the stability of migrant schools. Since 2006, as an effort to enforce the 9-year compulsory education law and increase regulations on all educational institutions including migrant schools, city governments all over the country have been shutting down unlicensed migrant schools and relocating migrant students into public schools.⁶⁵ Seemingly, the government had a good motive, but in reality, because of the poor enforcement of compulsory education, not all of the dismissed migrant students successfully matriculated into public schools. Some went on to new migrant schools, while others had to leave their parents in the city and went back home for school as left-behind children.⁶⁶

In Beijing, for example, the government issued the “Notification for Further Enhancement of the Safety Issues of Unauthorized Migrant Schools” on July 12th, 2006, which was essentially a command to eliminate privately-run migrant schools.⁶⁷ After migrant schools were closed, the government was responsible for placing migrant students into new schools. However, even though the government ordered “all public schools to admit students without any

conditions,” less than 30% of the dismissed migrant students found new schools to attend in reality.⁶⁸ This “clean-up” order involved 241 schools and nearly 100,000 students in total.⁶⁹ Additionally, in 2012, a new wave of clamp-down orders closed 24 migrant schools in Beijing and dismissed around 14,000 students.⁷⁰ Reporters from *The Beijing News* conducted a sampling survey on 5,000 of these dismissed migrant students, the result of which is shown by the graph below.⁷¹ It turned out that only 13.6% of the students were actually relocated into public schools, while over half of the students enrolled in migrant schools that were not yet shut down.⁷²

Other than promoting compulsory education, making room for city construction has also motivated the government to get rid of slums and nearby migrant schools. The government often uses the lack of licenses as an excuse to achieve its goal. In June 2014, Dequan Elementary, a migrant school located in the slums in Zhengzhou, Henan Province was shut down because

Figure: Where Migrant Children in Beijing Receive Education After Being Dismissed, 2012



urbanization and city beautification orders planned to completely “clean up” the slums downtown.⁷³ This time, students of the school were completely left alone in finding new schools, and few of them succeeded.⁷⁴

No matter what the motive is — to promote compulsory education or eliminate slum areas — forced removals of migrant schools interrupt migrant children’s education process and force them away from their friends and teachers. According to statistics provided by the Ministry of Education, from 2001 to 2010, the number of migrant schools in the whole country dropped by 47.6%, from 49,1273 to 25,7410, demonstrating the huge threat that the lack of licenses may pose to the stability of migrant schools.⁷⁵

Besides removal orders, another challenge faced by unlicensed schools is that they cannot give their students a legal “student status” (学籍, *xue ji*). Without the ability to issue student certificates or register students into the national schooling system, they hurt the students’ chances of receiving higher education and deprive them of student welfares. By law, an unregistered student without a student status cannot pursue a higher level of education.⁷⁶ Therefore, migrant school students have little chance of getting into a public middle school, high school or college through standardized examinations. As indicated by research conducted by *Beijing Youth Legal Aid and Research Center* on 41 migrant schools in Beijing in 2009, most students surveyed did not own a student card and were not registered in the national system.⁷⁷ Among the 20 licensed schools, four schools had at least partially registered their students; in the 21 unlicensed schools, none of the students were registered.⁷⁸ According to Xiong Bingqi, a Chinese scholar of education, migrant students without a student status have only two options: becoming left-behind

and registering into the educational system back home, or staying at the current school facing the constant danger of dismissal.⁷⁹ Either way, they face a grim future.

Also, unlicensed migrant schools cannot provide student welfare benefits. For example, unlicensed migrant schools do not offer government-sponsored physical examinations to students, while all public schools do.⁸⁰ Additionally, the student card issued by the government can be used as a bus pass and gives students a 50% discount.⁸¹ However, students at unlicensed schools are unable to enjoy this benefit.

The problem of licensing concerns the continuity of the students' studying process, their welfares, and their enrollment into higher-level schools. Without a license, migrant schools are essentially deemed illegal and are thus vulnerable to all kinds of policy changes from the government. As a major obstacle faced by migrant schools, the lack of proper licenses makes their quality significantly lower than that of public schools, intensifying educational inequality.

B. Funding

The funding of migrant schools mostly depends on tuition fees and donations, which are often inadequate and lead to poor school facilities, corruption, and overcharging. With a low budget, school administrations tend to cut spending by using old and low-quality facilities. Migrant schools usually use abandoned buildings in the slums as classroom buildings.⁸² Students are packed in tiny rooms without air-conditioning or heat; the desks are old and the bathrooms are unhygienic; and there are little to no athletic and recreational facilities.⁸³ Some migrant parents have also complained about bad food and fire hazards.⁸⁴ Without enough funds, migrant

schools have no way of providing migrant children with a safe, clean, capacious, and comfortable environment to study.

In the past decade, the poor conditions of migrant schools have attracted considerable public attention in China and abroad, which resulted in continuous financial support from philanthropists and charities such as the Red Cross Society, China Children and Teenagers' Fund, and Compassion for Migrant Workers. However, only some of the donations ended up benefitting migrant children due to the corruption of school administrations. In the cities of China, many migrant schools are founded by philanthropists, while others are used as business opportunities. In 2009, when filmmaker Chen Junxu made a documentary on migrant schools in Beijing⁸⁵, he talked with a number of migrant school sponsors and discovered a pattern of family management: the sponsors of the schools often took the position of the headmaster, and their wives took charge of the financial aspects of the schools.⁸⁶ Members of the faculty and staff called the sponsor "boss" rather than "headmaster."⁸⁷ Sometimes, the family also owned the convenience stores and gaming rooms nearby, forming a business monopoly in the area.⁸⁸ Profiting from these establishments in addition to tuition fees, the family ran the school like a company.⁸⁹

This pattern of family management makes corruption rampant. Wang Chunhua, a member of "Sons of Peasants," which is a charity organization in Beijing, exposed the corrupt nature of these families: during the three years when she worked at a migrant school as a teacher, she witnessed multiple cases of misappropriation of donations by the "boss."⁹⁰ She explained that migrant schools, especially those with a lot of media attention, regularly received large amount

of money and supplies such as ping pong tables, pencil cases, fans, and second-handed computers.⁹¹ However, the “boss” often kept the money and sold all or some of the supplies.⁹²

Moreover, school owners often raise tuition unreasonably to make additional profits. Ms. Zhang Cuixia, a mother of five, had to send her daughters back to Anhui Province because the migrant school that her daughters used to attend in Beijing raised the tuition by 900 yuan one year.⁹³ When she tried to talk with the school headmaster, he refused to answer any questions and turned her away.⁹⁴ Similar cases have happened to many other migrant families, resulting in the parents sending their children back home to the rural region because they could no longer afford the high tuition fees charged by migrant schools.

Problems also occur when too much public attention and donations “spoil” migrant schools and their students. Relying on outside help rather than making active progress, certain migrant schools take the support of others for granted and even actively ask for more. From 2008 to 2010, microblogger and author Xu Zhirong followed a group of migrant children and examined their lives at migrant schools.⁹⁵ “The worse the school’s condition is, the more donations it gets,” said Xu to a reporter of *Southern Weekly*, a prestigious Chinese newspaper based in Guangzhou, “Thus, many migrant schools intentionally keep their quality down to receive more donations.”⁹⁶ According to Mengwan Wang of Bainian Vocational School, which has been a center of public attention, her students sometimes became so accustomed to donations and medias that they began to think highly of themselves and stopped appreciating their education opportunities.⁹⁷ Distorting the students’ attitude towards public support, donations fail to reach their purpose of improving the education received by migrant children.

The lack of funds brings poor facilities, while donations can also lead to “side effects” such as corruptions and overcharging. With small budgets and greedy school runners, migrant schools deprive migrant children the right to enjoy an education experience which has the same quality as that of their urban peers.

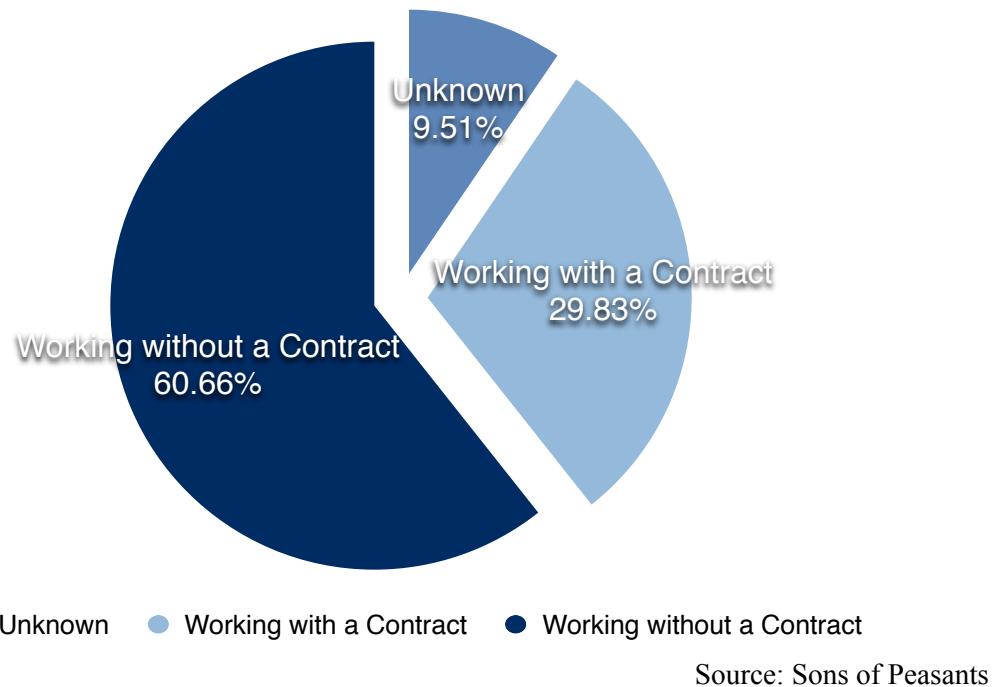
C. Faculty

The faculty is one of the most important measurement criteria for the quality of a school. In China, the government maintains the overall quality of education by assigning trained teachers to public schools. Migrant schools, however, are completely left out. Due to the low salary they offer, the informality of employment, and the hard conditions, migrant schools are often unable to hire teachers with proper training.

Due to a meager budget, migrant schools cannot afford to offer public school-level salaries and compensations. In Beijing, 30% of migrant school teachers are paid less than 800 yuan (=\$130) a month, and 65% are paid between 800 yuan and 1,200 yuan a month; 12,000 teachers have also complained about the delay before the schools issued their wages.⁹⁸ In fact, the average annual income of migrant school teachers is not even half of that of public school teachers in the poorest district in Beijing.⁹⁹ Therefore, working at migrant schools is always considered the last choice for teachers.

The poor treatment of faculty members further discourages good teachers from working at migrant schools. The hiring process of migrant schools is largely informal. According to a 2012 report on Beijing migrant school teachers by Sons of Peasants, an NGO, about 60 percent of the surveyed teachers never signed a contract, as shown by the graph on the next page. Also,

Figure: The Ratio of Teachers Working With or Without a Contract at Migrant Schools



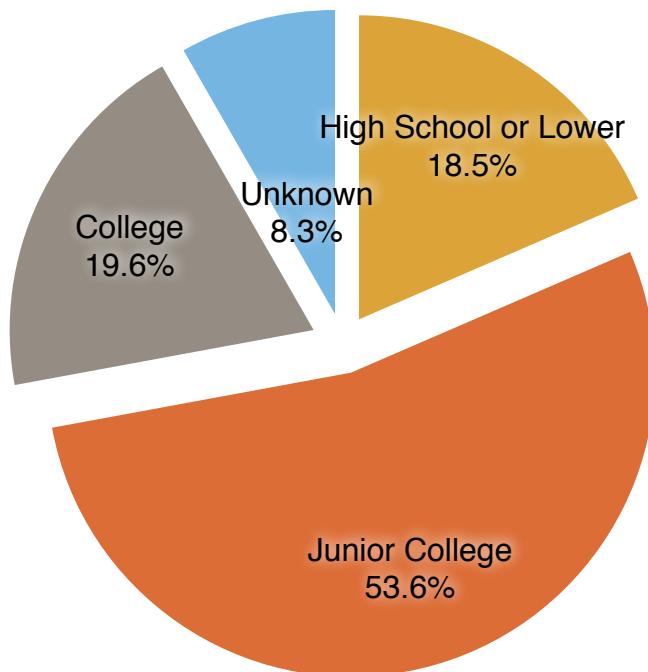
at migrant schools, few teachers enjoy Social Security or any welfare programs. According to the Teacher's Law of the People's Republic of China, owners of private educational institutions have the exclusive right to decide how teachers are treated.¹⁰⁰ Facing a small budget and administrative difficulties, the owners of migrant schools — the employers of the teachers — rarely spend money on the proper treatment of teachers. Thus, a large portion of migrant school teachers have not registered for social welfare programs. In Beijing, only about 10% of migrant school teachers are on Social Security, most of them working for licensed migrant schools that are relatively wealthy.¹⁰¹

Besides the lack of contract and welfare, the instability of migrant schools acts as another factor that repels potential applicants. When the government forces the removal of a school, teachers are left jobless. Since most migrant school teachers do not own a local hukou, the government is also not responsible for finding them new jobs.¹⁰² Without a suitable reference for

potential employers, few dismissed teachers can find a new school within a short period of time. Moreover, when teachers have a conflict with the administration, the law does not support them. When a teacher was dismissed unjustifiably by Dong Bei Ya Elementary School in Beijing and filed a lawsuit, the court refused to accept the case because the school did not own a license, making the subject of the case nonexistent.¹⁰³ A similar case happened to a teacher dismissed by Hua Ao Elementary in Beijing.¹⁰⁴ Labor arbitration eventually earned her a compensation of 20,000 yuan, yet she still had a lot of difficulties finding a new job on her own.¹⁰⁵ The instability of migrant schools leads to high mobility of teachers. According to a 2009 survey of 41 migrant schools by *Beijing Youth Legal Aid and Research Center*, 32% of the teachers had worked for at least three schools, and 50% of the schools reported a high fluidity of faculty members.¹⁰⁶

As a result of the migrant schools' unattractive job offers, only unqualified and untrained teachers come to work for them. As shown by the 2012 report by Sons of Peasants, only 19.6%

Figure: The Education Level of Migrant School Teachers



Source: Sons of Peasants

of migrant school teachers had a college degree, and 18.5% had a high school degree or lower. The low education level of faculty members directly illustrates the teaching quality of migrant schools. Without a capable group of teachers, migrant schools cannot provide students with an education that is up to the standard of public schools.

D. Safety Hazards

Safety hazards result from the low quality of school facilities and irresponsible operation of the institution. Migrant schools use some of the most poorly constructed buildings in a city. These buildings are usually abandoned factories, warehouses, markets, or farms.¹⁰⁷ Having never been examined or renovated, they create safety and health hazards to students and teachers. For example, according to a documentary by filmmaker Chen Junxu, a boiler explosion at Changdian Elementary in Beijing killed many students and teachers.¹⁰⁸ In 2011, from the ruins of a burnt-down migrant school, reporters of *Southern Weekly* magazine discovered that the walls of an old classroom building was actually made of unsafe materials like foam boards.¹⁰⁹

Irresponsible acts of the faculty and administration are another source of safety issues. In Beijing, physical punishments by teachers, which are illegal in China¹¹⁰, have occurred at about 70% of all migrant schools.¹¹¹ These punishments sometimes cause serious injuries, yet they are rarely reported to the media or to relevant government bureaus.¹¹² Additionally, a series of school bus accidents have caused the deaths and serious injuries of many young children. In China, school buses are not regulated by the government and are paid by the schools themselves. In an attempt to save money, many private kindergartens and migrant elementary schools try to carry as many students as possible in one trip so that the school can pay for the minimum number of

buses. Therefore, migrant school buses are often overweight and exposed to a lot of danger. In Beijing, 2011, a school bus carrying 6 adults and 76 kindergartners ran into an accident and resulted in multiple deaths and injuries.¹¹³ A similar case happened in the city of Hefei in Anhui province, where a school bus accident injured several young children in 2008.¹¹⁴ In recent years, the government has increased regulations on busing. More and more cities have passed new rules involving school buses to ensure the safety of school-age children. However, migrant schools, which are out of the public school system, have received little attention and made limited progress.

E. Overcrowding

The problem of overcrowding occurs when the government issues removal orders and causes dismissed migrant children to swarm into migrant schools that have not yet been shut down. The Beijing Municipal Commission of Education set the highest number of students in a class unit (not a grade) at 40, yet most migrant schools exceed this number.¹¹⁵ In Beijing, 20% of migrant schools have 1000 people or more, and most classes have nearly 50 students.¹¹⁶ Over-admission leads to an unfavorable student-to-faculty ratio. With more students but the same number of teachers, the educational quality of migrant schools drops. Also, when migrant schools respond to over-admission by limiting enrollment or raising tuitions, the burden will again fall on migrant children and their parents, who will have to find other suitable sources of education.

F. Lack of After-School Assistance

Migrant schools give migrant children the chance to access education, but they fail to address the rest of their educational experience, which includes after-school education. Without sufficient parenting and tutoring, migrant children fall farther and farther behind urban children in academics, extracurriculars and social life.

Parenting plays a vital role in a child's psychological and intellectual development, yet most migrant workers tend to neglect its importance. They tend to think that once their children enroll in a school, the teachers, instead of themselves, take full responsibility for their children's education.¹¹⁷ At home, most migrant parents spend little effort communicating and bonding with their children. Also, they have neither the time nor the capability to assist their kids with academics.¹¹⁸

While urban students improve their grades through tutoring, migrant parents cannot afford to provide such privilege for their children. In an interview conducted by Chinese education scholar Wang Xiaofen, his interviewee, a migrant father said, "We can't afford tutors. They cost 100 yuan (= \$16) an hour. Too expensive. Can't afford it... Those after-school math and English lessons cost 80 yuan an hour. We make 100 yuan an hour, so of course they can't happen for us."¹¹⁹ Without after-school lessons, migrant children are unable to find help for their homework or get ahead in classes, while most of their urban peers do.

Due to the absence of educational resources outside of school, the academic performance of migrant children turns out to be starkly worse than others. While wealthier children improve their grades by taking tutoring classes or by simply asking their parents, migrant children have to learn everything on their own at school. Their financial and social situation limits their chance to

catch up on others after school, when the poor-quality migrant schools are already holding them back.

G. Conclusions

Overall, migrant schools are a bad choice for education. Licensing and funding problems make them vulnerable to government removal orders. The poor treatment of faculty discourages good teachers and thus damages the teaching quality. From the students' perspective, life at a migrant school is also unsafe, overcrowded, unsupported, and hopeless. According to *Beijing Youth Legal Aid and Research Center*, 73% of Beijing migrant children feel unhappy at their current school, and more than half wish to attend public schools.¹²⁰.

Migrant children's paths after migrant school illustrate the poor result of education offered by migrant schools. In China, all elementary school students have to take a standardized exam which differs by region before attending middle school. In 2010, the average score of students at a migrant school in Haidian district of Beijing is only 15 out of 100, which is lower than the cut-off lines of almost all public middle schools in Beijing.¹²¹ Evidently, migrant schools fail to prepare their students academically for higher education.

Many migrant children — mostly those unable to continue living in a city or enroll in a public middle school due to their hukou and financial status — choose to return to their native places before finishing migrant school education. Many transfer to a public elementary school in their hometown, where they would continue to receive higher education. Among those staying at migrant schools in the city, the ones who are academically strong and financially capable get into public middle schools by taking the entrance exam, while those with poor academic records or

barred by their rural hukou status have to return to their native places for education, or attend migrant middle schools, or drop schooling completely. There are very few migrant middle schools in China, but some migrant elementary schools extend their curriculums to seventh, eighth, and even ninth grade to make additional profits.¹²² However, these “middle schools” are too rare and too low-quality to prepare students for the high school entrance exam, so most migrant children eventually choose to go back to their native places for middle school.¹²³

When migrant children — those in cities as well as those who have returned to the rural region — face the college entrance exam, or *gaokao*, their poor base of knowledge makes it almost impossible for them to excel. Therefore, many migrant children take an alternative route directly after high school or as early as after middle school: they enroll in vocational schools, which teach them practical skills and prepare them for a career as a barber, a cook, a mechanic, or other blue-collar occupations. In the end, after leaving college, vocational school, or even directly after high school or middle school, most migrant children fall back to the life paths of their parents, doing blue-collar or poorly-paid white-collar jobs.

It is important to acknowledge the contributions of migrant schools — mainly, that they provide migrant children with schooling. However, their flaws overshadow their benefits because in the end, they fail to reach the goal of education — to equip students with skills and knowledge that will help them succeed in an increasingly competitive urban society. Instead, migrant schools further increase the gap between migrant children and their urban peers.

V. The Policy Trend on Migrant Schools

In China, the government has the most power in making changes, and government policies have a direct impact on the fate of migrant schools and migrant children. Recognizing the intensifying effect of migrant schools on educational inequality, the Chinese government has been taking two main approaches to improve the situation of migrant children: the regulation and elimination of migrant schools.

In recent years, the Education Bureaus in numerous cities have moderately increased regulations and support for migrant schools. In Beijing, for example, the city government has been trying to merge them into the public school system¹²⁴ and increase standardization, teacher training, and financial aid.¹²⁵ In 2006, Beijing Municipal Commission of Education released a new plan which announced that the government would begin to take actions to improve the conditions at migrant schools.¹²⁶ Within a year, 58 schools in total were regulated and subsidized.¹²⁷ Charities have also played a huge role in improving migrant schools. Non-profit organizations such as INCLUDED (formerly known as Compassions for Migrant Children) and Sons of Peasants offer migrant children tutoring lessons and collect donations.¹²⁸ Despite efforts made by the government and charity groups, most migrant schools remain unregulated and unsupported. Overall, there has been limited improvement in the situation of migrant children.

In comparison to regulation, more focus has been put on the elimination of migrant schools. In 2006, while the government increased regulation, it also carried out an order to shut down a number of migrant schools which were too far below the standard.¹²⁹ In 2006 alone, more than 30 migrant schools in Beijing were closed.¹³⁰ In 2011, another round of clamp-down orders sentenced 24 migrant schools to death, because they did not have proper licenses.¹³¹ In

2014, the Chaoyang District of Beijing also announced a thorough clearance of unlicensed migrant schools.¹³²

According to Dr. Xiaohua Wang from Beijing Normal University, the approach that most municipalities in mainland China have been taking is not the regulation of migrant schools, but elimination.¹³³ Compared to regulation, elimination is much more straightforward, less time-consuming, and less costly. Therefore, most city governments aim to clear all migrant schools in the urban area and integrate all migrant students into the public school system, so that supervision over the education of migrant children would be easier and educational resources would be distributed more evenly.¹³⁴ So far, the government has been striving to make the educational system free of private, unregulated migrant schools. From 2001 to 2010, the number of migrant schools in the whole country dropped from nearly 50,000 to 25,000, according to statistics provided by the Ministry of Education.¹³⁵ In the future, this number will probably decrease further.

VI. From Migrant Schools to Educational and Urban Inequality

The stagnant situation of migrant populations has proven that the actions so far taken by the government have been flawed and incomplete. In fact, simply eliminating migrant schools is not sufficient to improve the education of migrant children in the long term. No matter how many migrant schools the government shuts down, more would be established because migrant children still need a place to receive education. Even if every single migrant school in China disappears, migrant children's access to public education would still be limited, because hukou and socioeconomic barriers still exist and could be used by public schools as excuses to exclude

migrant children. Then, a new wave of low-quality private schools would again emerge to fill in the demand for education. In the end, inequality remains. Migrant children continue to be trapped in a cycle of poverty, suffering from urban discriminations.

Therefore, the current approach to cracking down on migrant schools is ineffective in improving the overall situation for migrant populations in the long run. According to research done in the past by both Chinese and scholars in other countries, the key of solving the problem is instead to break down barriers which deprive migrant children of the opportunity to attend public schools, so that migrant children would no longer rely on migrant schools for education, and that migrant schools would naturally decrease in number and eventually become extinct. Migrant schools are a temporary relief plan, rather than a permanent solution. They directly deepen the gap between the academic achievement of migrant children and that of urban children, but they are simply one phenomenon rising from a bigger issue. In order to reduce educational inequality on a fundamental level, it is important to look for the origins of social barriers from China's complicated social structure.

The real cause for educational inequality as well as urban discriminations towards migrant populations lies in a flawed social system marked by an ineffective government and an extremely unfair hukou system. While the government poorly enforces progressive policies such as the compulsory education laws, the hukou system worsens the situation by generating a public attitude of intolerance and exclusion towards migrants.

The government's ineffectiveness is best illustrated by its weak enforcement of the nine-year compulsory education laws. After migrant schools are shut down, government officials rarely finish their duty of relocating the students and guaranteeing them nine years of free public

education. In reality, most migrant children still suffer from discriminatory admissions procedures, which the government has rarely acted against. While showcasing its intention for educational equality by passing new laws¹³⁶, the government has only solved the problem half way: it pulls migrant children out of poor-quality migrant schools, yet forgets to show them where to go next.

The other major source of inequality is the hukou system, which creates a binary structure in the Chinese society: local versus non-local, or essentially, urban versus rural. In mainland China, government policies play a key role in directing the trend of public opinions. By maintaining the hukou system, the government stresses the distinction between people with different geographical and socioeconomic background, polarizing urban populations and justifying discriminations. It gives urban citizens an incentive to blame migrants for pollution, traffic and crime,¹³⁷ and to view them as aliens. As a result, in major cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen, although rural migrants and urban-born citizens share the exact same living environment, their social groups are completely separated.

To help migrant children overcome educational inequality and other forms of discriminations, China have to directly address the problems brought by the government's inefficiency and the hukou system. The next chapter will discuss two different ways the Chinese government and the public can approach these problems.

VII. Possible Solutions for Urban Inequality

Among scholars and social activists, potential solutions for inequality have been a popular topic of discussions. Some promote legal changes and structural revolutions, such as the

abolition of the hukou system, while others encourage the self-advancement of migrant workers through their own hard work and education.

A very popular point of view, similar to the philosophy of Booker T. Washington in solving “the problem of the color-line”¹³⁸ in 20th-century America, is that the first step for migrant workers towards equality is to build economic strength. Those who follow this school of thought promote vocational education and believe that the migrant labor force should be delivered to where it is most needed, which is the service and manufacturing industries. In recent years, the rapid economic development of mainland China has significantly increased the demand for blue-collar workers and thus raised their overall income level. In fact, many blue-collar workers nowadays receive higher wages than college graduates. In 2014, the expected monthly salary for new college graduates is only 3680 yuan (a little less than \$600)¹³⁹; but bus drivers in Dongguan of Guangdong province can earn up to 4500 yuan per month.¹⁴⁰ Feeling degraded doing blue-collar jobs, many college graduates prefer working in an office despite lower wages, while migrants take up most working-class positions in the urban area. Thus, the “Booker T. Washingtons” of China encourage migrants to become blue-collar workers to obtain economic power and upward mobility.

In urban China, vocational schools have made significant contributions to the economic advancement of the migrant population. Unlike formal colleges, they do not admit students based on their college entrance exam scores. Subsidized by the government, they charge relatively cheap tuition fees affordable by most migrant students. The education programs they offer are practical and flexible, teaching a variety of skills such as automobile repair, cooking, hairdressing, and housekeeping, which lead to competitive salaries in the urban society

nowadays. Students are usually free to choose a specialty based on interest, and they can also decide how long they want to stay at the school. Vocational schools have served many migrant children as a stepping stone towards economic improvement. Meanwhile, vocational education improves the quality of the workforce and satisfies the needs of industries for labor.

Bainian Vocational School, a charity-funded school established specifically for young migrants, exemplifies how vocational education leads to economic advancement and urban integration. In Beijing, Chengdu, Dalian, and many other cities across mainland China, Bainian provides free two-year training programs for migrants.¹⁴¹ When I visited Bainian, I heard countless stories of its alumni who achieved economic success in different fields and established urban identity. Bainian is considered a model institution by the media. “[Bainian Vocational Schools] will help narrow the huge gap between rich and poor,” said Yao Li, the school founder, “or as we put it now, they will help build ‘a harmonious society’” (a catchphrase often used by the government).¹⁴²

While many ask the migrants to establish their equal status through gaining economic strength in the current social and political system, others urge for the elimination of the hukou system, which they believe is the key problem behind all forms of inequality towards migrants in China. To create a society where migrants and local urban citizens hold equal status, major transformations of the hukou system is a necessary step. Dr. Xiaohua Wang from Beijing Normal University stated in an interview that China would never be completely rid of urban-rural barriers as long as the hukou system exists, so the future of equality to a great extent depends on the fate of the hukou system.¹⁴³ When hukou restrictions disappear, many discriminatory treatments against migrants would lose their legal base. Migrant children would have less trouble

enrolling in public schools, and migrant schools would soon die out. In the long term, the differences between rural and urban origins would lose significance, gradually undermining the socioeconomic distance between migrants and urban citizens. However, this solution is extremely difficult to execute, since the hukou system provides the basis for taxation, social welfares, population control, and essentially, the normal functioning of the country.

Simply enhancing the economic power of migrant populations is far from enough to guarantee them an equal standing in the Chinese society; for a country as populated and large as China, the abolition of an integral part of the social structure would also face incredible obstacles. In fact, a better solution is a combination of these two: to maintain the hukou system but eliminate the restrictions it has on education, housing, and many other aspects discriminatory to migrants, while continuing to provide migrants who are unable to receive public education with vocational education and employment opportunities to accumulate economic strength. However, the subject is still under debate due to all kinds problems that may arise in the process of implementation.

Nowadays, most scholars and social workers in China are calling the government to be accountable for migrant issues. In mainland China, the normal functioning and the improvement of the society largely rely on government actions. Since the government had the largest role in creating the current social structure in the first place, it should also take the most responsibility in correcting it. Therefore, many people concerned with the future of migrant populations urge the government to carry out new policies. For example, in 2011, *People's Daily* — one of the most influential papers in China — published an article in which migrant workers and social activists expressed their objection to the hukou system, which they claimed created an “inheritance of

poverty” in the migrant class.¹⁴⁴ In 2012, when the government was about to close Tongxin Experimental School, which was a migrant school in Beijing, six social activists, including famous talk-show host Yongyuan Cui, sent a letter to the Ministry of Education, asking the government to stop shutting down migrant schools and give migrants the right to choose where to receive education.¹⁴⁵ Hundreds of academic papers have also been written to advise the government on how to improve the conditions of migrant workers through policy changes.

In reality, the Chinese government has been adopting parts of both methods introduced earlier. Through promoting the nine-year compulsory education laws, the government lowers the hukou barrier; by supporting free vocational schools like Bainian, the government allows philanthropists like Yao Li to lead migrant children towards a future of better economic conditions. However, the effect of these measures has been limited, and more concrete actions are yet to be taken.

VIII. Conclusion

In this CAMD Scholar research paper, the problem of educational inequality faced by migrants is exposed and studied through an examination of migrant schools. For thousands of migrant children unable to access public education in mainland China, migrant schools serve as a temporary solution but intensify the inequality between migrant children and their urban peers in the long term. For the migrant population, education determines the future of the next generation. As stated by Human Rights in China, an NGO, education is also “recognized as a human right in itself and an indispensable means of realizing other human rights.”¹⁴⁶ Therefore, immediate actions must be taken to help migrant children access the same educational resources as their

urban peers, so that they can take the first step to improve their living conditions and social status.

The failures of migrant schools shed light on the origin of inequality between urban citizens and migrant workers — unequal hukou policies and the ineffectiveness of the government. Although this research paper analyzes the source of inequality and introduces different viewpoints on how to eliminate rural-urban barriers, many questions are still waiting to be answered. For example, what would be the best way to transform the hukou system, and how can urban citizens overcome their anti-migrant attitude? Complicated by China's enormous population and totalitarian government structure, these problems require continuing efforts of expects in various fields in order to be answered. Until China finds the solutions for these questions, migrants still have to endure unequal treatments which press them down as second-class citizens for generations.

While government actions are needed, it is also necessary for the public to pay a closer look at the human side of the story — to personally understand the world that migrants live in and to feel their spirits and emotions. When I visited the homes of several migrants and documented their daily life with my camera, I witnessed how powerless they were when facing exploitative migrant school owners, mean public school principals, as well as the discriminatory hukou system — a rigid state apparatus. At the same time, however, I saw optimism and strength. These migrants, young and old, lived in a hostile urban environment thousands of miles from home, but they still managed to enjoy every moment of their lives with family and friends. Some of them sought solace from religion. When they narrated their unpleasant encounters with school administrators to me, their language revealed a unfortunate story but was mixed with

laughters and a sense of humor. The more I got to know them, the more hopeful I felt for their future. In fact, as I talked to scholars, educators, and students in Beijing, I saw that doors are opening up for migrant children, as schools like Bainian Vocational School were founded, and more urban youths developed a more friendly attitude towards migrants. While migrant children fight for a brighter future, the world is also slowly beginning to embrace them. If more people could get to know migrants personally, the distance between the urban class and migrant class would be much smaller, and there would be much more hope for migrants to improve their lives socially and economically.

The lives of migrant workers reveal a side of reality hidden behind the growing national strength of China — a side of reality that the world should not forget. As *The Economist* points out, “China is becoming wealthy and urban, but with people left behind.”¹⁴⁷ While the country benefits from cheap labor provided by migrant workers, it seems to forget about the rewards that these hardworking people deserve. Until we help migrants obtain basic resources and human rights, China can never be a truly strong and beautiful country as it projects. Only with transformations at both structural and individual levels would China be able to head towards a future where migrants and urban citizens embrace each other with understanding and respect.

About the Author

Xinyi (Joyce) Wang is a three-year senior at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. She was born and raised in Beijing, China for her entire life before coming to Andover as a new 10th-grader. A film-fanatic, she enjoys watching movies and making short videos with the Andover MovieMakers Club. She also loves participating in the community service group ACCO (Andover Chinese Cultural Outreach), proctoring at Eaton Cottage, and cheering for Andover basketball teams with Slam. Her current favorite subjects at school are math, computer science, and English. During her free time, she enjoys reading, writing (in both English and Chinese), sketching random people around her, playing the guitar, chatting with friends, and exploring fun restaurants in Beijing with her family.

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