

‘Equality of Opportunities’ in Education for Migrant Children in China

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Abstract China’s economic growth over the past 30 years has been possible partially due to the particular system of household registration known as *hukou* or *huji*. This system, distinguishing between two different types of citizens, i.e., between those with rural status and those with non-rural status, created what some scholars have called a de facto apartheid; a brand of dual-class citizenship. Since *hukou* status is actually quasi-permanent, a new category of urban workers has appeared in China in the last couple of decades. The expression “rural migrant workers” (*nongmingong*) identifies a specific category of urban workers—still registered under a rural *hukou* despite having lived and worked in the cities for many years. They are excluded for this reason from many kinds of benefits that local governments provide to urban *hukou*-registered citizens. One of the most controversial aspects of this issue is that concerning the schooling of rural workers’ children. The scope of this research is to evaluate the “equality of opportunities” for migrant children and, through the case-study of the City of Hangzhou, governmental policies to reduce the causes of social exclusion at least for future generations. Through literature review, analysis of documents, and semi-structured interviews, we attempt to assert some predictions about the general trends in China on this matter and the expectable outcomes.

Keywords China’s social policy · Schooling policy · Rural-to-urban workers · Social exclusion · Migrant children

Introduction

Background

China’s spectacular economic growth in the past 30 years has been possible partially to the particular system of household registration known as *hukou* or *huji* (Watson 2009; Chan 2010). This system, distinguishing between two possible types of citizens, i.e., between those with rural status (*nongye*) and those with non-rural status (*feinongye*), created what some scholars have called a de facto apartheid (Chan & Buckingham 2008; Chan 2010; Montgomery 2012)—a brand of dual-class citizenship. Those living in the cities and with urban *hukou* could enjoy state-subsidized food rations, in addition to basic welfare (pension, housing, sickness and maternity leave, health care, public schooling), while those holding a rural *hukou* had to rely almost completely on the use of a small portion of land (on average, 0.07 ha¹, see Tao & Xu 2007) for feeding themselves, yet still did not enjoy any kind of state-provided social security (Lin & Kangas 2006; Lin 2009). The *hukou* system was implemented in 1958 and it was modeled on the Soviet *propiska* (internal passport), in order to control population mobility in a period when the country’s planned economy was supporting the heavy industry in the cities and extracting a surplus of agricultural products from the countryside (Chan & Buckingham 2008; Chan 2010).

From the late 1970s, after Deng Xiaoping started the economic reforms, China has witnessed a huge phenomenon of internal migration, but the *hukou* system has not yet been effectively reformed (Leung 2003; Chan & Buckingham 2008).

Since it is almost impossible for most people to change their *hukou*, a new category of urban workers has appeared in China in the last few decades, usually

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referred to as rural-to-urban workers, or just migrant workers—in Chinese, *nongmingong* (Wong et al. 2007; Li 2008).

There were more than 260 millions migrant workers in 2012, according to the National Bureau of Statistics of China,² most of who were without local *hukou* and roughly 20 million school-age children who have relocated with their parents (Wong, Chang & He 2009). Most notably, a child's *hukou* status is based on that of his or her parents and thus it will limit their attainment of welfare services. Access to education is one of those aspects of the current Chinese welfare system still strongly affected by *hukou*. Although the Ministry of Education clearly stated in the Newly Amended Compulsory Law of 2006 that “compulsory education is a ‘public good’, should be accessible to all and should be free” (Xu & Mei 2009), the reality in recent years has been quite distant from that stated by law and basic schooling has often been precluded to young migrants. In addition, access to higher learning presents peculiar characteristics which constitute further barriers to their educational aspirations.

Scope of the Paper

Adopting Fitzpatrick's definition of “equality of opportunities” as a system where people are given the same starting conditions and the same rules (Fitzpatrick 2011), we conducted an exploratory study based on literature review, vis-à-vis semi-structured interviews and document analysis in order to evaluate the level of equality of opportunities in current China's educational system, with reference to migrant children and with a special focus on the case-study of the City of Hangzhou in Zhejiang Province.

Methodology

Our study proceeded through three different phases.

First Phase

Firstly, we reviewed English literature on rural-to-urban workers, the *hukou* system and—more specifically—migrant children, in order to set a general framework for our enquiry. As for the migrant children's problem, our review focused on articles published after the early 2000s, i.e. when the issue of migrant children in China became more numerically relevant. Keywords such as “China”, “Chinese”, “schooling”, “education”, “rural-to-urban workers” and “migrant children” were

² National Bureau of Statistics of China, “Statistical Communiqué of the People's Republic of China on the 2012 National Economic and Social Development”, available online at: http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/NewsEvents/201302/t20130222_26962.html. Accessed 21 December 2013.

used in combination for searching primarily two bibliographic databases, namely EBSCO and Google Scholar.

Second Phase

As a second step, we interviewed a group of seven migrant workers with school-age children living with them in the city, and the president of an NGO which organizes learning activities for migrant children. Recruitment of the parents was made during an afternoon activity for migrant children at the NGO, which we were in contact with from previous research work. We assigned them to two different groups and interviewed the two groups separately on the same day. At first, we collected relevant information on their personal migration history and their children's education. Subsequently, guided by some general questions on the Chinese educational system and expectations for their children, parents participated in an open group discussion with the researcher and helped to define problems related to educational access in China. We believe in the importance of their active participation for setting the proper focus of the subsequent steps.

Third Phase

Finally, we conducted further investigations in order to verify the findings that emerged from the interviews with migrant workers. We analysed documents and official legislations accessible on government websites and local newspapers. During this last stage, we found on the internet a list of “experimental” private-turned-public schools for migrant children and contacted them. One school agreed to meet us and we interviewed its headmaster and three teachers. Our questions aimed to gather data on the similarities and differences between this kind of school and other public schools, especially in regard to staff teaching experience, tuition fees, and application procedures.

All the participants were informed of our research scope and they expressed their consent to be included in our enquiry. All interviews were carried out in Chinese directly by the author in December 2012—with the assistance of local interpreters—and recorded on digital devices. The results and findings of our study are presented below, followed by some final considerations and suggestions.

Compulsory Education

Basic Education for Migrant Children

Compulsory education in China is funded and implemented by local governments (Rong & Shi 2001; Yan 2005; Chan et al. 2008). In the last decade, the central government has encouraged local governments to admit migrant children into public primary schools. In spite of this, limited financial

resources for schooling have made it impossible for the local governments to satisfy the ever increasing demand for the service (Kwong 2004). Therefore, free access to public schools has been limited to children whose parents meet certain requirements such as a regular job contracts, temporary residence permits, social insurance, and whether they have local *hukou* (Liang, Guo & Duan 2008). To give an example, the regulations for admission to public schools in Xiasha (a special Economic Development Area in Hangzhou) state that in case of an excess in admission requests, priority will be given according to such principles as local *hukou*, parents' local *hukou*, owning real estate in the area, and grandparents' local *hukou*.³ These conditions very often constitute an insurmountable barrier for migrant children to enjoy their right of free education, and for this reason, many of them have been deprived of any formal education at all. Many private schools, often organized by the migrant workers themselves, have emerged in the last few years as a response to the market demand, however, frequently characterized by a low quality in both teaching staff and infrastructures (Li et al. 2010; Chen & Feng 2013). Even more importantly, most of them are not officially recognized and cannot provide students with valid certificates and study rolls needed for further education.

Recent Policies

One solution that Hangzhou's government attempted in 2010 was to select seven of the best among these private schools and turn them into public institutions. The policy was guided by the principle of the "same treatment as local citizens" and tuition fees were abolished. The parents were required only to pay a modest contribution to their children's meals; the same as required of the parents of local children—a point noted by the headmaster of a private-turned-public school in one of our interviews. These schools only enroll migrant children, meaning there is no interaction with local children; however, teaching staff and programs are provided by the City's Educational Bureau (*Jiaoyu Ju*) and standards are guaranteed by governmental supervision (interview with the headmaster). This policy represents a successful experiment which could inspire similar policies in other Chinese cities.

Unresolved Issues

Despite these developments, some of the parents we interviewed still expressed concern about the quality of these private-turned-public schools in comparison to regular public schools (interview with the parents). In particular, they lamented a high turn-over among teaching staff. Actually, the

³ Hangzhou Xiasha Economic and Technology Zone, "Regulations and Rules for Admission in Public Primary Schools in 2012" (in Chinese), available online at: <http://edu.zjol.com.cn/05edu/system/2012/06/18/018588098.shtml>. Accessed 21 December 2013.

three teachers we interviewed had been employed by the school since 2003, but were fresh graduates when they started working at the school and therefore had no previous teaching experience (interview with teachers).

Another important point that emerged through the interviews with the parents was the difficulties involved in enrolling their children—even in these types of public schools—because of the documents needed for admission (interview with the parents). Although the entrance requirements are far less demanding than in other public schools and substantially independent from the *hukou*, there are still certain conditions that must be met, namely temporary residence permit, labor contract, residence certificate, and social insurance.

Especially hard for many rural workers to produce is social insurance documents (interview with parents), either because they are self-employed and running small businesses, so they cannot afford to pay a commercial insurance (interview with the parents), or because many employers are still not fully obeying the Social Security Law formally adopted in China in October 2010, with effect from July 2011,⁴ which made it compulsory for every worker and employer to participate into a national social insurance scheme.

For many migrant workers, the only solution that remains is either to leave their children behind in their hometown until they complete their studies, or to give them some form of private education, as mentioned above, in many cases, very limited in quality and not recognized by the government. There are many of these private schools, but it is very difficult to quantify their number. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to arrange interviews with these organizations or to find reliable data concerning this phenomenon. According to Zhejiang Province's estimates, 74.2 % of migrant children are enrolled in public schools, and only 25.8 % are attending private schools.⁵ We have some legitimate doubts in accepting this data, since these numbers most likely cover just those children and private schools included in official statistics. It is likely that this data does not take into account children not officially registered in the city or schools not recognized by the government.

Higher Education Entrance Examination

The *Gaokao* System

Finally, there stands the problem young migrants have to face when they decide to proceed into higher education. The

⁴ The Central People's Government of People's Republic of China, "Social Insurance Law of the People's Republic of China", 28 October 2010. Available online at: http://www.gov.cn/flfg/2010-10/28/content_1732964.htm. Accessed 21 December 2013.

⁵ Office of Basic Education, Zhejiang Province's Educational Bureau, "Perspectives for Education of Migrant Children in Zhejiang Province", unpublished document.

gaokao system is a public examination which regulates the access to universities in China and which has been often “regarded as an equal mechanism for students to strive for their rights to receive higher education” (Xu & Mei 2009, p. 16). In truth, it is actually built around a complex and unequal mechanism which hinders migrant children’s educational aspirations. The system is still largely based on *hukou* and every candidate must take the exam in the province where he or she is registered. The problem is that the best higher education institutions are located in a few provinces and municipalities (such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Zhejiang Province), which set different standards for examinations and different quotas for admissions of candidates from other provinces, reserving most of the available places to local residents (Xu & Mei 2009). For example, a student with Hunan *hukou* living in Hangzhou and looking to study in one of the city’s universities would have to take *gaokao* in his hometown, so would be forced to compete for a place from a significantly smaller quota than if she/he took it in Hangzhou. When we asked the parents during our interviews what policy they would propose, the first answer was “to allow our children to do their *gaokao* here” (interview with parents). Although their children were still in primary school, their concerns over *gaokao* reveal the importance of higher-level learning in Chinese culture (Kwong 2004), people’s aspirations to upward social mobility being highly conditioned by the strong link existing between formal education and the labor market. One should remember that university rankings are highly significant in China and the prestige of the institution where one studies will profoundly influence his or her future job prospects (Koo 2012).

Recent Developments

In August 2012, the State Council sent a proposal on “Access to Higher Education Examination Entrance for Migrant Workers’ Children” to the Ministry of Education and all its four sub-administrations, where it was requested to find a solution to admit non-local students residing in the cities to the examinations by the end of 2012.⁶ At the beginning of the following year, few provinces had implemented effective policies and in some cases they had not even made any public announcement. Furthermore, any attempt to extend the eligibility to take *gaokao* to non-local *hukou* students might encounter resistance from local residents, who see it as an infringement of their own

privileges.⁷ Zhejiang Province has made a clear statement in which it formally allows students with non-local *hukou* to take the *gaokao* in the Province, but under conditions that the student has completed all his secondary studies locally and with no interruption. This solution is certainly a positive step, but it will only affect a low proportion of migrant students - about 3,800 according to some estimates.⁸ Another 7,000 students will just be permitted to take the Vocational School Admission Exams, since previous regulations had limited the access of migrant children to local high schools and they still only account for 2 % of the total high school student population.⁹

Discussion

Inequality, Education and Social Mobility in China

The requirements expressed in Zhejiang Province’s new regulation as conditions for taking the *gaokao* are, in our view, a key point to understanding how local policies, while in principle designed to ease access to educational resources, tend instead to strengthen a causal relation between the different levels of inequality faced by a young migrant at various stages of her/his life: first in compulsory education, then in higher learning and finally in the job market.

When parents were asked if they believed it was the responsibility of local government to provide education for their children, they unanimously answered in the affirmative. The reason behind their response was that they felt they had contributed significantly to the wealth and development of the city and thus should enjoy the same privileges of locally registered citizens. The parents we interviewed identified themselves primarily as citizens of the People’s Republic of China and so believed their children deserved the right to be treated as equals with their peers (interview with the parents). They had been living in the city for more than 10 years, and some of their children were born in Hangzhou and were not even able to speak their family hometown’s dialect. These children spent a considerable part of their young existence in the city but the educational system penalizes them on the basis of their geographical provenience and they cannot enjoy their right to formal education.

⁷ At the end of that year, some Beijing local parents organized through Weibo a protest in front of the local Educational Bureau against the extension to non-local students of the eligibility for doing *gaokao* in the city.

⁸ “Plan for admission of migrant students announced” (in Chinese), Hangzhou Daily, 31/12/2012. Available online at: http://hzdaily.hangzhou.com.cn/hzrb/html/2012-12/29/content_1408131.htm. Accessed 21 December 2013.

⁹ Ibidem

⁶ “Details on plans in the national territory to admit non-local students to the Gaokao” (in Chinese). Available online at: http://gaokao.eol.cn/kuai_xun_3075/20121231/t20121231_887965.shtml. Accessed 21 December 2013.

Beyond the difficulties they encounter during the years of compulsory education, their aspirations to enter higher education and achieving a better standard of living than their parents is further impeded by an examination system that favors certain people on the basis of their *hukou*—namely the *gaokao*. Our findings lead to the conclusion that China's educational system is still highly deficient in providing migrant children with equal opportunities to achieve their educational goals and to strive for a better life. Due to the importance given to education in Chinese society, the risk is that without effective reforms, the educational system might contribute to precluding upward social mobility for a large class of people—who have played an important role in China's recent economic development, but remain mostly excluded from its benefits—thus projecting current social inequalities into the future.

Further Steps

Although there are obvious weaknesses to the generalizability of this study, due to the limited spectrum of the sample and to its circumscription to Hangzhou/Zhejiang Province, its main contribution is to define the nature of a problem which is urgent and lacking of systematic studies in English language academia. Our hope is that the present work can pave the way for further investigations. Through our enquiry, we confirmed that many problems mentioned in previous literature persist even to this day. Moreover, it was highlighted how barriers to education persist *systematically* along all the phases of the migrant children's education life. There were some positive signals coming from recent policies, but there is still much work to do to reduce the extent of inequality that affects the futures of migrant children. In particular, there is a need for further policies to eliminate the obstacles that inhibit access to compulsory education for migrant children, while there is a general necessity to reform the *gaokao* system at a national level, removing the mechanism of quotas and leveling off the examination standards between different provinces and municipalities.

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