

They Live in Cities Where They Don't Belong:

An Analysis of the Discrimination and Ideological Inequality Suffered by Chinese Migrant Workers' Children in Public Schools

Weiyei Zheng

Writing 101: The Myth of Meritocracy

Instructor: Haleema Welji

Introduction & Thesis

Internal migration, different from international immigration that has dominated news and politics in the U.S. and Europe in recent years, is defined as a movement internally from one region to another within one country; it is recognized as an important characteristic in developing countries (Chan et al., 2009). In China, rural workers migrate to cities in search of better opportunities and high-paying jobs, often bringing their children, too, hoping that they can receive a decent education. It is estimated that 36.9 million migrant children are living in cities and towns in 2020, which created a huge influx in urban population that renders their host cities and towns incapable of accommodating their needs, especially education (New Citizen Project, 2020).

These children have two choices for schooling. They can either go to public schools, which are well-regulated and offer high-quality education in China, or they can go to migrant schools that are exclusively established to accommodate migrant children. These migrant schools are categorized as private schools, but they share nothing in common with the expensive, elite private schools. In fact, many migrant schools started off informally or illegally by migrants themselves and lacked basic funds to support teachers and facilities (Li, 2011). As a result, migrant children in migrant schools do not really receive proper education, and statistics show that these children performed significantly worse in all test subjects compared to their counterparts in public schools (Chen & Feng, 2017). In recent years, integration-oriented policies helping migrant students go to public schools have been implemented (China Labour Bulletin, 2018). For example, in 2017, the city of Beijing closed twelve disqualifying migrant schools and steadily increased public school attendance rate by migrant children (Hernandez & Zhao, 2017).

Even with all the benefits the public school system offers, however, many migrant students are reluctant to attend public schools, with some even deciding to drop out of school (*Jilin Daily*, 2013). It is my aim to find out why migrant students are reluctant to go to public schools despite their advantages over migrant schools, and to what extent current educational measures are helping migrant students in public schools. I argue that migrant workers' children in public schools suffer from



Weiyei Zheng

Born in a small city categorized as a “third-tier city” in China, I witnessed the huge economic disparity between my hometown and its metropolitan counterparts. When I was 10-years-old, my family and I moved to Guiyang, the capital city of my province. Many migrant workers reside in this city; I remember driving by “migrant schools” and being appalled by their lack of infrastructure. This summer, I volunteered at a project that aims to bring liberal arts education to non-metropolitan cities in China. This experience led me to reflect more deeply about my own privilege and the educational inequity in China and elsewhere in the world. Some students, like me, are privileged enough to come across the Pacific Ocean and attend expensive colleges here in the United States; however, there are also students whose existence is ignored by us and whose lives are being pushed to the periphery of cities on a daily basis. In Professor Welji's class, we examined cases of discrimination faced by immigrant children, and we learned many different forms of discrimination, especially linguistic ones which I was not aware of, that promotes a problematic ideology which creates a forced assimilation and silences diverse voices. It is not hard to find a connection between the plight faced by immigrant children in the United States and migrant children in China. I would like to thank Professor Welji for her continuous support during this process, and also thank you to Professor Sheryl Welte Emch as well as the editorial board for their help in revising this essay. Without their suggestions and feedback, this essay would not have been complete.

both administrative discrimination and peer discrimination. The discrimination not only makes migrant students ashamed of their identity but also impacts their academic performance. Current measures aim to integrate migrant children into public schools through a process of urban assimilation, which fails to recognize and further marginalizes the identity of migrant children. Thus, I contend that the measures designed by Chinese policymakers and educators are simple, brutal shortcuts that fail to solve the complex educational problem, while further reinforcing ideological inequality.

Background

The children of migrant workers in China face a similar dilemma to immigrant children elsewhere in the world due to China's particular *hukou* (户口 household registration) system (Roberts, 1997). Under this system, the Chinese population is divided into two groups: the urban population which is registered under their respective cities as legal residents of the city, and the countryside population which does not have the urban resident status. As the Chinese economy has expanded, cities have become increasingly attractive to rural populations, as they provide more high-paying jobs and better standards of living. Thus, rural residents swarm into the cities, making up 36% of China's total workforce at around 288.4 million in 2018 (China Labour Bulletin, 2018). Yet, even after migrating to cities, these workers are still categorized as rural residents by the hukou system. Therefore, they are barred from many social services in cities, including basic healthcare and, for their children, rights to public education (China Labour Bulletin, 2018).

Recognizing the difficulty faced by many migrant children, the education bureau in many cities lowered the bars for migrant children to enroll in public schools, closed down many unregulated migrant schools, increased funding for primary and secondary public schools, and designated more public schools to accept migrant students. These measures had a positive effect on admitting migrant students to public schools, increasing the number of migrant children who do attend public schools in 2018 by 40% (New Citizen Project, 2020).

Despite recent efforts, many issues still need to be addressed, such as migrant students' mental health and relevant support offered to them in public schools. Thus, this paper will focus on the current situation of migrant children in public schools, as well as relevant educational discourses and their implementation.

Children remaining in migrant schools will not be discussed because their learning conditions are relatively unaffected by these recent policies.

Methods

In this paper, I will present some interviews of migrant families that are either translated by a native Chinese speaker who is fluent in English or from scholarly sources that are already in English. I will also present current Chinese school policies as well as educational discourses that aim to mitigate the issue. I analyzed the quotes and current policies from a linguistic perspective, which puts a heavy focus on the way someone talks or writes. Linguistics is a very essential part of investigating issues relating to ideology or identity; through analyzing language use, I was able



to find some disparities between the promoted equality and the problematic reality. Thus, I hope to offer readers a more comprehensive understanding of the fundamental problems that migrant students in China face today.

Discrimination, Psychology, and Denial of Identity

Migrant students who go to public schools face discrimination from both the administration and their classmates, making them sensitive to the differences between them and the urban students. One migrant student, Wu, who goes to a public school, noted:

I am scared every time the school checks household registration because then my classmates would know that I come from the countryside and I attend this school by paying an extra *jiedu* fee. This makes me feel inferior. My classmates make fun of me, and they call me “little peasant”. (Wu qtd.in *Jilin Daily*, 2013)

The *jiedu fee* (借读费 borrow-place-to-study fee) is a mandatory fee required by school administrations that migrant students have to pay in order to be admitted to public schools. Although the fee itself may not necessarily seem discriminatory, its name, which literally translates to borrowing a place to study, encapsulates a sense of official rejection and inhospitality toward the migrant children. It signals to migrant children that their placement in public schools is temporary, and that they are borrowing a spot from a school where they do not belong. This fee, thus, is discriminatory in nature, as it rejects the migrant students' ability to call their schools home.

Another administrative discrimination faced by migrant students is the *Gaokao* (高考 China's College Entrance Exam) system. Migrant students are often not permitted to take the exam in the city where they have been studying for years, but rather have to take it in their home province, which is determined by their *hukou* (户口 household registration). *Gaokao*, or the College Entrance Exam in China, is famous for its difficulty and once-a-year policy. The *Gaokao* not only dominates high school experience but also serves as virtually the only criteria for college admissions, meaning that this exam score will be the only factor that determines what colleges they can get into. It is also administered independently by each province, meaning that each province's exam will be somewhat different from each other. In addition, Each province has different cut-off scores for different universities. For example, the cut-off score in Beijing for Peking University is much lower than that in Guizhou, giving Beijing students a huge advantage over students in Guizhou. Migrant students, however, need to go

back to their registered home province to take the *gaokao*, which is a tremendous adjustment and unfair treatment that will inevitably affect their performance. In the northern part of China, 21.3% migrant workers reported that their children could not take the *gaokao* locally in 2019 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). However, their children's urban classmates who have their *hukou* in the cities would never have to face this problem; they also enjoy the advantage of a lower cut-off score. To simply study well is not enough for migrant children to succeed in this exam that may determine their life; compared to their urban counterparts, they need to study exceptionally well to be able to adjust within a few days to a different testing standard.



The administrative discrimination is also reinforced by discrimination at the peer level. Urban students make fun of migrant students and call them “little peasant”, a derogatory term that highlights urban superiority and rural inferiority. Migrant students are also used to being called “xiangbalao (乡巴佬 redneck)” and “sworn at” by the urban students (Wang qtd.in Lu, 2008, p.697). Migrant students also describe ways that urban students bully them, including that “[t]hey bully waidi (外地 coming from elsewhere) people on the ground that they are local” (Wang qtd.in Lu, 2008, p.697). This discrimination suggests that migrant students in public schools are being treated as an outgroup; the urban students do not welcome them as their peers.

The multiple levels of discrimination that migrant students face, both by the administration and peers, leads to psychological reluctance to go to school. Being in a state of uncertainty, unaware of where their future leads them to, many migrant children experience a sense of rejection and lack of self-esteem. In an environment where they experience

discrimination and the lack of attention, some migrant students choose to quit school, even though public schools offer a superior education compared to migrant schools. One migrant worker remarked on the reason his son gave him for refusing to go to public school:

I wanted to find a good public school for my son in the city too, but my son wouldn't go anymore because he said the urban kids looked down on him and he earned bad grades (Zhang qtd.in *Jilin Daily*, 2013).

Migrant students understand that public schools are more regulated and better for their future than migrant schools, but they “wouldn't go anymore” to public schools. The alternative option of going to migrant schools, however, means that they will be *de facto* segregated from the urban world that their families sacrifice so much to join.

Education bureaus and schools who started to admit more migrant students to public schools deserve credit for helping migrant students to perform better academically in public schools than their peers in migrant schools. In turn, this suggests that the current public school system is helping migrant students. However, it is important to note that a significant gap in their test scores across all subjects is still present between migrant students and their urban peers in public schools (Lu & Zhou, 2013). One potential explanation could be that this gap is correlated to the poorer mental health of migrant children, as studies have shown that mental health has an impact on academic performance (DeSocio & Hootman, 2004). To say that the schools are already supporting migrant students substantially is intentionally overlooking the correlation between the discrimination that migrant students suffer and their academic performance. Public schools should not take all the responsibility for migrant children's growth. On the home front, migrant parents often cannot understand what their children are going through. Many of them only care about test performance because it is their only hope to have their children be admitted to urban high schools and universities. One migrant student said that “[m]y parents always gauge my learning through my examination performance. If I get a low score, I will be beaten. Neither parent cares about the reasons for why I received a low score” (Anonymous qtd.in Liu & Jacob, 2012, p.186). Parental pressure on test performance and ignorance of children's psychological well-being make it



harder for schools to communicate with parents and foster a healthy environment for migrant education.

The discrimination that migrant students suffer in public schools leads to a mindset that an urban identity will protect them from all the suffering. They believe that being born in the countryside is a disadvantage that needs to be corrected, and by being assimilated into the urban population, they will erase any inferiority attributed to them. Thus, they acquiesce to their suffering given the promise of a bright future. One migrant student, Song, remarked about her situation:

I know my parents wanted me to have a bright future, so they brought me to the city to study. What I can do is to not care about people who discriminate against me, study well, and find a job that pays well so that my parents do not need to be migrant workers anymore (Song qtd.in *Jilin Daily*, 2013).

Some migrant students, like Song, are eager to study hard and find a good job to get rid of their migrant identities and achieve an urban status. This identity crisis is a result of a perceived, inferior positionality that migrant children have when they

compare themselves to their urban counterparts. Migrant children are often very sensitive and feel that urban teachers treat them differently (Wang, 2013). Rather than question the legitimacy of the system and whether they have been treated fairly, migrant families attribute many struggles that they suffer to their perceived inferior rural status. They use phrases like “don't make them lose on

the starting line”, “bring them to the city to change their fate”, and “leave the countryside and live a better life” to describe their reasoning for migrating to the city with their children (Anonymous qtd.in *Jilin Daily*, 2013). The lack of confidence in their own identity and the wish to become someone else are dangerous, as they further confirm a problematic system that arbitrarily divides the urban from the rural. It is the system, not their identity, that needs to be fixed.

Problematic Educational Discourse, Reinforced Inequality, and Direction of Change

The ideology that an urban identity is better than a rural one is also reinforced by Chinese educators, whose discourses describe migrant students as innately inferior, a belief that

inevitably limits their understanding of the complicated differences between migrant students and urban students. Discourse, as defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is a “formal and orderly and usually extended expression of thought on a subject.” In one case study of two migrant schools in Guiyang, a city in southwest China that draws many migrant families, researchers from a local university labeled migrant students as “closed-minded students who think backward and who have a narrow circle of life,” and that they “are of low quality and have tiny knowledge base” (Sun et al., 2016, p.14). In these discourses, migrant students need to be fixed because they are “backward” and “closed-minded”. Another study called migrant students who are not well-educated “time bombs for the future society” (Li, 2007, p.755). Migrant students are only viewed as potential threats, not as individuals in need of care and attention.

This discriminatory framework results in problematic implementation that offers little help to address the discrimination faced by migrant students in public schools. Influenced by discourses that devalue migrant students’ identity, schools often employ strategies to homogenize migrant students with the urban students, implying that the rural identity was not of value and should be abandoned to succeed in the cities. The denigration of rural identity perpetuates and validates the existing ideological inequality between rural and urban groups, justifying a new form of discrimination. One public primary school in China reported that migrant students had “extreme difficulty in assimilating into the school life” and therefore “a lot of teachers did not like to teach them” (Liang & Zhao, 2019, p.19). To mitigate the situation, the school designed many activities in order to assimilate migrant students into the school, such as classes in “computer design, Chinese painting, violin classes, English classes and calligraphy” (Liang & Zhao, 2019, p.19). These activities, however, are not designed with consideration of migrant students’ talents; it is unlikely that many migrant students have ever been exposed to computer design or violin classes before they come to cities, and few have the money to afford such lessons outside of school. Thus, migrant students are automatically put at a disadvantage in these classes, which may potentially make them feel more inferior to their urban peers. Therefore, by only offering standard, Chinese middle-class extracurricular classes at public schools, the school forces migrant students to conform to urban ideals, which again reinforces the idea that the urban identity is more desirable than the rural one.

These discriminatory attitudes and misguided policies reinforce existing inequality and perpetuate a problematic system of meritocracy, in which merit is solely determined by urban standards of academic performance, and values from different backgrounds are overlooked. One Chinese educator proposed that “we need to close the gap” between migrant students and urban students (Sun et al., 2016, p.14).

The logic of gap discourse, as Teresa L. McCarty (2015) has demonstrated, reproduces “the very social, linguistic, and educational disparities it calls into questions...gap discourse simultaneously constructs a logic of individual dysfunction, limitation, and failure while masking the systemic power inequities through which the logic is normalized” (p.72). By validating the “gap” between certain groups, educators assume the system in which these groups are placed is not the one at fault. However, with stagnant social mobility and continuous discrimination, it is hard to make the argument that the Chinese education system does not automatically place certain groups at a disadvantage.



Conclusion

With an ever increasing number of rural families migrating to cities in China, discourses on migrant children’s education are more necessary than ever. Currently, migrant students still suffer from systemic and peer discrimination, which results in their reluctance to go to public schools and bad academic performance. Chinese educators’ description of migrant students is problematic, reinforcing discrimination in the implementation of school strategies that aim to help migrant students integrate but fail to achieve that goal. Without changes in policy toward migrant children integration in public schools, migrant students will remain systematically disadvantaged in the system. It is essential that this disadvantage should not be normalized, and we should not silently agree to ideological inequality just because it is hard to resolve.

There are some ways that may ameliorate the existing problems in integration of migrant students in public schools. The Theory of Inclusive Education, defined by UNESCO in 1994, is a four-step process that puts emphasis on “integrating students in schools and accommodating their various needs toward achieving a quality education” (Liu & Jacob, 2011,

p.179-80). The four steps can be used as a framework to improve the current interventions to help migrant students in China, which includes: 1) equal access to public schools, 2) accommodation of individual needs, 3) full participation from all related parties, and 4) quality education. Echoing this thought, Chinese scholars are beginning to suggest that schools design courses that introduce urban students to rural cultures and traditions to enhance their understanding of the countryside, and hopefully to achieve bidirectional interaction and equal integration (Liang & Zhao, 2019). Scholars are also suggesting that schools need to play an active role in eliminating the discrimination. For example, schools should report more positive news about migrant families on campus to create a more friendly perception of migrant students. They should also offer classes in knitting or farming that put migrant students at an advantage (Sun et

al., 2016). These suggestions, once implemented, can increase student and parent investment, thereby helping to create a healthier learning environment for migrant students.

On the system level, however, much remains to be done. First, China should redesign its *hukou* system to allow easier access to urban welfare for the mobile population. Second, migrant students should be allowed to take the *zhongkao* and *gaokao* exams in the cities where they have been going to school for years. Third, the central government must provide more funding to establish more schools in order to control class size and offer more migrant students the opportunity to attend public schools. Fourth, China should experiment with a more equity-oriented college admission system, similar to Affirmative Action in the United States. These measures, once taken, will substantially support migrant students, which will also improve Chinese society as a whole.

Works Cited

- “Average Annual School Fees for the Children of Migrant Workers in the City is 2,450 yuan.” Central Government Website, last modified October 24 2006. http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2006-10/24/content_422052.htm
- Chan, Emily Y. Y., Stewart W. Mercer, Cai Yue, Samuel Wong and Sian M. Griffiths. “Mental Health of Migrant Children: An Overview of the Literature.” *International Journal of Mental Health* 38, no. 57, Fall 2019, pp.44-52.
- DeSocio, J., and J. Hootman. “Children’s mental health and school success.” *The Journal of School Nursing* 20(4), 2004, pp.189-196.
- “Facts and Data of Chinese Migrant Children.” *New Citizen Project*, 2020. <http://jiliuwang.net/archives/92102>
- Chen, Y., and S. Feng. Quality of migrant schools in China: evidence from a longitudinal study in Shanghai. *J Popul Econ* 30, 2017, pp. 1007–103, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00148-016-0629-5>
- Hernández, Javier C., and Iris Zhao, “One Target in Beijing’s Migrant Crackdown: Schoolchildren,” *New York Times*, Dec.24, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/24/world/asia/china-schools-migrants.html? ga=2.80763985.77183512.1575736759-1249036921.1510707574>
- Li, Longfu. “The Vicious Circle of Migrant Workers: Some Interviews and Reflections of Migrant Workers’ Children.” *Legal System and Society*, March 2007, pp. 755.
- Li, Yunhui. “Reflection on Problems of the Education for Migrant Workers’ Children (农民工子女教育问题给我们带来的思考)” *Kaoshi Zhoukan*, 2011, pp. 209-10.
- Liang, Yongshi, and Min Zhao. “Case Study of School Integration Education of Migrant Workers’ Children (随迁子女的学校融合教育个案研究)” *Basic Education Review*, August 2019, pp.19.
- Ling, Minhua. “Bad Students Go to Vocational Schools!”: Education, Social Reproduction and Migrant Youth in Urban China.” *The China Journal*, no. 73, 2015, pp.108-31. doi:10.1086/679271.
- Liu, Jing, and W. James Jacob. “From Access to Quality: Migrant Children’s Education in Urban China.” *Education Research for Policy and Practice*, September 2012, pp.179-80. doi: 10.1007/s10671-012-9136-y.
- Lu, Wang. “The Marginality of Migrant Children in the Urban Chinese Educational System.” *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 29, no. 6, 2008, pp.691-703. www.jstor.org/stable/40375392.
- Ma, He, and Wei Liu. “The Reality and Expectations of Migrant Workers’ Children in School (农民工子女求学的现实与期盼).” *Jilin Daily*, July 23, 2013.
- McCarty, Teresa L. “How the Logic of Gap Discourse Perpetuates Education Inequality: A View from the Ethnography of Language Policy.” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 2015, pp.72.
- “Migrant Workers and Their Children.” *China Labour Bulletin*, last modified May 2019, <https://clb.org.hk/content/migrant-workers-and-their-children/>.
- Roberts, Kenneth D. “China’s ‘Tidal Wave’ of Migrant Labor: What Can We Learn from Mexican Undocumented migration to the United States?” *International Migration Review* 31, no. 2, 1997, pp.249-93. doi:10.2307/2547220.
- Sun, Jinchuan, Mengmei Li, and Yajun Li. “The Current Situation and Solutions of Extracurricular Activities for Schools With Migrant Workers’ Children (进城务工人员子女民办学校校本化综合实践活动开设现状及对策)” *Survey of Education*, January 2016, pp.14-15. doi: 10.16681/j.enji.weqe.201601007.
- Wang, Changming. “From ‘Others’ to ‘Our Group’: Analysis on the Assimilation of Migrant Workers’ Children in Schools (从 ‘他者’ 到 ‘群我’: 农民工随迁子女学校融入问题研究)” *Journal of Chinese Academy Governance*, 2013, pp.88-92.
- Yao, Lu, and Hao Zhou. “Academic Achievement and Loneliness of Migrant Children in China: School Segregation and Segmented Assimilation.” *Comparative Education Review* 57, no. 1, 2013, pp. 85-116. doi:10.1086/667790.