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Growing Up In (and Out of) Shenzhen: The Longer-Term Impacts of Rural-Urban Migration on Education and Labour Market Entry

Charlotte Goodburn

Abstract

Extensive research has shown that rural-to-urban migrant children in China face significant barriers to an urban public primary-school education, and often end up in poor quality, migrant-run private schools. However, much less is known about what happens after children leave junior high school. This article therefore draws on two rounds of interviews with migrant children educated in Shenzhen, in 2008-09 and then in 2015-16, to examine in detail their experiences of schooling and labour-market entry. It identifies four distinct pathways of education – state vocational school, private migrant secondary school, state academic high school, or return to the countryside for further schooling – and suggests that these educational routes all ultimately lead to the same end point: regardless of pathway, aptitude, financial investment in education, or earlier career aspirations, migrant youths are channelled into low-skilled urban service work. This is in marked contrast to the hopes of parents that their child will achieve upward mobility through investing in education. This article analyses the multiple reasons for the depressing uniformity of outcomes, and the crucial role of state policy at both central and local levels in perpetuating migrant disadvantage.

Much of the research into the education of China's estimated 35.8 million migrant children has painted a picture of exclusion from better-quality urban state schools and education in low-quality private migrant primary and junior high schools.¹ Much less clear is what happens to these migrant children after they leave these lower levels of education in China's cities. A dearth of longer-term studies on migrant children due to the difficulties of conducting longitudinal research with a highly mobile population results in a lack of

¹ All-China Women's Federation, "Woguo nongcun liushou ertong chengxiang liudong ertong zhuangkuang baogao [Report on the Situation of Left-Behind Rural Children and Migrant Children in China]". Available at: <http://acwf.people.com.cn/n/2013/0510/c99013-21437965.html>; Zai Liang and Yiu Por Chen, "The Educational Consequences of Migration for Children in China." *Social Science Research*, 2007, Volume 36(1): 28–47; Charlotte Goodburn, "Learning from Migrant Education: A case study of the schooling of rural migrant children in Beijing," *International Journal of Educational Development* 29 no. 5 (2009): 495-504; Myra Pong, *Educating the Children of Migrant Workers in Beijing: Migration, Education and Policy in Urban China* (Routledge, 2014).

information on migrants' educational experiences and outcomes after the ages of 12-15, even though this period shapes young people's entry into the urban workforce. In most large cities there are extensive regulations in place that prevent non-locals from accessing education after primary or junior high school. Most urban governments insist that the entrance examinations for senior high school (*zhongkao* 中考) and university (*gaokao* 高考) be taken in a student's "place of origin" where their household registration (*hukou* 户口) is held, thus shifting the responsibility for migrants' further education to the rural area.² For migrant children raised and educated in the city, their home village may be an altogether unfamiliar place, with a different dialect, lifestyle and education system from that which they had experienced in the city. Their parents therefore seek alternative ways of continuing their education in the city. How successful are their educational strategies, and what are the outcomes for migrant young people and for urban society more broadly?

This article seeks to answer this question, as well as developing a more general argument about the failure of human capital theory in the Chinese context of limited graduate employment and major structural barriers to the education of migrants. Its focus is the post-junior high school educational options available to migrant youths in the city of Shenzhen, drawing on initial fieldwork conducted with rural migrant parents and primary-school-aged children in 2008-09, with follow-up interviews with some of the same children aged 14-21 in 2015-16. It identifies four distinct pathways of further education: urban state vocational schools, urban private migrant high schools, state academic high schools, or return to a rural high school – and explores the experiences of migrant youths in each. By examining children's educational histories from primary school through high school and beyond, it reveals that these educational routes in fact lead to the same end point: low-skilled work in the urban service sector. Regardless of a wide range of differing factors, migrant youths ultimately find themselves in low-end, low-status and typically badly paid jobs. The article scrutinizes the role of the state in producing this outcome, and highlights the short-sighted nature of restricting educational opportunities at a time when China is attempting to upgrade industry from low-skilled manufacturing.

² Anita Koo, Holly Ming, and Bill Tsang. "The Doubly Disadvantaged: How Return Migrant Students Fail to Access and Deploy Capitals for Academic Success in Rural Schools," *Sociology* 48 no.4 (2014): 795-811.

Educating the Children of Rural Migrants and the Theory of “Human Capital”

Human capital theory and an instrumentalist view of the role of education have permeated Chinese policy since 1978.³ Human capital theory, developed by Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz in the 1960s, suggests that individuals increase their “human capital” through investment in education, which maximizes their employment opportunities and, scaled up, leads to widespread economic development.⁴ In human capital theory, students’ motives for continuing education beyond the basic level stem from a desire to improve their labor market prospects, income, and social status.⁵ According to critiques by Donald Gillies and others, human capital is an essential component of neoliberal ideology, shifting responsibility for educational investment onto the individual.⁶ Students become educational consumers who make educational choices based on expected returns, and are accountable for their own ‘labor market fates’,⁷ leading in China to what Ann Anagnost describes as “a fable of self-making” in which individuals must engage in continual self-improvement and the realization of their economic potential.⁸ The association between individual investment in education and social and economic success in China is further strengthened by state discourses since the 1990s about raising population quality (*suzhi* 素质) to enhance China’s global position, and by deep historical associations in China between education and upward mobility in which success and status came from passing imperial examinations.⁹ The result is what Terry Woronov calls a “fetish” for “numeric capital” in which examination scores are taken as a representation of human worth.¹⁰ Perceiving education as the key to the future of both individuals and the

³ Limin Bai. "Human Capital or Humane Talent? Rethinking the Nature of Education in China from a Comparative Historical Perspective," *Frontiers of Education in China* 5, no. 1 (2010): 104-129.

⁴ Gary S Becker. "Investment in Human Capital: A Theoretical Analysis," *Journal of Political Economy* 70, no. 5, Part 2 (1962): 9-49; Theodore Schultz. "Investment in Human Capital," *The American Economic Review*, 51, no. 1 (1961): 1-17.

⁵ Gary Becker, "Investment"

⁶ Donald Gillies, "State Education as High-Yield Investment: Human Capital Theory in European Policy Discourse." *Journal of Pedagogy* 2, no. 2 (2011): 224-245; Limin Bai, "Human Capital"; Ann Anagnost, "Introduction: Life-making in Neoliberal Times." In Ann Anagnost, Andrea Arai, and Hai Ren, eds. *Global futures in East Asia: Youth, Nation, and the New Economy in Uncertain Times*. (Stanford University Press, 2013): 1-27.

⁷ Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel, *Young People and Social Change: Individualization and Risk in Late Modernity*. (Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press, 1997).

⁸ Ann Anagnost, "The Corporeal Politics of Quality (Suzhi)," *Public Culture* 16, no. 2 (2004): 189-208: 197

⁹ Andrew Kipnis. "Neoliberalism Reified: Suzhi Discourse and Tropes of Neoliberalism in the People's Republic of China," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13, no. 2 (2007): 383-400; Kipnis, Andrew. "The Disturbing Educational Discipline of ‘Peasants’," *The China Journal* no. 46 (2001): 1-24.

¹⁰ Terry Woronov, *Class work: Vocational Schools and China's Urban Youth*. (Stanford University Press, 2015): 14

nation, parents usually place a high value on schooling and children have high educational goals.¹¹

It is true that as the labor market has replaced state assignment of jobs, education in China has become increasingly important in shaping individuals' occupations and incomes. However, structural barriers to high-quality education for marginalized groups mean that many Chinese citizens are prevented from accessing the kinds of education that lead to good jobs and increased social status.¹² While the central government has gradually softened its stance on migrant education since the 1990s and now encourages cities to facilitate migrant children's entry into state primary and junior high schools, municipal governments lack incentives and financial resources to accommodate migrant children, and a significant proportion therefore continues to be excluded from the state system, enrolling instead in private, usually unlicensed, migrant schools.¹³ Moreover, beyond the junior high school level, the expectation by both the local and national governments is that children will "return" to their "area of origin" for education, since migrant children remain officially members of the rural population in virtue of their *hukou* status, even if they have until then lived all or most of their lives in the city.¹⁴ This means the state places responsibility for providing education on rural county governments. Both government documents and the news media frame children re-migrating for education as a natural process of "returning" to their legitimate position both geographically and socially.

However, this re-migration to a rural school is not always a happy or successful experience. Detailed empirical work on this by Anita Koo *et al* and by Minhua Ling demonstrates the gulf between China's rural and urban education systems, and the difficulties that students experience leaving their parents in the city and fitting into the school and social environment

¹¹ Andrew Kipnis, *Governing Educational Desire: Culture, Politics, and Schooling in China*. (University of Chicago Press, 2011); Anita Koo, "Expansion of Vocational Education in Neoliberal China: Hope and Despair among Rural Youth," *Journal of Education Policy* 31, no. 1 (2016): 46-59.

¹² Ka Ho Mok and Jin Jiang, "Massification of Higher Education: Challenges for Admissions and Graduate Employment in China," in *Managing International Connectivity, Diversity of Learning and Changing Labour Markets* (Singapore: Springer, 2017): 219-243; Charlotte Goodburn, "Changing Patterns of Household Decision-Making and the Education of Rural Migrant Children: Comparing Shenzhen and Mumbai," *Migration Studies* mnz013 (2019).

¹³ Myra Pong, *Educating the Children*; Charlotte Goodburn, "Migrant Girls in Shenzhen: Gender, Education and the Urbanization of Aspiration." *The China Quarterly* 222 (2015): 320-338.

¹⁴ Koo, Ming and Tsang, "Doubly Disadvantaged"

of their “old home” (*laojia* 老家).¹⁵ Similarly, my own findings are that migrant youths educated in urban China acquire forms of social and cultural capital that do not always translate well to the rural environment. However, remaining in the city, regardless of whether children attend state or low-quality private *minban* (民办) schools, also engenders problems for most migrant-worker children. As will be seen, they experience such difficulties depending on place of origin, parents’ income and extent of urban social networks, among other factors. Even those students whose parents are able to invest intensively in their schooling and are strongly committed to what Becker calls “human capital investment” find their desires to increase employability and social status thwarted by inequitable policies.

Fieldwork Methods

My evidence is based on seven months of fieldwork with migrant children and parents in Shenzhen in 2008-2009, with follow-up interviews with some of the same children in 2015-16. Shenzhen was a rural county named Bao’an in the Pearl River Delta on China’s south coast adjacent to Hong Kong, with only around 310,000 residents in the early 1980s, and grew through massive in-migration after its designation as China’s first Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in 1980, reaching an estimated population of around 14 million by 2008.¹⁶ Of these, only around 3 million had legal local urban residence (*hukou*). The rest were migrants, giving Shenzhen the largest number of rural-urban migrants of any Chinese city.¹⁷

In 2008-09 I taught English in several migrant-run *minban* schools. At the same time I conducted semi-structured interviews in sites of high in-migration, which I identified with help from local students and a researcher from a local labor research organization. I used both snowball and on-street intercept methods in migrant communities, and was able to interview 92 parents (63 mothers and 29 fathers) and 66 children. The children were all aged between 6 and 12 years old both at the time of migration and at interviews, and had migrated not more than five years earlier. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin and detailed notes were

¹⁵ Koo, Ming and Tsang, “Doubly Disadvantaged”; Minhua Ling, “Returning to No Home: Educational Remigration and Displacement in Rural China,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 90, no.3 (2017): 715-742.

¹⁶ “Shenzhen renkou midu paiming quanqiu diwu” [Shenzhen ranked world’s fifth for population density], *Guangzhou ribao*, (Guangzhou Daily), January 15, 2010. Available at: <http://news.sohu.com/20100115/n269599067.shtml>

¹⁷ “Shenzhen 8 cheng shi zuke duo zhu chengzhongcun [80% of Shenzhen’s population rent in urban villages]”, *Zhongguo Shibao*, 2017. Available at <http://www.chinatimes.com/cn/newspapers/20171123000904-260301>

taken. Information from these initial interviews is used here to understand children's early educational experiences in the city.

In 2015-16, I returned to Shenzhen and was able to contact twelve youths from the original children's sample for semi-structured follow-up interviews focusing on the longer-term impacts of migration. Interviews with this group and ten other migrant youths who were not in the original sample provides the core information on which this article draws. The additional ten youths met the same criteria – i.e., they had migrated from rural China to the city with their parents between the ages of 6 and 12, and had still been within this age range in 2008-09. These ten additional informants were introduced to me by my original interviewees, as their friends, classmates or co-workers. Information from both rounds of interviews set eight years apart were analyzed comparatively and thematically, using an iterative process of inductive and deductive coding to explore key themes in interviewees' accounts of their experiences and actions. All names of informants used here are pseudonyms, since much of the information was sensitive or potentially compromising.

The 2015-16 sample includes young people who had returned to their areas of origin temporarily but had come back to Shenzhen. Of necessity it does not include youths who had remained in the rural area or who had migrated elsewhere in China. Nonetheless, from discussions with my young interviewees about the post-middle-school trajectories of their former classmates and friends, I believe that only a small proportion of migrant youths chose to leave the city long-term, and that the pathways identified here are broadly representative.

Primary and Junior High-School Education in Shenzhen in 2008-09

Whereas some large Chinese cities, notably Shanghai, undertook campaigns in the early 2000s to incorporate migrant children into state schools and to bring official migrant schools within the state system, Shenzhen did not.¹⁸ Official statistics from 2002 claimed that around 60 per cent of migrant children in Shenzhen attended state schools, based on statistics only for migrant households registered with a temporary residence certificate (*zanzhuzheng* 暂住

¹⁸ “Yiwu jiaoyu jieduan xuexiao zhaosheng ruxue gongzuo de shishi yijian” [Opinions on Implementation of Enrolment of Schools in the Stage of Compulsory Education]. Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, 7th April 2011. Available at: <http://www.shmec.gov.cn/attach/xxgk/4676.doc>

证).¹⁹ In fact, only migrant children formally registered with the local education department were eligible to enter Shenzhen state schools.²⁰ The conditions for registration in 2008–09 included the provision of six types of official documents: *hukou* and temporary residence certificates; a family planning certificate; a school transfer letter; a birth certificate; social insurance certificates for both parents; and a property deed or officially-stamped rental contract. Few migrant parents had all of these documents, so the majority of migrant children were unable to attend state schools.

As in other cities, the majority of migrant children in Shenzhen attended privately-run *minban* schools, because enrolling in such schools required no documents. These are typically of much lower quality than the state schools. Many are housed in dilapidated converted factory buildings, where classrooms are cramped, class sizes are large, and facilities lacking. Discipline is typically poor, and as a teacher I observed incidents of physical violence. Few teachers in migrant schools are qualified teachers, and there is a high staff turnover. This was very different from the state schools I visited, which had attractive buildings and spacious and well-equipped classrooms. State primary school teachers are educated at least to the level of a teacher-training university and have passed the Shenzhen Municipality's examination for teachers. Students are generally polite and attentive in class. Although I have not compared actual levels of achievement of children in migrant schools with those in Shenzhen state schools, studies in other Chinese cities suggest children in private migrant schools do significantly less well in core subjects than those in state schools.²¹

I asked both the children and parents about their hopes for the future. Parents' long-term aspirations for their children, as well as children's own dreams, were overwhelmingly urban. Many children expressed repugnance at the idea of agricultural work. As one 10-year-old girl expressed it: "Farming is dirty and boring, and the money is very little. Nobody wants to." A six-year old boy gave a similar answer when asked if he wanted to be a farmer: "No! I want

¹⁹ Zai Liang, Lin Guo, and Chengrong Duan. "Migration and the Well-Being of Children in China," *The Yale-China Health Journal* 5 (2008): 25-46.

²⁰ Shenzhen Government Online "Women de haizi neng fou xiangshou 'shuangmian' ma? [Can our children benefit from the "two-waiver" policy?], 4 September 2008. Available at: <http://search.sz.gov.cn/was40/detail?searchword=DOCUMENTID=342799&channelid=10989>.

²¹ Yuanyuan Chen and Shuaizhang Feng. "Access to Public Schools and the Education of Migrant Children in China," *China Economic Review* 26 (2013): 75-88.

to be a city person. City people don't farm (*zhongtian* 种田)". Instead, children dreamed of becoming teachers, doctors, police, computer programmers and scientists in Shenzhen. Some girls hoped to be beauticians, and one 11-year-old wanted to be a "career woman" (*nuqiangren* 女强人). Several children of both sexes wanted to be a "boss" (*laoban* 老板) in their own business, an aspiration echoed by some parents. Many other parents, though – including many who ran their own small noodle restaurants, market stalls, or waste recycling businesses in Shenzhen – thought this was "too exhausting" and hoped their children would work fixed hours for a fixed wage in a secure job with employer-provided welfare benefits. Many mentioned university. Few wanted their son or daughter to do factory work, which many parents had experienced themselves, and which was "exhausting" as well as of low status and low pay. Office work where one could sit down and work in an air-conditioned environment was a common aspiration. How achievable these ambitions were can be observed by examining the four pathways open to migrant children after the age of 15-16.

Four Pathways to the Same Destination

Like most cities, in 2015-16 Shenzhen maintained a range of regulations to prevent non-local youths from accessing public education. Before 2014, the vast majority of migrants were ineligible to take the senior high school entrance examination to Shenzhen state schools. This was reformed in 2014, so that those with the necessary documents, whose parents had held residence permits for at least three years, and who had attended three years of registered schooling in Shenzhen were able to sit the examination locally to enter Shenzhen state high schools.²² From 2016, some of these children were also eligible to take the local *gaokao* for university entry.²³ However, individual schools continued to impose further restrictions, with the best adding criteria such as local *hukou* and three years of local social security payments, as well as imposing higher point requirements on non-local students, making it much more difficult for even these children with all the necessary documents to access an academic senior high school education in the city. The large number of migrant youths unable to meet

²² Shenzhen Education Bureau, "Suiqian zinv 2014-2016 nian zai shenzhen canjia zhongkao xuyao shenme tiaojian? [Under what conditions can migrant children take the senior high school entrance examination in Shenzhen in 2014-16?]", 27th November 2014. Available at: www.szeb.edu.cn/jyfw/fwxsjz/gzjy/zkcjw/201411/t20141127_2712882.htm

²³ "2016 nian jin 3800 ming suiqian zinv jiang zai shen canjia gaokao [Nearly 3800 migrant children will take the university entrance examination in Shenzhen in 2016]". *Shenzhen bendi bao* [Shenzhen Local News], 23 October 2015. Available at: <http://edu.sz.bendibao.com/edu/20151119/741881.shtm>

the documentary criteria are allowed now to apply to local state vocational schools rather than academic schools. Alternatively, they can attend private *minban* high schools. Yet these are scarce, and since the introduction of the national student registration (*xueji* 学籍) system in 2014 have been unable to provide any formal record of schooling, making transfer to a state school or university entrance impossible in Shenzhen or elsewhere.

Migrant youths are therefore left with four options to continue their education. To summarize: first, they can enter Shenzhen state vocational schools either by taking the senior high school entrance examination (if eligible, since 2014) or through direct enrolment in the schools that offer this, to study for a three-year vocational qualification. Second, they can return to their native villages for local rural education (either academic or vocational). Third, they can attend a private *minban* high school in Shenzhen. Fourth, the very few who have managed to acquire sufficient documents can try to enter state senior high schools in the city. Alternatively, they can choose to drop out of school altogether and enter the labor market. This of course would leave them economically and socially disadvantaged because of the increasing importance of qualifications in the Chinese economy. Most migrant children and their parents are therefore reluctant to consider this option, and prefer to invest a considerable portion of the family income into one of the four educational routes. Here are case studies of children who took each option.

a) Vocational Schools in Shenzhen

Shenzhen is not alone in channelling those without a local *hukou* into vocational and technical education after the age of 16, rather than continuing down the academic high school route like most of their urban peers. In keeping with recent state pronouncements on “industrial upgrading” and “Made in China 2025”, there has been an emphasis by the state on training a labor force of skilled workers (so-called *daguo gongjiang* 大国工匠).²⁴ In compliance, urban governments have applied this particularly to the children of migrant workers. For example, Shanghai has attempted to ensure the supply of semi-skilled labor for

²⁴ Elena Klorer and Matthias Stepan, "Off Target: China's Vocational Education and Training System Threatens the Country's Rise to Industrial Superpower Status," *Mercator Institute for China Studies China Monitor* 24 (2015). Available at: https://www.merics.org/sites/default/files/2018-01/China_Monitor_24_Vocational_Education_EN.pdf

key sectors by providing state subsidies for migrant places to vocational schools.²⁵ In Nanjing, too, the city is directly involved in reproducing a social hierarchy in which lower-class youths provide cheap labor for the semi-killed rungs of the urban labor market.²⁶ Although Shenzhen does not offer subsidies like Shanghai and Nanjing, it significantly restricts other education opportunities. Thus vocational education is the only real option left for most migrant youths after the age of 15-16 if they want to remain in the city and continue studying. Shenzhen has 17 secondary vocational schools (*zhongdeng zhiye xuexiao* 中等职业学校 or *zhongdeng zhuanke xuexiao* 中等专科学校) and technical schools (*jishu xuexiao* 技术学校). The latter schools are typically of lower quality and accept students with lower *zhongkao* entry scores. They compete to attract migrant students by promoting themselves vigorously in and around Shenzhen's private *minban* and inferior state junior high schools.

Of the youths I interviewed, some had enrolled directly with a vocational school because they did not possess sufficient documents, and some had taken the senior high school entrance examination but had not scored high enough to meet the additional points requirements for non-local *hukou* holders to enter a Shenzhen senior high school. Many were restricted to the less popular vocational courses with low *zhongkao* test-score requirements such as "Car Mechanics", "Electrical Equipment Installation and Repair" and "Business Etiquette" (a particularly dubious option open only to female students at least 1.6 meters tall). In some schools, courses were automatically assigned to applicants depending on their scores, with no reference to aptitude or interests. Eighteen-year-old Meijin was assigned to an unpopular major in "Computer-Aided Animation" based solely on her low entrance examination score. Although she enjoyed the chance to watch cartoons daily, she described her artistic skills after two years of courses as "around zero" and explained that she could not complete any of the artistic assignments, as she had never been any good at art of any kind. Asked if she might find a job related to her courses after graduating, she responded laughingly: "No, definitely not! I could perhaps be a sales assistant in a clothing store".

Only one student whom I interviewed in 2015-16 had chosen her course on the basis of a career plan. This was 17-year old Fanhung, introduced to me by her classmate Choiwa, whom I had taught in 2008. Fanhung's and Choiwa's stories provide a clear example of the

²⁵ Minhua Ling, "'Bad Students go to Vocational Schools!': Education, Social Reproduction and Migrant Youth in Urban China." *The China Journal* no. 73 (2015): 108-131.

²⁶ Terry Woronov, *Class Work*

difference between migrant families in Shenzhen with extensive social connections (*guanxi* 关系) and marginalized families in the city. Both Fanhung and Choiwa came from rural Guangdong, but unlike Choiwa, whose parents earned little selling fish in a market, Fanhung's family was well-off by the standards of most migrants. After a decade in Shenzhen her father, a construction project engineer with a tertiary vocational qualification, had recently managed to acquire a local *hukou*. On account of her father's education and employment, Fanhung had been able to acquire all of the documents necessary to enrol in a Shenzhen state school, gaining a better education than Choiwa at the inadequate *minban* school where we had met. Having done less well than she had hoped in the senior high school entrance examination, and having discussed her options with her father and his colleagues as well as a classmate and her parents, Fanhung decided to study "Building Design" at a vocational school, reasoning that she already understood some of the basic principles from her father's work, and that he had the contacts necessary to find her a position on graduation. Fanhung was satisfied with the course, and in her third year in 2016 had used her family's social network to find a useful internship in a construction firm, bypassing the school's less relevant internship offerings.

By contrast, Choiwa, studying "E-Commerce" at the same school, had no idea how her course might lead to employment, having chosen it herself on the basis of a vague awareness of the success of China's eBay-equivalent, *Taobao*. Along with five of her classmates, Choiwa had accepted a school-assigned internship at an electronics retailer, which mostly consisted of handing out advertising leaflets on the street, and which she described as "a complete waste of time".²⁷ Most of the other migrant students, lacking social capital in Shenzhen, similarly were forced to rely on their school to assign them to an internship that typically was unhelpful in terms of their studies, career progression, or skills training.

Another difference between the two girls' experiences of vocational school stemmed from their prior educational experiences. Fanhung reported that her classmates were divided into two kinds, one group taking school seriously and aware of "how to study", the other not serious about learning, unaware of how to study, and mostly just "killing time" (*hun rizi* 混日

²⁷ Note that these internships differ from those reported in the literature on exploitative factory work, which are usually undertaken by those studying in rural vocational schools which have arrangements with local governments to provide this labour. For further details, see Jenny Chan, Pun Ngai, and Mark Selden. "Interns or Workers? China's Student Labor Regime," *Asia-Pacific Journal* (2015): 1-25.

子). Whereas Fanhung situated herself in the first group of students, Choiwa candidly told me how she and her former *minban* junior high-school classmates sometimes slept in class or played on their cell phone when the vocational high school lesson was dull. She also used the phrase “killing time” to describe her own experience. These remarks point to a difference between the state-educated students, and those who had attended private *minban* migrant schools. Even the least prestigious Shenzhen state schools tend to enforce strict study discipline, generating students who “know how to study” even if they do not all perform well in examinations. By contrast, the often chaotic and unruly *minban* schools made studying challenging, and children educated in such schools are often unprepared for further study.

Such problems are compounded by the low quality of many of the vocational courses available to migrant students. The account given by 20-year-old Minfei from Shanxi, another former-*minban* student, highlights both the low quality of the vocational courses, and the inadequate preparation for study provided by the earlier *minban* education:

The vocational school was really rotten... Out of a class of 70, only 10 regularly attended, and we had only two computers for the whole class... We were supposed to be learning “Computer Skills”, but we learned nothing about computers! The teacher spent class time drinking tea and reading the newspaper, and there was no serious teaching. Actually I never really enjoyed studying – earlier when I was at a junior high school I didn’t learn anything either, and often got into physical fights with my classmates. That was also a rotten school.

Minfei was eventually expelled from the vocational school after a physical altercation with a teacher. “I learned far more about computers in internet cafes than at school,” he concluded. “Now I work in a shoe store, and I don’t need to use a computer at all”. This outcome was typical for the majority of migrant students who attended *minban* schools and then the city’s vocational secondary schools. Many graduates, after three years of “killing time”, ultimately end up in much the same sort of low status service work as their counterparts who had left education directly after junior high school. Although this was unpalatable to families convinced that education was the family’s best hope, for most of the students the employment advantages of a vocational secondary qualification were quite low.

b) *Minban* High Schools in Shenzhen

Since very few migrant students could enter a state academic senior high school in Shenzhen, attending one of the city's few private *minban* senior high schools used to be an option if they wanted to pursue a non-vocational career. However, since the 2014 regulation stipulated that such students could not be enrolled in the new national student ID system, which assigns a unique ID number to each student in a central database of their educational histories, attending such a school has become an expensive and futile exercise. Students can neither transfer back to their rural hometowns to take the university entrance examination nor take the examination in Shenzhen, since both now require an existing ID number. Therefore, attending a private *minban* high school in Shenzhen and then going back to take the *gaokao* in the home province was not a common option and only one of my informants had taken this route (before 2014).

Yifan, a 20-year-old from Jiangxi province, had rejected the idea of joining the Shenzhen labor force at 16, since he would be unlikely to find anything but the lowest paid and lowest status job. He had continued in the senior high school section of his *minban* school after finishing junior high in 2012, along with another 19 migrant youths like him. These were typically the school's higher achieving students, who hoped that they could return to take the university entrance examination back in their home provinces. Their parents had borrowed money to continue paying the *minban* school fees, believing that investment in their children's education would pay off. When I had taught Yifan in 2008-09, he had been a bright 12-year-old who was keen to answer questions in class and to practice his English. Particularly good at mathematics, he had dreamed of going to university and becoming a computer programmer. But in 2016, Yifan was working as a sales assistant in the sports section of a department store, earning just above the city's minimum wage at 2,200 *yuan* a month. I asked him how many of his high school class had gone on to university:

I think zero. Maybe one at most... I don't think so.

[Why not?]

Some really didn't want to continue studying but their parents asked them to... they didn't let them get a job so young and they hoped they would be admitted to university. Of course some dropped out and went to work... One boy went to a factory, other

classmates to stores and cafes to work. Then... when I was starting 11th grade, the school was closed down [by the local authorities]. Some students transferred to the school's other campus, further away and less convenient. Some classmates didn't stay long at the other campus and they mostly went out to work too.

Although sudden closure by the authorities was a well-known risk for all *minban* schools, the rapid demolition of their campus in 2013 had been a shock to its students, leading to a hiatus in schooling and several dropouts. I asked Yifan about the teaching at the new school campus:

The teaching was very ordinary... Quite poor really. Most teachers didn't know much more than the students – they were young too and didn't know how to teach the high school textbooks. We were just killing time and we had little enthusiasm for study. We lacked self-confidence that we could achieve highly in that school. You could say we had a realistic attitude.

Yifan left after three months of grade 11, since he was learning nothing useful and it was not worth traveling the distance every day to the new campus. Yifan thought only two or three of his classmates had taken the university entrance examination (before the 2014 regulation), and none had scored highly enough to enter university. Some had switched to enrol directly in vocational schools, but of those he was still in touch with most were now working in low status service positions in Shenzhen.

c) State High Schools in Shenzhen

I encountered only one student who had been able to attend a state senior high school. The 2014 regulations exclude the vast majority of migrant children whose parents are self-employed or whose workplaces have not consistently paid adequate social insurance, those who have (re-)migrated within the past three years, or those who do not have one or more of the documents. Only 19-year-old Chialan from rural Guangdong, who had attended a state school since migrating to Shenzhen at the age 10, had been able to meet the conditions. Her parents had run a small furniture repair business when I first met Chialan in 2008, but after three years they began exporting furniture to Hong Kong, leading to a significant increase in the family's income. Though Chialan reported struggling with English in her state primary

school when first interviewed, she had rapidly caught up with her classmates, and by the time she entered junior high school she was receiving good marks and dreamed of becoming a teacher. Her parents had, with the help of contacts in Shenzhen, managed to acquire all the documents and had even independently purchased social insurance for the express purpose of furthering their daughter's education. Chialan was thus able to take the senior high school entrance examination in Shenzhen in 2014 and did reasonably well.

However, Chialan was registered as a “category D” student—one who lacked a local *hukou* and whose parents held neither a Shenzhen special “talent residence permit” nor a “high-level professionals certificate”, nor were they members of the armed forces or police. This meant she needed to score higher than local students and was subject to restrictive quotas on what school she could enter. Despite her good entrance examination score, she was therefore able to enrol only in one of the city's less-respected high schools:

The quality of education wasn't very good... the students were all like me: no Shenzhen hukou, and none who had scored exceptionally highly on the exam. Their original homes were mostly county towns and even villages. I felt their learning foundations were not very good, and we didn't learn much, because the teachers had to teach slowly and were often not patient. My grades declined a lot compared with junior high school.

At the age of 18, Chialan returned to her hometown to take the university entrance examination, which she was not eligible to sit in Shenzhen in 2015 despite her eight years of state schooling there. Despite her advantage as a migrant from within Guangdong province, who had studied the same curriculum as in Shenzhen, she did not do well in the examination. Her parents were disappointed and enrolled her at a private university in the outskirts of Shenzhen which admitted students with low scores on payment of substantial fees, where she studied “Information Management”. Private universities in China are disadvantaged by government regulations which allow them to admit students only after state universities have finished enrolments, and they normally recruit lower-qualified students who are taught mostly by teachers who hold only bachelor's degrees. They are thus regarded with distrust by the government and society alike.²⁸ While Chialan's parents thought the fees worth paying –

²⁸ Osman Ozturgut, "Problems in China's Private Universities," *International Higher Education* 55 (2015):18-19

indeed had borrowed money from relatives – to enable their daughter to gain a form of tertiary qualification, Chialan herself was realistic about her employment prospects:

First I need to graduate, which may not be so easy, since I heard I need to write a long dissertation and I haven't received any training in how to do this... Then I hope I may find a job in a school or a large work unit where I could do administrative work like file management. This kind of work is suitable for girls, not very tiring and quite dignified (timian 体面) and stable (wending 稳定). But I may have to change my plans, since this kind of job is in high demand and there are many graduates from good universities. Even working in a store would be okay for a while, as long as I have a chance to try for new opportunities.

As Chialan's experience demonstrates, even attending an urban state high school, far out of reach for most migrant youths in Shenzhen, was no guarantee of receiving either a high-quality education, or entering a state university, or opening doors to decent employment. Although her parents had invested a large amount of money to enable her to enter a state school, then an urban state senior high school and then university, Chialan's most likely job was much the same sort of service work as many of her peers from Shenzhen's vocational schools and private *minban* high schools.

d) Return to Rural China

For the majority of migrant youths, returning to their parents' home county was the only real option for continued academic education. However, the experiences of my interviewees reveal that sending a child back to be educated was often a poor strategy in terms of educational outcome or the child's wellbeing.²⁹ Two children whom I originally interviewed in 2008, Linlin and Mingliu, were sent back to their home provinces of Shaanxi and Sichuan for a senior high school education. Both had done well at school in Shenzhen, and their parents wanted them to continue in the academic educational route. Linlin's parents, who ran a small business selling loose-leaf tea to restaurants in the city, had, through a combination of forged documents and assistance from social networks, managed to gain their daughter entry

²⁹ My findings are similar to those of Anita Koo, "Doubly Disadvantaged"; Minhua Ling, "Returning to No Home".

to a state primary and junior high school in Shenzhen. In 2008, Linlin had expressed to me her hope of becoming a doctor. However, her score on the senior high school entrance examination was lower than expected. To maximize her chances of being able to go on to university, her parents decided to send her back to Shaanxi to be educated. Her parents used their social networks to gain Linlin a place at a good high school in the county town, where she boarded in the home of a teacher. After seven years in Shenzhen, with only short annual visits to Shaanxi, 16-year-old Linlin had not wanted to leave her parents and younger brother in Shenzhen, but reluctantly accepted this as her duty to her parents as well as her only feasible option.

However, it was not easy to adapt to the rural school setting: the Shaanxi curriculum, teaching methods, and expected achievement levels were all different from those at her Shenzhen state school. The university entrance examination is not standardized nationally, and in many provinces the contents relate specifically to the local provincial curriculum, which Linlin had never studied. Moreover, the county school had a strong emphasis on rote learning and testing. As Andrew Kipnis has demonstrated, the “educational discipline” of China’s rural schools differs substantially from schools in urban areas, where there are efforts to provide a “quality-oriented education” (*suzhi jiaoyu* 素质教育) that includes analysis and synthesis of knowledge rather than memorization.³⁰ Although the state schools in Shenzhen had provided Linlin with what she perceived as an excellent education, they had not equipped her to cope with the intense pressure and extensive testing of the Shaanxi school: “Everything was harder there. My classmates would study until midnight! The books seemed much more difficult, and I couldn’t understand anything. I slipped from near the top of the class to near the bottom”. Even with additional tutoring, Linlin could not keep up. Nor had the classroom behavior she had learned in Shenzhen state schools prepared her to integrate with her rural classmates. As she put it,

I was quiet and polite in class and didn’t argue with the other students, but I couldn’t get along with them at first. They weren’t polite at all! They were always shouting and sometimes pushing. They didn’t wait in line properly...They used local slang I couldn’t easily understand, and scolded me for speaking Mandarin.

³⁰ Andrew Kipnis, “Disturbing Educational Discipline”.

“Improvements” to migrant children’s accents and behavior were often key aims of teachers in Shenzhen state schools, actively promoted as a way of increasing the cultural capital of rural children. After several years in a city school, migrant children internalized the values promoted there. When Linlin spoke of her Shaanxi classmates, she took care to distinguish herself with explicit reference to their “quality”: “Although they knew how to learn from books, their quality was low... sometimes they did things that were very uncivilised [*hen bu wenming* 很不文明].” While “civilized” behavior, such as speaking quietly and politely in class, was an important signifier of urban social status in Shenzhen, these habits did not translate well to a rural setting, where failure to behave in ways similar to other students left Linlin unable to make friends. After two lonely years Linlin decided that further study was pointless since her grades had never recovered, and her chances of entering university seemed remote. She persuaded her parents to let her leave the school without taking the university entrance examination, and she returned to Shenzhen where she began work as an assistant in a department store.

Mingliu was another high-achieving student, whose parents had sent him back to his native county at 15 to study. After attending a rural high school for only two months he ran away from his grandmother’s home and returned to Shenzhen, incurring his parents’ anger. Unlike Linlin, he had attended a private *minban* school in Shenzhen, and had therefore not been subject to the same discipline and training in “urban” civility. His main difficulty in integration was not classroom behavior but the demands of the rural curriculum, for which his educational experiences in Shenzhen had left him even less prepared than Linlin, along with his lack of fluency in the Sichuanese dialect. Having lived in Shenzhen since the age of seven, he had communicated even with his parents in Mandarin. Although the medium of instruction was officially Mandarin, the children and most of the teachers used Sichuanese in school, which meant that Mingliu could neither follow the lessons well nor chat easily with his classmates. His grades fell dramatically, and he lost interest in further education altogether, abandoning his earlier dream of becoming a police officer.

While the literature on Chinese migration provides accounts of local villagers’ admiration for “modern”, “cultured” young migrant workers returning home from the cities, the same does

not appear to be true for returnee children.³¹ Although the returnees may regard themselves as more modern and cosmopolitan (or “open minded” and “civilized”, in Linlin’s case), they were teased rather than admired by rural classmates, the reverse of the pattern of mocking “country bumpkins” that many of the same migrant children had experienced in Shenzhen. Nor, as has been noted, did their “high quality” urban state education prepare them to do well in the rural system. My 2008-09 interviews showed that migrant children in Shenzhen had initially struggled to take the initiative in finding answers for themselves in the “quality-oriented” urban state curriculum, yet my follow-up interviews in 2015-16 revealed that those who returned to rural China found the reverse problem even more severe. Excluded by rural classmates for their “urban” behavior, and ill-equipped to do as well in rote learning and therefore grades, returnees found that the study habits they previously had learned in the city now disadvantaged them. Their only realistic work option was to return to Shenzhen to join the urban service workforce at the bottom, leaving behind their dreams of university.

Discussion and Conclusion

The above case studies suggest that, regardless of which of the four post-junior high school educational pathways is taken, rural migrant youths typically enter the lower rungs of the urban service sector between the ages of 17 and 21. The form of education they had pursued did not to make much of a difference to this outcome, regardless of their earlier career aspiration, aptitude for study, or parents’ financial investment in education. In fact, some of those who had appeared most talented at the age of 6-12 – for example, Yifan, Linlin and Mingliu – ultimately quit schooling early because of the major difficulties of pursuing an academic high school education in a radically different environment of the rural school system, or because of the low quality and tenuous legal status of *minban* high schools in the city.

A brief comparison of the trajectories of Linlin and Chialan is instructive. Intelligent and diligent girls, they had both, unusual for migrant students in Shenzhen, managed to enter urban state schools at the junior high school level. Both had scored reasonably well on the senior high school entrance examination, but had pursued different educational strategies

³¹ Rachel Murphy, *How Migrant Labor is Changing Rural China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Xiaodong Lin, *Gender, Modernity and Male Migrant Workers in China: Becoming a 'Modern' Man* (Oxford: Routledge, 2013).

from the age of 15-16, with Linlin returning to rural China to avoid being allocated to a poorly-performing state high school in Shenzhen, while Chialan remained in the city in precisely the kind of school Linlin had sought to avoid. Their parents had invested significantly in their daughters' "human capital", paying for documents and school fees, boarding fees (Linlin), and private university fees (Chialan), but no amount of expenditure could overcome, for Linlin, the gulf between the rural and urban education systems and the loneliness and marginalization of being sent back, or in Chialan's case the inequitable urban examination and enrolment criteria, even for intra-provincial migrants. The likely labor market outcome for both girls was low-status service sector work with limited possibilities for career progression.

The migrant youths who entered vocational school had not fared much better. Although I encountered few cases of dropping out, courses and internships were largely irrelevant to their career aims, and the vocational qualification did not normally provide a noticeable advantage in the urban labor market. Only Fanhung, who was able to leverage her much better social networks in the city, established through her father's employment as well as her state junior high school contacts, felt satisfied with her vocational education and was on track toward her career aims. The others, especially if previously educated in migrant *minban* schools, were ill-prepared for further study and lacked guidance in choosing schools and courses, making it hard for them to pursue any kind of feasible long-term employment strategy or acquire the skills needed in a period of industrial upgrading. Although vocational schools advertized employment rates of 98 percent and above on graduation, the types of positions available for those with a vocational diploma normally matched neither the education provided nor the students' aspirations. China's recent decade of de-industrialization of large urban centers and shrinking workforces at many state-owned enterprises has meant a vocational qualification no longer channels as many graduates into stable industrial work, nor provides skills training that would support a career in higher value-added manufacturing. Instead, many of the factories that would have employed semi-skilled workers have now moved to rural and peri-urban areas, and urban vocational secondary graduates are more likely to find work in the rapidly-growing service economy. These jobs are typically low-paid high-turnover positions, with little opportunity for training or promotion, and low job security.

Regardless of educational pathway, talent, commitment or investment, then, Shenzhen's migrant youths end up overwhelmingly in precarious urban service roles, frustrating parental desires for their children to achieve upward mobility through formal education and the accumulation of "human capital". This is not to say that there is no social mobility for rural migrant children. Compared to the labor histories of their first-generation migrant parents, there is a significant move away from factory work and, at least in the short term, away from self-employment in small businesses. Some youths were able to fulfil the most modest level of parental aspirations – to work in an air-conditioned environment and to sit down at work, albeit mostly as a store assistant rather than the office worker their parents had envisaged. None were able to achieve their dreams of salaried professional positions with job security and employment benefits.

The responsibility for this inequitable entrapment in low-paid labor for almost the entire cohort of migrant children lies with both the national government and, especially, local governments. Although the national government appears aware of the risks the next generation of undereducated migrant children poses to China's high-skill development, the national-level *hukou* system, despite several rounds of reform, provides a mechanism through which local governments can distinguish migrants from locals. It connects migrant children to the place of their birth and allocates resources accordingly, including for further education. This is particularly problematic for migrant children brought up in the city, who typically have limited connections with their places of formal registration, and whose urban studies, experiences, and aims do not translate easily into the rural context, as some of the case studies above show.

City governments under China's decentralized education funding system lack the resources or the incentives to provide high-quality education to rural migrants and are keen to discourage their long-term settlement. Furthermore, the city governments face concerns from local *hukou*-holders who seek to protect their privileged access to top-quality schools and the university entrance examinations. It is worth noting that Shenzhen is in fact less strict in this than most of the other very large cities. Even though central government policy relaxed restrictions on public school enrolment and university entrance examination eligibility in 2014 and 2016, megacities like Beijing have tightened access in recent years. Nor do under-resourced local governments in rural China have much incentive to provide support to migrants returning for education, especially as these students are likely to do less well in the

rural system than local non-migrants, and ultimately return to the cities. Not only does this lead to migrants falling through the cracks between urban and rural policy; it also means that neither the city nor the rural county benefit from the potential skills of this group, wasting parents' investments in their children's "human capital." Many of the brightest and most talented migrant children are routinely sent out of the city for a further education that frequently ends in academic failure, while those who remain are channelled into underperforming schools, kept out of universities, or directed to a dysfunctional vocational education irrelevant to the current development needs of the city and the country.