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## **EDUCATING MIGRANT CHILDREN**

*The effects of rural-urban migration on access to primary education*

### INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1980s, China has experienced historically unprecedented levels of internal migration. Estimates suggest that there were at least 250 million internal migrants in 2011 (NBS, 2012). While many migrants move between rural areas, the fastest growing type of migration is rural to urban, as migrants choose to work in better-paid non-farm occupations in urban areas. In Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen and hundreds of other cities, migrant workers toil in factories, in sweatshops, on construction sites and in micro-businesses, up to 14 hours a day, seven days a week. These men and women move across the length and breadth of the country to earn enough to support themselves and their families and, if possible, to save for the future. Rural-urban migration is, for many, a powerful mechanism for escaping rural poverty.

Many of these migrants take their children to the cities. While rural-urban migration may present an effective route out of poverty for adults, the effects on these children are much less clear. In particular, there may be especial problems for migrant children in terms of education, since the Chinese state places serious restrictions on the ability of the children of migrant workers to access education in urban China. To enrol in state schools, migrant children need official documents, which few have; are required to take entry examinations based on different curricula; and face strict quota systems. Many migrant parents therefore send their children to expensive migrant-run private schools, the majority of which are unregistered, of dubious quality, and represent a significant cost burden to migrant parents. Furthermore, despite positive changes in state attitudes towards migration since the 1990s, both central and local government in China seem to oppose the provision of private education to migrants, and schools are frequently closed down. This paper examines the existing literature on migrant education and integrates this with my own interviews with migrant parents and children, as well as the teaching and observing classes in semi-legal migrant schools that I conducted in Shenzhen in 2008-2009. It assesses the impact of central and local state policies on migrant children, by comparing their educational experiences before and after migration. My findings provide a sharp contrast to much recent research on adult migrants, which argues that migration is overwhelmingly beneficial, by suggesting that there may be significant disadvantages to migration for children.

MIGRANT CHILDREN

China's rural migrant situation is directly related to two historical phenomena: the introduction of market-style reforms, and long-term population mobility constraints. During the 1950s, in an attempt to control population movement, the government classified every resident as rural or urban through the household registration system (*hukou*). One's classification determined not only one's place of residence, but also the benefits received from the state. Urban dwellers had access to state-subsidised benefits such as food, life employment, medical insurance, housing, social security and pensions (Solinger, 1999). Rural-dwellers received none of these, but were expected to be self-sufficient. Two methods were used to maintain *hukou* classifications: neighbourhood committees reported newcomers to the authorities, while basic goods were allocated only to urban *hukou*-holders. This system was extremely effective. By fixing each person into a geographic position, social status and social relations were effectively assigned by the state. After the mid-1980s, however, a relaxation in implementation of *hukou* laws and the re-commodification of many goods allowed the growing urban private sector to absorb large numbers of low-paid rural labourers. Increased agricultural productivity caused by the new Household Responsibility System from 1981 and a decrease in per capita cultivated land created a huge surplus of peasants – around 95 million by 1984 (Li, 1996). While some found employment in new rural industries, millions moved to cities, establishing networks of migrants and encouraging further migration.

Most rural migrants come from poor areas in the interior and west of China, moving towards more economically-developed eastern coastal regions. The main reason for movement seems to be the large income gap between cities and countryside. However, there are also important non-economic reasons for migration, including the desire to experience city lifestyles, which are frequently presented in the Chinese media and in state discourses as being more “advanced” than rural life, and which may be particularly important for parents wishing their children to become modern urban citizens.<sup>1</sup>

Most rural migrants find employment in the urban informal sector, where work is insecure, badly-paid, tedious and often dirty or hazardous. State-owned work units are particularly willing to employ migrants, since they do not have to provide staff housing and benefits to non-local workers. While minimum wage systems and restrictions on working hours have been introduced in many cities since 2004, these seem to have been largely ineffective, with many migrant workers working excessive overtime for less than the minimum wage (Du & Pan, 2009).

The pattern of rural-urban migration has changed significantly since the late 1980s, when most migrants were single adults, usually men moving for construction or factory work, or women going into service. Family members were often left behind in home villages, with children cared for by remaining spouses or by grandparents.

However, as urban employment stabilised and accommodation became more widely available in the late-1990s, migrant labourers began to bring family members to join them in China's cities. While most surveys show that the majority of migrants are still unmarried adults aged 15-30, 2006 data from the National Bureau of Statistics indicated that 20% of rural migrants now migrate with spouse and children. The 2010 All-China Women's Federation survey estimated that the number of migrant children in China's cities was 35.8 million, representing a 41% increase on 2005 (ACWF, 2013). While much recent work on adult migrants in China have shown very positive effects of migration, both for the individual labourers and their home villages, there is much less clarity about the impact of migration on children (Du et al., 2005; Zhu & Luo, 2008; Taylor et al., 2003).

#### FIELDWORK

In order to investigate the impact of migration on migrant children, including on their education, I conducted seven months of fieldwork in Shenzhen in 2008-2009. Shenzhen, a city of sub-provincial administrative status in Guangdong province of southern China, situated immediately north of Hong Kong in the Pearl River Delta, provides an interesting case study, since it is considered to be especially progressive, and is often regarded as a blueprint for the development of other urban areas in China. Since becoming China's first Special Economic Zone in 1980, Shenzhen has become a major manufacturing centre and the financial, commercial and industrial centre of southern China. The population is approximately 14 million, of whom only around 2 million have legal permanent residence in the city. The rest are migrants, giving Shenzhen the largest number of migrants of any Chinese city (Guangzhou Ribao, 2010). Although not all migrants come from rural areas, it is estimated to have the highest rate of rural-urban migration in China (Tan, 2000, p.294). Most rural migrants work in factories, particularly unmarried migrants aged 15-24, a group usually thought to make up the bulk of rural-urban migrants (Mou et al., 2011). However, there are also many older, married migrants in the city, often engaged in informal sector small businesses such as market vending. A recent study of migrant housing in Shenzhen found that 53% of migrants in the city live with their families, that the majority of married migrants have at least one child, and that most have brought their child to Shenzhen (Wang et al., 2010, p.87-88). The true number of migrant children in Shenzhen is unknown, but official figures in 2008 put the number of non-local-*hukou*-holders aged 6-15 at 540,000 (Shenzhen News, 2008).

My fieldwork in Shenzhen formed part of a larger comparative study, assessing the impact of migration on education, family finance, health and wellbeing in both China and India. In Shenzhen, I surveyed migrant families from May 2008 to January 2009, carrying out semi-structured interviews with parents and children inside the SEZ boundaries. I interviewed 66 children and 92 parents of children who were between 6 and 12 years old both at the time of migration and of interview, and who had moved to the city directly from their home village not more

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than 5 years earlier. It was difficult to find adult interviewees, especially during the Olympic period (June-September 2008), and so I used a combination of methods, primarily door-to-door interviewing in areas where rural migrants lived and worked but also visiting factories with a local auditor and occasional “snowballing”. I interviewed children in and around migrant schools and in migrant communities. In interview, I focused on the quality of education received in the native village and in Shenzhen, obtaining detailed information on school facilities from the children, since parents were often not well-informed. I also visited four Shenzhen state schools, and taught or observed classes in four private migrant schools, in order to acquire first-hand knowledge of migrant education in the city. In the next sections I will discuss the situation of migrant children in both the state education system, including relevant changes in national and regional legislation, and in private migrant schools, drawing on details of my field research. I will then focus briefly on gender, an overlooked issue in the assessment of the impact of migration on children’s education, before concluding with a discussion of why migrant children’s education in urban China continues to be restricted and suggesting problems this may pose for the future.

#### EDUCATING MIGRANT CHILDREN: STATE SCHOOLS

Since urban primary education in China is usually considered of much higher quality than in most rural areas, it might be thought that migrating children would benefit from a better education after migration. However, several institutional factors prevent migrant children from attaining a decent education. Although primary and lower middle school education (usually ages 6-15) is legally compulsory for all children, city governments still have no absolute obligation to educate the children of migrants. From interviews with migrant parents in Shenzhen, I found that although 87% (78) of school-going children had attended state school before migration, with just 13% (12) receiving private education, in the city only 18% (16) of school-going children went to state school and the vast majority attended low quality private schools.<sup>2</sup>

Until 1996 migrant children were refused permission to enrol in urban state schools at all, since responsibility for their education officially lay with their areas of origin. From then, in an attempt to enrol more migrants in state schools, central government allowed urban schools to charge migrants extra fees to cover the cost of additional resources. Most fees were beyond the means of migrant workers, so very few migrant children were enrolled. Although in 2003 a State Council Decision stated that migrant children should not pay more than local children, and a further 2004 recommendation limited the permissible types of fees, in many areas migrants continued to be excluded from state schools because of high fees levied by individual schools (and sanctioned by local governments) (Goodburn, 2009). In August 2008, the “two-waiver” policy to waive all tuition and textbook fees during the nine years of compulsory education, already in force in rural areas, was

extended to China's cities (SC, 2008). However, local governments were given discretionary powers to decide whether to include migrant children based on actual conditions, and in many cities, only registered migrants fulfilling strict criteria were eligible for the "two-waiver" policy. In Shenzhen, only migrant children who were in compulsory education and had registered with the Education Department as students were eligible. I will return to the conditions necessary for registration below.

In November 2008, the Ministry of Finance, and the National Development and Reform Commission promulgated the Circular on the Abolition and Suspension of 100 Administrative Fees, which included the abolition of temporary student fees and miscellaneous fees for compulsory education. However, since local governments had already been granted flexibility on this issue by the State Council, this circular seems not to have brought about immediate changes. In late 2008, migrant children in some parts of Shenzhen were still paying as much as three times more than locals for their education (SPG, 2008), while Guangdong provincial government documents indicated that the collection of temporary student fees remained a problem in some Shenzhen state schools in 2011 (Shenzhen Online, 2011).

Aside from fees, there are also serious administrative barriers to migrant children's state school entry. Among parents I interviewed, the overwhelming reason for not attending state school in Shenzhen was the family's lack of the documents necessary to register as a student. To enter a state school in Shenzhen, a total of six official documents were required, known as the "5 + 1" (*wu jia yi*): five certificates and one proof. Parents, teachers, school principals and local officials all gave slightly different descriptions of these, and there was a great deal of confusion as to which documents were required in what circumstances. However, the most common documents said to be necessary were: temporary residence certificate (*zhanzhu* or *juzhu zheng*); family planning certificate; school transfer letter (*zhuanxue guanxi han*); birth certificate (*chusheng zheng*); social insurance certificates of both parents (*fumu shuangfang shebao*); and property deed or officially-stamped rental contract (*fangchan zheng* or *zulin hetong*). By contrast, no documents at all were required to enter most private migrant schools. Very few families I interviewed had all of the documents, which could be both difficult and expensive to obtain.

In particular, most parents reported that birth certificates had not been common in their villages, especially for children born at home, and were costly and difficult to obtain later. Social insurance was expensive to purchase and many parents, especially those who were self-employed, could not afford it. Housing rental contracts were also very difficult to come by, since the majority of families were living in illegally-let rooms. Family planning certificates were, of course, not available to families with children born "out of plan". Even school transfer letters could be difficult to obtain, since these had to be brought from the child's previous

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school, which might necessitate expensive journeys to apply for and to collect the document. Furthermore, two parents reported that rural school principals were unwilling to provide this document, since the school's funding was based on the number of children officially "attending".

Even if the family could provide all necessary documents, a Shenzhen state school place was still unlikely. The entry of non-local children into state schools was controlled by strict quotas, and those without a Shenzhen *hukou* could be admitted only after all local *hukou*-holders had been granted places. Since better schools filled up quickly, there was often no space for migrant students in state schools within their district. If parents wished to enrol their child in another Shenzhen state school, outside their official area of temporary residence, they would again be subject to "out-of-district fees". Transportation there could also be expensive, time-consuming or dangerous. Furthermore, migrant children were selected for entry in those schools which had spare places by competitive examination, based on the city schools' curriculum, which was often very different from that in the children's home villages.

In some cities, greater efforts have been made to enrol migrant children in state schools. Shanghai seems to have been one of the most successful. In 2008, the Shanghai city government responded to the central state's increased emphasis on migrant education by launching a "three-year action plan for the education of migrant children", characterised by further opening of public schools to migrant children. Chen and Feng (forthcoming) estimate that in 2011 about 70% of Shanghai's migrant children were enrolled in state schools. Administrative barriers to entry, which had included the provision of many different certificates as in Shenzhen, were relaxed in 2011, although entrance for children born "out of plan" may be more difficult.<sup>3</sup> Although Beijing has been slower in incorporating migrant children into state schooling, recent estimates for the number now enrolled are similar (HRIC, 2012). Other urban areas have much lower rates, however, with Kunming and Guangzhou having only 55 and 40% of migrant children in state schools respectively (HRIC, 2012). Furthermore, these figures may greatly overestimate the true numbers of enrolled children since most surveys of migrant families include only those who have officially registered as "temporary residents" in their city, a process which many migrants choose not to undertake because of high direct and indirect costs (Lan, forthcoming).<sup>4</sup>

Even where migrant children are able to enrol in urban state schools, studies show continued concerns about their education (Han, 2004; Wang & Fan, 2005; Fang et al., 2006). As Terry Woronov (2008) has observed, policies that allow migrant children to enter state schools do not address the issue of how they are treated once enrolled, or how good the education provided is. While news reports in China on the education of migrant children are usually sympathetic in tone, they very often attribute part of the problem to the "quality" (*suzhi*) of migrant children and parents, pointing out that many migrant children have not received pre-school

education, that their parents' educational level is low and that their home environments are "unfavourable" to study (Goodburn, 2009). Children of migrant workers are perceived by some urbanites as being "out of control", "ill-disciplined", "dirty" and "ignorant" (Goodburn, 2009). Migrant children may therefore face challenges within state schools including discrimination from urban teachers, classmates and parents of local students (Fang et al., 2006). Indeed, some migrant parents cite discrimination in state schools as a reason for not wishing to send their children to these schools even if they could (Woronov, 2008; Goodburn, 2009). Lan Pei-Chia's recent study of state schools in Shanghai has demonstrated a high level of discrimination against migrants, who may be segregated in separate classrooms and playgrounds, wear separate uniforms and enter through different doors to prevent mingling with local students (Lan, forthcoming). Even where there is no deliberate segregation, state schools designated to receive migrants may be seen as "dumping grounds" for undesirable children and avoided by parents (Woronov, 2008).

Despite these issues, I found that for the children attending state schools in Shenzhen, 100% (16) of parents thought the school quality was good. In particular, they praised the quality of the teaching, the school facilities and the wide range of subjects taught. Of the children interviewed, two mentioned that it was difficult to make friends in state schools. However, this is likely to be less of a problem in Shenzhen than elsewhere, since, because of the city's spectacular growth, very few people are genuinely "local". Migrants are therefore less obviously targets of discrimination and bullying than in many other Chinese cities. Despite problems making friends, all seven children I interviewed who attended state school said that their school was good. Good teachers, interesting classes, and excellent facilities were all praised. Although there may be serious problems of discrimination in state schools in some cities, then, in Shenzhen I found that the few migrant children able to attend state schools generally received a good quality education.

#### EDUCATING MIGRANT CHILDREN: PRIVATE MIGRANT SCHOOLS

With restricted access to urban state schools, as well as concerns about discrimination, many migrant parents in China's cities have little choice but to enrol their children in "black" unlicensed private migrant schools. Migrant schools were first started in the early 1990s by retired teachers and other migrants because of the need to provide alternative education for their children (Han, 2004). In the early years, they were informal: many were based in disused buildings or the living spaces of migrant families and were funded through tuition fees, which were much lower than those charged by state schools at that time. However, as migration increased, the profitability of operating migrant schools attracted entrepreneurs, including those with a local *hukou* and with no background in teaching. Since migrant schools are privately run and most are unlicensed, there are no standards, and many schools provide a very poor quality education.



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There have been several studies of the conditions in private migrant schools. All have suggested that such schools are much inferior to urban state schools in terms of the education provided – although most have focused solely on schools in Beijing (Kwong, 2004; Woronov, 2004, 2008; Goodburn, 2009). It seems likely that most migrant children receive an education inferior to that of urban children. How their education compares to that of rural children is much less well researched. My research on Shenzhen therefore aimed to compare the quality of the education in migrant schools not only with urban state schools but also with the schools children had attended in rural China, in order to assess the impact of migration on their education. The following material is based on parent and child interviews as well as on my own observations.

In Shenzhen, although initial migrant schools were set up by migrants to provide affordable, accessible education, most now function as profit-making businesses, charging high fees. In fact, even before the 2008 legislation waiving state school fees, some migrant schools charged more than local state schools. The mean monthly tuition fee in migrant schools in 2008 was approximately RMB295 per child, compared to RMB130 for those who paid full state school fees (mostly before July 2008). The mean combined monthly income of parents interviewed was approximately RMB4,080, and some couples earned as little as RMB1,800, while for single parents and families where only one parent worked the monthly income could be as low as RMB1,000. Migrant school tuition fees, then, represented a major burden to most parents, especially those with more than one school-aged child, and when combined with the additional fees for books and equipment charged by most schools. One private school I visited did offer much-reduced fees to parents who had the “*wu jia yi*” documents, but gaining this discount was next to impossible since the criteria were even stricter than in most Shenzhen state schools. Unsurprisingly, I did not find any child attending at reduced-rate fees.

It is unclear why any parent with the necessary documents to enrol their child in state school would choose a Shenzhen migrant school, regardless of fee discounts, because of the enormous difference in school quality. Unlike in previous studies of Beijing migrants (Woronov, 2004; Wang, 2008), in Shenzhen no parent cited discrimination in state schools as a reason for choosing a private migrant school, and all those interviewed said that they would send their child to state school if they could. Migrant parents’ perceptions of Shenzhen state schools and the education provided there were uniformly good. Perceptions of migrant schools, by contrast, were poor.

Of the 72 parents whose children attended private migrant school, only 27% (19) thought that the school was “good” and 73% (53) thought it was “bad” or “very bad”. Nearly two-thirds said the school was bad because the overall education was bad, and a third because the teachers were poorly trained. Many parents also mentioned poor facilities, overcrowding and bad discipline. While 38% (22) of

children attending migrant schools thought that their school was “good”, most of these gave the reason as having made friends there. Only 6 of those who thought the school was good mentioned a good education or good teacher. Several spoke of problems of discipline and violence, which were especially serious in two schools I visited.

Many parents expressed anger at the disparity between state and private schools. Only two parents thought that the private school their child attended was better than Shenzhen state schools, and both were fathers of boys who attended schools with high tuition fees (above RMB 500 a month). One of these, a street restaurant owner from Guangdong, referred to the school as an “elite” (*guizu*) private school and was proud that he could send his son there. His two daughters, however, attended the local migrant private school, where tuition fees were RMB 280 a month, and which he described as “really very poor”.

It was difficult for migrant schools to improve their teaching and facilities, not only because of limited resources and lack of state support, but also because of their vulnerability to closure. Unlicensed schools, which constituted the majority of migrant private schools even within the SEZ, could be closed down by local government at any time. Migrant schools were thus constantly under threat of closure, which might happen without warning, and with no attempt to ensure children’s schooling was not disrupted. It was initially difficult for me to gain access to schools, since principals and teachers were afraid that if I drew attention to poor conditions, they would be closed down. Even at the best migrant school, which I was told was licensed, staff were worried the license could be withdrawn and the school closed. At the start of 2007, I was told, three unlicensed schools had been closed, and a further two were closed during my fieldwork. Yongcan, an 11-year old boy from Hunan, had for two years attended the “Excellence School”, which was closed without warning. Yongcan missed a month of school before transferring to another migrant school. His father said:

They told us the children would be sent to other schools, but the [school our children attend now] is too expensive and much further away. They told [my wife] the fees for this semester will be refunded, but we haven’t received any money. What’s more, I have heard that this school doesn’t have the school licence either! How can parents know what documents the school has?

School principals were left facing a contradiction: they were unable to improve the quality of their schools while under constant threat of closure because of their low quality.

My observations highlighted the differences between state and private migrant schools. None of the four state schools I visited was a “key” or “experimental” school, but the quality was high. All had attractive buildings, with large playgrounds and sports areas, while classrooms were attractive and well-equipped. Many classrooms had computers and projectors, and all had blackboards or

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whiteboards, televisions/DVD players, maps, charts and other facilities. Three schools had special facilities for learning English, and all had dedicated rooms for music and art. Classrooms were mostly spacious, and furniture in good repair. All teachers were reportedly educated at least to the level of teacher-training “normal” university and had taken the Shenzhen Municipality’s examination for teacher employment. Students were well-behaved, polite to teachers, and generally quiet and attentive in class. I did not observe any physical bullying.

The four private migrant schools where I taught or observed classes were very different. Only one was in a purpose-built block, while the others were in dilapidated converted factory buildings. In one, factory work continued on the ground floor. Although all had playgrounds, these were inadequate for the numbers of students, so sports lessons were minimal and break-time play was restricted. Classrooms were old, dirty and cramped in all four schools, with class sizes of between 55 and 70 compared with an average of 35 in state schools. Furniture was old and broken. Some children lacked chairs. There were few maps, charts or other facilities, and only one school had computers for student use (two machines for 1,200 students). There were no dedicated classrooms for special activities. Lavatories were inadequate for the numbers of students, and staffrooms too few and too small for the teachers, many of whom slept in dormitories in the schools, where they ate, slept and prepared lessons.

Unlike in state schools, there was little size and age uniformity within classes, since many children had missed schooling or enrolled late. Each class had several children significantly older than the rest, who were bored and disruptive. Discipline was poor in all four schools, and extremely bad in one. Eight children mentioned that they were frightened of other schoolchildren, and I was told that older boys bullied younger and newer pupils. I observed many incidents of physical violence. When I taught in one school, I was frequently interrupted by students leaving their seats, talking, shouting and hitting other pupils. Students in one class would turn over desks if bored and run into the corridors. Punishment was imposed in the form of occasional thumps from teachers, or offending students were made to stand in the staffroom reading after class, but these methods did little to alleviate the problems.

Few teachers in migrant schools were qualified teachers, and many were at most senior technical high school (*zhongzhuan*) graduates. Two teachers had not completed senior high school. Most were under 25, and many had not taught before. Many parents complained about high staff turnover, as teachers left to find more profitable non-teaching jobs. The monthly salary of migrant teachers was around RMB1000, compared with RMB4000-6200 in Shenzhen’s state schools and over RMB1400 (including overtime) in local factories. Some children had experienced six different class teachers in one semester. The teachers of English had woefully inadequate English, and one 20-year-old teacher told me frankly that she could not speak a word of English. Students in the same school did not seem to

have grasped much mathematics either, with members of a fourth-year class struggling with two-digit addition.

Although I could not compare actual levels of achievement of children in migrant schools with those in Shenzhen state schools, the results of a recent study of Shanghai schools suggests that migrant children in private migrant schools do significantly less well in core subjects than those in state schools. Chen and Feng (forthcoming) find that on average the Chinese score for migrant students in Shanghai state schools is higher than that of those in migrant schools by 10 points, while the test score gap in mathematics is 16 points. A similar study undertaken in Beijing also suggests that migrant students in state schools significantly outperform those in migrant schools, achieving test scores more than 10 points higher (Lai et al., 2012).

While the education received by most migrant children seems to be of poor quality, especially when compared to the education in urban state schools, it is possible that it is nonetheless better than that available in most of rural China. This view was repeatedly suggested to me by urban Chinese, who, while agreeing that private migrant schools were of dubious quality, stressed that they were much better than anything available in rural areas. However, when I asked migrant parents and children to compare education before and after migration, a surprising picture emerged. Over half of parents (49) preferred the village school, and only 36% (32) thought the city school was better. When parents' answers are broken down by type of school attended in the city, the issue becomes clear. For children attending state school in Shenzhen, 15 of 16 parents thought the city school was "much better" than the rural school. By contrast, only 24% (17) of parents whose children attended private school thought it was better than the village school (most because the curriculum was broader). Even many parents who had rated the village school as bad said it was preferable to the city migrant school. The children's answers were similar, with all children who attended state school, but only 31% (18) of those who attended private school, saying that the Shenzhen school was better. In particular, both parents and children felt that teachers had been better before migration, with many parents commenting that teachers in migrant schools were badly trained, did not "take care of" children and could not discipline them.

This finding seems to contradict some of the older literature on migrant schools in China. For example, Woronov (2008) emphasises that, although the Beijing migrant school she studied in 2001 was worse in many ways than urban state schools, children there greatly preferred the migrant school to those in their home villages, in part because the quality of instruction was higher. However, the other reasons given by children she spoke to for preferring to study in Beijing related not to their education itself but to living with parents, who could supervise their schoolwork better than grandparents in the village, or to the fact that since migration their families could afford to send them to school regularly, as well as to buy higher quality food (Woronov, 2008, p.106). Children I interviewed in

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Shenzhen mostly also expressed a preference for living in the city, and gave similar explanations about living with parents and eating better food. However, in terms of actual quality of education very few thought that the migrant school and its teachers were as good as those in their home village. This may partly reflect the considerable efforts made by the state to improving rural education in recent years, including investment in teacher salaries, buildings and facilities and curriculum reform, as well as the abolition of tuition fees from 2006 (Hannum et al., 2008). The more recent study conducted by Lai et al. (2012), comparing Beijing migrant schools with state schools in rural Shaanxi, supports my finding that migrant education is worse than that in rural China – in particular in terms of school resources and quality of teaching.

#### EDUCATING MIGRANT CHILDREN: A GENDER GAP?

The effect of migration on the quality of schooling children receive seems serious. For those few children able to attend state school after migration, the quality of their education is much improved compared with in rural China. However, the large majority of children can attend only private migrant school, where the quality of the schooling seems worse than in home villages. It seems plausible, then, that for many children migration has a serious negative effect on primary education. One aspect which has not been explored at all in the existing literature, however, is that the impact of migration on children's schooling may vary by gender. I found that nearly two-thirds of those children who attended better quality state school after migration to Shenzhen were boys. There were two main reasons for this.

The first reason was that male births were more likely to be officially registered. Family planning quotas in most of rural China allow a couple to have a second child if their first is a girl. The more children a family had in excess of family planning quotas, the less likely younger children were to be registered, since registration of out-of-plan births involves payment of a large fine. This was much more likely to affect girls than boys. Among families I interviewed, out-of-plan boys were more frequently registered than girls, since most parents of younger sons thought the fine worth paying to include boys on the family *hukou*. Even the births of some eldest or second daughters may have been hidden so that the family could "try again" for at least one son. Girls, therefore, were less likely than their brother to have the necessary documents to attend state school.

The second reason for the less frequent enrolment of migrant girls in Shenzhen state schools was that some parents saw the education of their sons as more important than that of their daughters, and made more effort to acquire relevant papers, undertake complicated admissions procedures, purchase extra equipment required by the school and pay for extras such as bus fares to send their sons to state schools. In interviews many parents tended to emphasise boys' schooling over that of girls. This was less common in single-child families, perhaps because of more financial resources available to invest in the child's schooling, or because

these parents would be dependent on their child in their old age. However, many families with several children seemed to pay less attention to the schooling of daughters than of sons. In fact, in several families I found that younger girls may not be enrolled in school yet, despite being at least 6 years old and in some cases as much as 8 or 9. While delayed school enrolment was already more common for girls than boys before migration, it seems likely that this was exacerbated by moving to Shenzhen because of the much greater costs of education in the city. These negative effects of rural-urban migration on the education of girl children in particular may seem surprising in the context of developmental discourses about more “modern” urban attitudes, including towards gender, and represent a clear counter to the idea, expressed in at least one recent study, that migration to the city works to decrease son-preference (Wu et al., 2007).

### CONCLUSIONS

Most Chinese researchers recommend the expansion of city state schools to accommodate more migrants as the solution to migrant children’s education problems. This is thought likely both to reduce the hostility and discrimination experienced by migrant children in urban China, and to improve the quality of the education they receive (Han, 2004, p.53). To some extent, this is already taking place, with cities like Shanghai and Nanjing increasing the number of state schools which can accept migrant students, while in some districts of Beijing designated state-run migrant schools have been launched (Renmin Ribao, 2012). However there remain serious obstacles to the enrolment of migrant children in urban state schools. The need for an array of official documents before a child can be registered as a student prevents many from enrolling, while family planning regulations continue to restrict school places to one child per family. These problems are in addition to the issues of quotas and different curricula, as well as the discrimination which migrant families continue to report from urban teachers, children and parents.

One possible solution might be for local governments to recognise and improve existing private migrant schools, at least in the short term. However, the state has mostly taken a more hostile approach. The attitude of the central government during the 1990s was described as “do not ban, do not recognize, let it run its course” (*bu qudi, bu chengren, zisheng zimie*), which allowed the (technically illegal) schools to exist as long as they maintained a low profile (Kwong, 2004). However, since then there have been sporadic crackdowns on migrant schools on the part of city authorities, most notably in Beijing before the 2008 Olympic Games (HRW, 2006). Most other city governments have operated similar campaigns, which are now ostensibly on the grounds of removing low quality facilities which may be hazardous to health and safety, removing structures which lack planning permission or requisitioning land for other projects, rather than removing illegal schools *per se*, but which have the same result.<sup>5</sup> Stringent regulations as to the minimum standards required to set up a school, including

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various kinds of sports facilities and a campus of at least 15,000 m<sup>2</sup> in Beijing schools, are impossible for even the best migrant schools to meet (Hu & Li, 2006).

Furthermore, state hostility to migrant schooling seems to stem not only from city governments, which might be expected to show some antipathy to the strains on resources caused by large influxes of migrant settlers, but also, to some extent, from central government, which has failed to provide additional resources to areas with large migrant populations to cope with the extra costs of migrant children's schooling. Nor has the central government taken steps to prevent local authorities from closing unlicensed migrant schools arbitrarily, or to pass any permanent law to hold local governments responsible for the schooling of all children, regardless of *hukou* status. All these facts suggest that the responsibility for the lack of education for migrant children lies not only with local authorities, but also with a central government which has been reluctant to take action to improve the situation.

Julia Kwong (2004) has suggested that state opposition to private schools set up by migrant communities arises from a tension between the state and the emerging civil society in China. According to this argument, the authorities resent popular support for migrant schools, seeing them as an encroachment on their monopoly on the provision of education. I have suggested elsewhere that this interpretation downplays the acceptance of licensed private schools in the Chinese education system (typically attended by the children of wealthy non-migrants), but it does raise an interesting question about the way the Chinese state views rural migrant communities (Goodburn, 2009). Although a major policy shift has occurred since the late 1990s in state attitudes towards migration, from attempts to curb the flows of migrants to the encouragement of labour migration for development, there has not been the same shift in attitudes towards migrants themselves. Large migrant communities exist broadly outside the state system, in that few migrants have state social insurance, use state healthcare or participate in state organisations; many do not follow state family planning regulations and have unregistered "black" children; and, because of their mobility, few are effectively monitored by local state networks. The creation of migrant schools may therefore seem less like acts of entrepreneurship within the state framework, and more like attempts to create an alternative system altogether. The state's response may, then, reflect a more general fear of the potential challenge to state legitimacy posed by the vast numbers of migrants in the city, rather than a more general antipathy to non-state provision of goods.

The state's failure to ensure a decent education for the tens of millions of migrant children thus remains a serious issue for China's development. Examination of the numbers involved shows that migrant students are becoming increasingly important. The number of local-*hukou*-holding children in both rural and urban schools is falling, since declining birth-rates have reduced the number of children in each successive cohort (NBS, 2012). The rate of migration, on the other hand, is

high and increasing. Migrants are increasingly choosing to remain in cities, and more children are migrating with their families. Tens of millions of migrants who currently live in the city have no plans to return to village life. If the children of these migrants are denied access to a decent education, this is likely to have a serious, long-term effect on China's social and economic development. The existence of a badly-educated urban underclass of rural migrants who hope to settle long-term in the city may bring problems of social stability. The existence of separate classes of "haves" and "have-nots" has long been a concern to the Chinese government in the context of the rural-urban divide, which may have reached its widest ever in income and consumption terms in 2009 (OECD, 2012, p.18), but the settlement of rural families in China's cities brings the problem into urban areas themselves. Meanwhile, continued high economic growth rates combined with the decreasing size of the labour force may shortly create a situation of rising demand and falling supply. While rising wages and a changing industrial structure have potentially huge positive effects for the country as a whole, China will have to move up the "productivity ladder" to become competitive in skilled industrial sectors. A key question is whether the labour force will be sufficiently educated to be able to perform this kind of work. The existence of tens of millions of rural-urban migrant children who have no access to a decent primary-level education (and whose education is actually largely worse than that in rural China) suggests a major problem for China's future.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See, for example, Kipnis, 2011 for a discussion of modernisation discourses in China and their impact on education.
- <sup>2</sup> In fact, some of those children receiving private education in rural China actually attended state schools as fee-paying pupils, which was usual in some areas for children born in excess of family planning quotas.
- <sup>3</sup> From 2012, the provision of a one-year Shanghai residency permit and proof of employment and rural origin were reportedly sufficient (Lan, forthcoming).
- <sup>4</sup> My interviews found that in addition to the cost of the application itself, opportunity costs through time away from work and indirect costs of repeated journeys to PSB bureaux could cause reluctance to apply for a temporary residency permit perceived to offer few benefits.

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*Charlotte Goodburn  
The Lau China Institute,  
King's College London*