

A “House United” or a “House Divided”: Investigating the Role of China’s Household Registration in Educational Quality and Equity in K12 Classrooms

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Abstract

The household registration system and policies have profound influences on the economic development, social transformation, and the process of urbanization and industrialization in China. This research paper conducted an extend review on China’s household registration policy’s influences on rural-to-urban migrant students’ educational participation, attainment, and achievement in K12 levels. Previous review of academic achievement gaps between rural-urban and migrant-local students identifies the quest for educational equity for every student, but much of them leave open the question of the historically rooted Hukou system’s powerful influences on migrant students’ educational experiences and outcomes in their processes of integration to the new social and cultural environment.

Keywords: educational reform, household registration policy, migration and migrant education, social justice education

1. Overview of the National Migration Population and Issues Related to Their Children

1.1 Increasing Migrant Children Population

One of the most significant social trends in China during the 1990s was the large amount of internal migrants (World Bank, 1997, as cited in Liang & Chen, 2005). With the increasing flow of migrants, research on migration in China is quickly emerging. As more and more people participate in the migration process and as migrants expand the duration of their stays in cities, migrant children increasingly become part of the migrant stream (Liang & Chen, 2005). Ming reported in her research in 2013 that there are more than 225 million rural-to-urban migrant workers, and some 20 million migrant children in Chinese urban cities. In China, although adult migrants still face difficulties and hurdles in urban cities, the consensus which illustrated by Liang & Chen (2005) seems to be that “migration has had a major positive impact on the economies of both the sending and receiving communities. In addition, to the extent that most migrants make more financial gains at the place of destination than at the place of origin, migrants themselves benefited from the migration process” (p.28).

However, what is less clear is the consequence of migration for migrant children and children of migrants. Due to policies related to the household registration system, migrant children confront various limitations to local social welfare and public educational resources. So their urban education faces the risk of being interrupted or ultimately stopped. Moreover, as mentioned in Liang and Chen’s research in 2005, as migrants secure employment and settle down, they are more likely to bring their family members, including their spouses and children to their settled cities for family reunion. As shown in the 1997 Census of the Floating Population in Shanghai, children of school age already accounted for nearly 12% of the total migrant population (Zhang, 1998, as cited in Liang & Chen). The wave of China’s migration process, which started in the 1980s, has reached a point where more migrants who arrived in the earlier years are now bearing their children in these cities. These city-born migrant children had already reached school age by the 1990s (Liang & Chen, 2005). Therefore, the issue of education of migrant children is likely to be more and more important over time.

Ming’s study on migrant children in Shanghai in 2013 showed that many of the migrant children had moved to Shanghai when they were very young, and some were born in this city. Their residency permits, or Hukou,

followed those of their parents, consequently “they were not entitled to some of the public services that their local school mates with Shanghai Hukou enjoyed” (p.53). In terms of education, “they were not guaranteed a seat in a public primary or middle school, even when seats were available” (p.53). As Pong (2015) pointed out, this large-scale migration in China has given rise to unique policy challenge for the Chinese government, one being educational provision for the children of these rural migrant workers in the cities. Along with factors like higher salaries and standards of living, education has been an important motivation for the high levels of rural-urban migration. Pong argued that: “Many migrant parents view education in the cities as an opportunity for their children to break out of poverty and improve their social status” (p.18). This common belief has contributed to an increasing number of migrant workers who take their children with them or have children in the cities.

1.2 The Great Divide between the Rural and Urban Sectors in Basic Education

Iredale and Guo discussed in their study in 2003, that the Chinese government was enabling the “increasingly free movements of people for both economic development and the important of individual living standards; much of this movement is essential for the economic survival of people living in poverty-stricken areas” (p.1). The major problem, as they addressed, existed in the extent of the economic and social divide between urban and rural areas and the inferior services such as schools, medical facilities, housing, and social welfare that rural people experience. Wide spatial variations have emerged in China in the process of economic reform, partly as a result of the government’s economic policies and its emphasis on developing the east coast (Iredale & Guo, 2003). This economic and social divide also reflected in the distribution of educational resources.

Generally speaking, high quality teachers and sufficient educational resources are centralized in eastern coastal regions and distributed in big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangdong (Wang, 2004). Unsurprisingly, the places with the highest percentages of migrants and migrant children in China are the coastal provinces and provincial cities of Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangdong. According to Ming’s (2013) research, they have been the top three destinations for many years, and migrants have been making up an increasing proportion of the population in all three places. Based on Ming’s study, in 2010, the migrant population figures had risen to 39, 35.9 and 30 percent of the total population of those three areas.

Similar to the allocation of other state resources under China’s rural-urban and western inland-eastern coastal divide, the allocation of educational resources reflects a strong preference for urbanities (Fu & Ren, 2010). Government funds were largely allocated to support schools beyond compulsory education which tended to be located in urban areas, rather than primary or junior secondary schools located in rural regions (Hannum, 1999; Fu & Ren, 2010). Fu and Ren (2010) pointed out that there was a tendency for local governments to transfer the responsibility for rural compulsory education to rural peasants, who were already suffering from the institutional arrangement of China’s rural-urban divide, not to mention substantially lower incomes than their urban peers. Even so, lack of appropriate financing caused serious problems in rural compulsory education. According to the data Fu and Ren collected in 2001, “while 40.9% of primary school teachers in urban areas had finished at least specialized secondary education, only 20.3% their rural colleagues had done so; while 23.5% of junior secondary school teachers in urban areas had at least graduated from tertiary schools, only 9.4% of their counterparts in rural areas had achieved that level of education” (P.595).

Given these circumstances, weak academic preparation, attendance in inferior schools, inadequate educational opportunities, and lack of financial and family supports not only resulted in rural and migrant students’ lower academic performance and achievements compared to their urban counterparts, but also motivated them and their parents to “squeeze into” urban schools for higher quality education.

Evidence from Hannum’s (1999) research on urban-rural gap in basic education indicated that the curriculum for rural areas also reflected a declining priority on issues of urban-rural equity. “The inferior quality of rural schools and their increasingly vocational and technical orientation”, according to Hannum, “placed obstacles in the path of academic routes to status attainment, promising rural primary students were largely blocked from transferring to urban schools” (p.201).

As discussed in previous chapter, the unbalanced economic and social development and educational resources distribution between rural and urban areas could pose many challenges for government officials and school administrators. Based on Wu’s (2011) study, students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds may have more or less access to educational resources that “either directly from families or indirectly from family influences on school organizations” (p.3). Influences of residential location on migrant children’s education have been examined in Liang and Chen’s study in 2005. Some important findings emerged from their analyses: “First of all, migrant children are much less likely to be enrolled in school than local children. Secondly, they encounter a

major disadvantage in terms of school enrollment and attainment” (p.26). As education becomes more and more significant for socioeconomic mobility in the Chinese society, such disadvantages faced by the large amount of migrant children is likely to have long-term consequences for them and for urban society as a whole (Liang & Chen, 2005).

2. Household Registration System and Its Educational Impacts on Migrant Children

Since its creation and implementation, the household registration system has been employed by the Chinese government as the main tool to control rural-to-urban migration and to distribute resources and opportunities, with many important implications for social mobility (Wu & Treiman, 2007). The “Hukou Book”, which records attributes of a household, has been referred to as the “China’s No.1 Document for it has the omnipotent power to determine many important aspects of life” (Chan, 2009, p.198). Under this system, claimed by Wu and his colleague, the children of parents with urban registration status are automatically granted urban status at birth and are entitled to privileged benefits conferred by the socialist state: access to quality education, medical care, and decent job. Mentioned by Chan, Liu, and Yang (1999), since migration is selective and as hukou and non-hukou migrants face huge different opportunities and constraints, “population flows in China are most meaningfully classified along hukou lines: migration with residency rights (hereafter, hukou migration); and migration without hukou at destination (non-hukou migration)” (p.428).

Basically the hukou system divided the total population into rural and urban parts. As Fu and Ren discussed in their study in 2010, there were limited opportunities for exam admission to tertiary education for students from rural origins to be entitled nonagricultural hukou status. Those chances were restricted to the best and brightest few of the rural population (Wu & Treiman, 2007). Scholars (Wu & Treiman, 2007; Fu & Ren, 2010) agreed that the basic idea of the hukou system was deeply rooted in the central government’s recognition of the rural-urban divide at that time. Scholars believed that the hukou system greatly influenced people’s social mobility, educational attainments, employment opportunities, and labor-market returns (Fu & Ren, 2010). More specifically, a person’s hukou status is a long-lasting label that represents his or her duty and rights to the states. Consequently, as they argued, the hukou system promotes inequality by “favoring one individual with a certain status over another with a different status” (p.592). The gap between rural migrants without local hukou and urban residents not only creates social inequality, but also leads to tremendous educational inequality which needs more serious attentions from policy makers and educators with power.

2.1 “Working Hard, Bound for Nowhere”: Migrant Workers’ Children’s Dilemma

In Ming’s (2013) research of migrant worker’s children’s educational experiences in metropolitan cities such as Shanghai and Beijing, a frustrating phenomenon can be summarized from various case studies: no matter how many efforts they made and how successful in their studies, “these migrant students are legally barred from taking the public high school entrance examination upon graduation” (p 54). And those of their migrant peers without local hukou in Beijing, even following some students as they migrated back to their hometowns for future studies. For those migrant families choose to stay in their destination cities, they were often asked to pay substantial special fees to enroll their children in local public schools (Ming, 2013; Xiong, 2015). Those additional educational registration fees can be very expensive and many migrant families could not afford. The most important restriction that could shut down the educational door for migrant students was that migrant students were not allowed to take the public high school entrance examination in cities such as Shanghai upon middle school graduation, and thus would not be allowed admission to a Shanghai public high school (Ming, 2013). As a result, their only road to high school and college was to return to their hometowns.

Mentioned in Xiong’s study in 2015, Shanghai started to apply the “open-door” policy to migrant children in order to enable more migrant students enroll in local public schools. However, students from their initial private migrant schools didn’t mix with the local Shanghai school age children and migrant students also reported that they found it difficult to achieve upward social mobility even if they do attend public schools. Unsurprisingly, although local governments and public schools are willing to open the door for migrant students for entering, their more urgent needs of “staying” still remains unsolved. Migrants’ children who inherit their parents’ non-local hukou status are officially counted as migrants, generation after generation, no matter how long their parents have stayed in the host city (Ming, 2013). Despite the recent reforms or “relaxations” in hukou policies, migrant children have still never had a chance of becoming “true” urban citizens and really integrating into the local social and cultural environment. Instead, their hukou status created an invisible barrier to make them become outsiders within the host cities.

2.2 “Under the Same Blue Sky?” The Divided Educational Opportunity and Quality

Scholars (Liang & Chen, 2005; Wu, 2011) indicated that perhaps the most prominent structural feature of

contemporary Chinese society is the social divide between the rural and urban sectors, institutionalized by the hukou system which has provided an important administrative tool for the government to cope with demographic pressures in the course of rapid industrialization starting in the 1950s (Chan, 1994). Recent studies of migration in China have highlighted the importance of hukou in determine the life chances of internal migrants (Solinger, 1999; Wang & Zou, 2001; as cited in Liang & Chen, 2005). Because of the involvement of hukou system, although migrant children's education has been receiving attention from government officials and public society, there remain serious gaps in reality.

"Under the same blue sky, grow up and progress together" (Pong, 2015, p.58), the policy goal of seeking educational equity is certainly not a recent call. It reflected a recognition at the central level of migrant children's right to equal educational opportunities. However, based on Pong's research by 2015, central governments should create the space and provide more opportunities for children of the floating population to receive basic education, but only children who "could not be taken care of in their place of hukou registration could apply to be as temporary students of public schools in receiving areas" (p.60). Pong's study also stated that children of the floating population could be temporarily educated in public schools, but then admission would depend on an application process and various conditions. In addition, public schools could charge these students temporary schooling fees each semester.

As more and more migrant workers have chosen to bring their children with them to urban cities, schooling for their children has become an indispensable issue. But migrants are routinely derived insufficient public service and support from upper governmental level: "local governments set their education budgets according to the number of students with local hukou. And because of the local hukou requirement of the public examination system, teachers are essentially only evaluated on the quality of their teaching to local students. Migrant children are again left out of the calculations" (Ming, 2013, p.97).

Migrant parents usually have two options for educating their children in the city: The public system and the private system, which is also referred to "the dual educational system" (Xiong, 2015). There is an official education system composed mainly of public and private schools which approved by the local government; and an unofficial education system of private migrant schools with or without official school licenses (Xiong, 2015). If given a real choice, according to Ming (2013), "almost all migrant families would jump at the opportunity to educate their children in a public school, where the quality of teachers and school facilities are unquestionably better. Unfortunately, three factors make the public system largely irrelevant to migrant students and their parents: access, public examination requirement, and examination syllabi" (p.99). As mentioned by Ming (2013), in 2006, the newly revised Compulsory Education Law again emphasized the most government's responsibility for migrant children; however, it also mentioned the principle of "enrollment in nearby schools" (p.100), which is interpreted by some local governments as "enrollment in schools near to the locality of hukou registration" (p.100).

None the less, there are not enough spaces in big cities' public schools to satisfy the large demand of all migrant students without additional government investment, which leaves rooms for the additional registration fees. In addition to fees, local governments and schools can also use paperwork as a barrier to limit migrant students' access to public schooling. Noted in Ming's (2013) research, migrant students in Beijing and Shanghai were only entitled to public schooling if their parents can produce the "Five Licenses": "Temporary residence permit, proof of employment, proof of residence, certificate from the place of origin showing that the family could not provide caregiving support to its children here, and hukou booklet" (p.101).

As noted earlier, another obstacle for migrant students is also hard to overcome: The hukou restriction of the public examination system. Migrant students are not allowed to take the National College Entrance Examination outside their hukou residence (Ming, 2013). For many students, returning to their hometown is still not a feasible option. Even in cases where migrant students can return to their hometown to take the exam, they still encounter the additional hurdle of overcoming examination syllabus differences across different regions. Due to the regional differences in education quality and resources, "syllabus mismatches will become an increasingly prevalent problem among migrant students" (Ming, 2013, p.102).

Theoretically, migrant children without local hukou can enroll in high-quality, expensive private urban schools. But in reality, only the privileged few can afford those schools: "It is not a realistic option for the masses of low skilled, blue-collar migrant parents" (Ming, 2013, p.103). Under this circumstance, the private system alternative for their children's education only refers to migrant workers' children schools. These schools are mostly founded and owned by non-locals, and often hire staff and teachers who themselves don't have local hukou (Ming, 2013). Most of these migrant schools are unlicensed, and usually confront the risk of being closed by government

authorities at any time. Reported from Ming's research, in Beijing, graduates from licensed migrant schools are allowed to participate in the Public High School Entrance Examination, regardless of their hukou status, but only students with local hukou are assigned a public high school after completing the exam. Migrant students are still not placed in a public high school afterwards.

As Pong (2015) conducted in her study, although migrant schools continue to serve as a significant function for migrant communities in urban cities such as Beijing, they still lack the resources to provide a learning environment for their migrant students. Based on Pong's research, despite central policies are calling for increased management of and support for these migrant schools at the local level, migrant schools in Beijing for example, have not received much assistance from the municipal government. Most of them are still unlicensed and remain vulnerable to government closures. According to the data based on Ming's (2013) research, in 2012, there were around 200 licensed and unlicensed migrant schools in Beijing, and no new licenses have been offered to migrant schools since 2006, and many unlicensed schools were forced to shut down between June and October 2006. In 2011, "the demolition of 24 migrant schools, which enrolled over 140,000 students, made international headlines" (p.108).

2.3 "Fitting In or Left Out": An Unbalanced Battle for Migrant Students

Previous empirical researches indicated some common trends in schooling for migrant children: the delayed age at school enrollment, lower socioeconomic backgrounds of migrant parents, and lack of qualified teachers and school infrastructure (Liang & Chen, 2005). Research also revealed the effects of rural-urban disparities in migrant students' educational attainment: migrant students maintained lower enrollment and attainment rate compared with their local urban peers, the duration of residence matters for migrant children (Liang & Chen, 2005); migrant students experience substantial educational inequality, and the migration process would have negative influences on migrant children's learning outcomes (Wu, 2011). Fu and Ren (2010) indicated that there are many inequalities related to hukou system in terms of the quality of migrant students' compulsory education. All in all, as pointed out by scholars (Heckman, 2005 as cited in Fu & Ren, 2010; Wu & Treiman, 2007; Xiong, 2015), China's current dualistic educational policy promotes inequality. Place of birth determines hukou status and greatly influences an individual's chances for a good education, and thus, a decent and well-paid career. Hence, as Fu and Ren reported in their study, rural-origin migrant students not only suffer from fewer years of schooling compared with their urban peers, but also receive an inferior compulsory even secondary education.

In the process of integrating into urban educational, cultural, and social environment, migrant students not only face obstacles to the equal access and attainment of educational opportunities, but also move between degrees of comfort and discomfort with their own identity and their identity intertwined with local students. The national hukou system and policies create a macro-hurdle for migrant students, while the social and cultural capital in their settled cities could reinforce a micro-barrier in the way they regard themselves as they construct their social identity. Xiong (2015) reported that migrant children at the public schools were more pessimistic compared with their local counterparts and students in private migrant schools. As Xiong summarized, migrant children were more pessimistic about their future social mobility, experienced self-deny and rejection, as well as experienced "the counter-school culture" and institutional discrimination against their origins, family backgrounds, lower socioeconomic status, and accent.

Lin (1993) found that migrant students usually suffered psychological damage during their "educational migration process" (p.26). As she illustrated, migrant students easily looked down on themselves, their urban classmates teased them, and their teachers ignored them. It's all too natural that many of them lose interest in studying and drop out of schools. Evidence could also be found in Xiong's (2015) research, which indicated that only a small number of migrant students eventually finish k12 level education and go to college. Many migrant students too often feel that they experience the risk of sticking out, becoming invisible, or being left outside the mainstream, for example, even their accents can result in their being taunted or excluded. As Lin (1993) pointed out, "the custom of looking down on skilled and manual labor and their children is deeply rooted in the society" (p.65), despite the government's renewed efforts to revitalize education for migrant children, there has been a tug of war. The problem is that even though the number of migrant schools and public schools which open to migrant children, many migrant students don't have the access or willingness to enroll in those schools, due to various physical and psychological barriers and challenges that could marginalize them out of the mainstream society.

3. For Future Discussion: Rethinking Education for Migrant Student

There can be no doubt that issues of migrant children education could be one of the important yet biggest challenges to face for educational administrators and policy makers. As Zhang (2013) claimed, compared with

issues of adult migrants, children as accompanied migrants have not been sufficiently studied especially in the field of education. In her study, the rural-to-urban migration created split rural households and changed family structure. One distinctive result was the growing number of left behind children and increasing migrant children to cities. Facing problems of inadequate educational and social resources and lacking of access to secondary and future education, in combine with restrictions created by lacking of local urban hukou, those migrant children experienced cultural marginalization, social discrimination, educational exclusion, and social welfare shortage (Zhang, 2013). However, education for migrant children still has attracted comparatively less attention from people who have power.

Previous literature has cited many reasons for the decline of migrant student enrollment, participation, and graduation in the K12 and higher education. Among them, the overall rural-urban gap in basic educational opportunities and resources, the widening of qualified teaching force gap for migrant children, the lack of prestige for teaching and migrant schools as a profession, and influences of hukou system on educational equity and quality have been widely discussed. Numerous recommendations have been made to try to remedy the current situation: providing increased government financial aid to migrant schools, hiring more qualified teachers for migrant students, restructuring public and migrant schools to provide teachers and school principals with more autonomy to recruit migrant students, relaxing the “entrance requirement” for migrant children and their parents. While many of these recommendations have proven useful and sound promising, the problem still exists. How to balance the national hukou restrictions and impacts on migrant students without local hukou remained a tough problem which can’t be solved only rely on school principals and teachers’ willingness to “open doors” and “add more seats” for the large amount of migrant student population. The “ceiling effect” (Xiong, 2015) of hukou system on distribution of educational resources and opportunities remains hardly to change. Moreover, while reviewing related empirical articles, issues of teacher’s power, responsibilities, and preparation in regard to migrant children and hukou influences are seldom mentioned. As Lin (1993) proposed, teachers are well aware of the discrepancy between the school curriculum and rural and migrant students’ needs, but they usually lack the decision-making power to bring about real changes. “To change from stressing the Entrance Exam and hukou system to meeting local needs is by no means a small task to be fulfilled by a teacher working along” (Lin, 1993, p.42). Moreover, the lack of voice of preparing teachers for effectively working with migrant children in teacher education programs also needs equally important attention from policy makers and teacher educators. Creating an equity and excellent learning environment for every student in China can be a complex and difficult reform, but it could always start with a small sparkle in our mind: confront the difficulty migrant students are facing, understand struggles they are experiencing, and addressing their needs and voices to the public so the majority of migrant student population won’t remain to be the silent and vulnerable minority.

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