Everybody educated?

*Education migrants and rural-urban relations in Hubei Province, China*

Sier, W.M.

**Publication date**
2020

**Document Version**
Final published version

**License**
Other

**Citation for published version (APA):**

---

**General rights**
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Everybody Educated?
Education Migrants and Rural-Urban Relations in Hubei Province, China

This dissertation tells the stories of China’s ‘education migrants’, the growing number of Chinese rural youth who migrate to the city via the country’s higher education system. These youths’ increased enrolment in Chinese universities has driven the rapid expansion of the Chinese higher education system since 1998. Despite being the first in their families to go to university, education migrants struggle in the city as a result of their substandard degrees and the stigmatisation of rural people in urban China. Yet, driven by their family members’ need of support and a lack of alternative options, these youths continue to strive for success in China’s urban society.
Everybody Educated?
Education Migrants and Rural-Urban Relations in Hubei Province, China

Willy Sier
Promotiecommissie:

Promotor: prof. dr. H.W. Van Schendel, Universiteit van Amsterdam
Copromotor: dr. S. Lan, Universiteit van Amsterdam
Copromotor: dr. B. Kalir, Universiteit van Amsterdam

Overige Leden: prof. dr. B.J. De Kloet, Universiteit van Amsterdam
prof. dr. Xiang Biao, Oxford University
prof. dr. R. Ronald, Universiteit van Amsterdam
dr. W.H.M. Leung, Universiteit van Amsterdam
dr. C.H. Harris, Universiteit van Amsterdam

Faculteit der Maatschappij- en Gedragswetenschappen
The research for this dissertation was conducted with the financial support from the Moving Matters (MoMat) Programme Group, Department of Anthropology, Amsterdam Institute of Social Science Research (AISSR), University of Amsterdam. A six month research stay in Oxford, UK was made possible by the UvA 385-grant.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deep gratitude for all the people who have supported me during the years of my PhD trajectory. First of all, I wish to acknowledge the people whose stories are at the heart of this work. Without their boundless generosity and kindness this project would not have been possible. Not only did they invite me into their homes and families, but they also did everything within their power to further my research and make me feel welcome in their worlds. To the youth portrayed in this book I would like to say: spending time with you was the best part of this research project. My greatest hope is that my writing will do justice to the trust you have had in me and my work.

Mario Rutten, the person who once helped me bring this project to life, is unfortunately no longer with us. I am deeply thankful for the years that Mario was my supervisor, during which he shared with me his love for anthropology and his wealth of experience with research and university life. Most of all I treasure the unforgettable friendship and endless support that he showed me during that time, as well as the enduring connection with his wife Rienke and children Daan and Lisa.

Willem van Schendel, Shanshan Lan, and Barak Kalir, thank you for all your help with seeing this project through. I think back on your visits to Wuhan very fondly, and am so grateful that you travelled all that way to bring me some company and meet my informants. After my return, you guided me through the writing phase efficiently and in good humour. Our meetings made me feel inspired and confident. I am very grateful for all the support you showed me throughout the years.

I would like to acknowledge all the MoMat members, including the permanent staff and the community of PhDs, who made these years so enjoyable. Also, I want to thank Muriël Kiesel and the staff of the AISSR for all their support, and express my special appreciation for Rosanne Rutten, who has always generously provided me with encouragement and advice.

Sanderien Verstappen, thank you for thousands of hours of phone coaching and all your friendship. I am endlessly grateful for you having travelled all the way to Wuhan to visit me and make our film ‘Empty Home’, which is now a beautiful visual window through which I can always remember this period of fieldwork. José Komen, you helped me in uncountable ways during my PhD trajectory. You are a great example to me and your support during this time has been absolutely invaluable.
Miriam Driessen, thank you for helping me spend a semester in Oxford and teaching me about the art of article writing. I am so proud that my first publication was realised in cooperation with you. I thank Xiang Biao and Helen Siu for introducing me to their students, Miriam Driessen and Ling Minhua, and for their insightful comments in the early stages of this project. Ling Minhua, I appreciate you meeting me in Hong Kong and showing me your university campus.

I want to express my deep appreciation for my family who enthusiastically follow all my endeavours and in whose company I recuperate many weekends of the year. Having such a warm home to return to gives me the power to go out and explore the world.

To all my friends in Volendam: whether it is by playing endless games of Monopoly, sharing family meals, watching Ajax lose in spectacular ways, talking until we can’t keep our eyes open, or going on a skiing holiday, there is no better way for me to unwind than by spending time with you. Special mention for the ‘wailing wall’ members (Hout, Karin, Boots, Chap, Jeroen, and – behind the scenes – Jolien) who give me all the chat, friendship and support anybody could ever need.

My friends in Beijing: Zakaria Elmasri, Hussain Amer, Junni Ogborne, Edwin Lam, and Li Wei. Ever since my I started my Master’s you have supported me on the road to becoming a researcher. Thank you.

I would like to offer my special thanks to the O’Connor family who have hosted me many times in their beautiful Dublin home, where I found great nooks for writing and indulged in their delicious cooking.

I would also like to acknowledge the support of all my friends who have contributed to this work throughout the years. Seppe van Grieken, thank you for letting me stay in your house and being such a good friend. This whole adventure started when we first scouted Wuhan together. Vanessa de Smet, Lieke Wissink, Elyse Mills, and Dorien Theuns, thank you for all your friendship and support. Judith van de Bovenkamp, I was so lucky that you were in Wuhan and I was able to share yet a bit more of my China-journey with you. Stephen George and Stephy Chung, thank you for hosting me on Lama Island.

And, of course, last but not least, Daniel O’Connor. You did not only contribute your beautiful drawings to my thesis, but have also filled these years with love and laughter, making them into the happiest of my life. You really are the best. Thank you.
List of Figures & Photos

**Figures**

Figure 1: Map indicating the location of Hubei province in China
Figure 2: Map indicating relevant research locations within Hubei province
Figure 3: Overview of Hubei province score line 2015
Figure 4: Overview of Hubei province’s education System 2014
Figure 5: Structure of the labour market from the perspective of education migrants

**Photos**

Photo 1: Youth hanging out at a mall at Wuhan’s Optics Valley Square
Photo 2: Impression of Wuchang district, Wuhan
Photo 3: View from my studio window on a polluted day, near Yuejiazui
Photo 4: Intricate infrastructures and newly-built buildings for sale
Photo 5: Entrance to the Foxconn factory grounds
Photo 7: Display outside of Duodaoshi High School informing about last year’s results
Photo 8: Decoration on Misty’s office wall
Photo 9: Misty’s office

Glossary

Ant tribe / Yizu
A term popular in academic literature in reference to educated, rural youth in cities.

Eating bitterness / Chiku
Bearing hardship.

Gaokao
The university entrance exam.

Guangjie
Go out window shopping, roaming the streets or a mall.

Hukou system
Chinese system of residence registration.

Key point university
Universities belonging to the top segment of the education system, funded by the 985- and 211-projects.

Left-over woman / Shengnü
A derogatory term to refer to a highly-educated, unmarried woman.

Marriage Agent / Meipo
A female matchmaker in the village who matches young men to potential brides for a fee.

Marriage House / Hunjia
The house a groom is expected to buy before marriage.

Outside / Waidi
‘Going outside’ generally means ‘to migrate’ or ‘do migrant labour’. ‘Coming from outside’ or ‘being an outsider’ means ‘to be a migrant’ or ‘not a local’.

Phoenix boy / Fenghuangnan
A derogatory term to refer to a boy who grew up in China’s countryside, and is now successful in the city.

Shuangxiu
Getting two days off per week on a job.

Taobao
An online marketplace.

Tianran
Job-hopping.

WeChat / Weixin
China’s most popular social media application. It combines functions of social media applications Facebook and Whatsapp.

Zhai
Popular internet-term, meaning: not often wanting to go outside, being shy, keeping to oneself.
Time Line

1949: The China Communist Party (CCP) comes to power, and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is founded.

1976: Death of Mao Zedong.

1978: Start of the reform period under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping.

1986: Implementation of nine years of compulsory education.

1990: Stagnation of the rural economy, which develops into ‘rural crisis’.


1998: Start of the radical expansion of the Chinese higher education system.

2004: Launch of the rural primary school merger programme.


2017: Rural graduates can now apply for urban hukou-registrations in second-tier cities.

Maps

Figure 1: Map indicating the location of Hubei province in China
Made by: Willy Sier

Figure 2: Map indicating relevant research locations within Hubei province
Made by: Willy Sier
Overview of Main Characters

**MORNING SUNSHINE**

1994
University dropout
Major: accountancy
Zhuanke university
Two sisters, one brother
Parents practice labour migration
Married in 2018

**ANNA**

1993
Foxconn office employee
Major: editing
Class 2 university
One brother
Parents practice labour migration
Plays piano
**Li Tang**

1988
Car salesman
Major: car sales
Zhuanke university
Only child
Mother is a farmer
Raised by single mother

**Julia**

1993
Works in education sales
Major: Fashion design
Class 2 university
One brother
Mother practices labour migration
Very ambitious
Misty
1993
Works in sales
Major: accountancy
Zhuanke university
One brother
Parents are farmers
Married and pregnant in 2019

Xi
1993
University dropout
Works in e-commerce
Major: machine engineering
Class 1 university
Single child
Parents are farmers
INTRODUCTION
I want a rich and wonderful life.
I want to be busy, and I want to be free.
Life is wonderful, when the soul is free.

(Morning Sunshine)

It was a sunny Sunday afternoon when Morning Sunshine spoke these words dreamily, sitting on the doorstep of a mall in Wuhan. She liked coming to this mall on Sundays for window shopping, as did many of her peers, judging by the great number of youths strolling through this newly-built and extravagantly-sized shopping complex today. Groups of friends walked around with their arms linked, laughing and talking. This mall was well-connected to the parts of Wuhan’s outskirts in which many of the city’s factories and less famous universities were located, making it a popular hang-out for those youths who spent most of their time on factory grounds and university campuses in the city’s peripheral areas.

When we first met in the early autumn of 2015 in Wuhan, the provincial capital of China’s Hubei province, Morning Sunshine was two years into her studies to become an accountant and two months away from dropping out due to a nervous breakdown. The pressure for her to succeed would soon become unbearable. The knowledge that her parents, brother and sisters were struggling to get by as labour migrants ever since they lost their farmland to a land consolidation project was weighing on her. Feeling guilty that her ambition to study was a strain on the family’s income, Morning Sunshine worked extra jobs and took out bank loans in order to cover her own tuition and dorm fees. Throughout her summer holidays, she had worked in a beer crate factory to save up something extra. Now, the new school year had just started. The exhaustion of combining work and study, and the gnawing doubt about her choice of major and university, were bringing her down. She had never wanted to become an accountant in the first place and was now starting to understand that the degree for which she was studying did not promise much in terms of labour opportunities. So, what was she doing all this for?

Morning Sunshine is one of a great number of rural Chinese youths who moved to the city with the goal of going to university since the start of the expansion of the Chinese higher education system in 1998. The rapid increase in the number of Chinese undergraduate students, from 3.4 million in 1998 to 27.5 million in 2017, was mainly driven by students like her.1 These youths, whom I will refer to as ‘education migrants’ in this thesis, are the first people in their families to attend university and arrive in the cities as students, not as labour migrants. Education has rapidly become a main driver of Chinese rural-urban migration, moving millions of rural youth to the cities each year. This thesis investigates how these youths’ lives are affected by following this educational pathway to the city. Based on eleven months of ethnographic research (2015-2016) among ‘education migrants’ from Hubei province, it describes these youths’ contradictory experiences in the education system, where they simultaneously experience success and failure, and in the urban labour market, where they negotiate their dual identities as university graduates and rural youth. This thesis asks to what extent higher education enables education migrants to challenge deeply ingrained rural-urban hierarchies, and push the boundaries of the categories that make up this hierarchy. And, if higher education does not necessarily deliver on its promises of social mobility, then why do student numbers keep rising, and why do so many rural youth continue to embark on long educational trajectories?

Part One: Debates & Historical Context

Enthusiasts & Alarmists

The scholars, journalists, policy workers and politicians who have thus far discussed China’s educational expansion and the increased university enrolment of rural Chinese youth can be divided into two camps, which I will refer to as ‘the enthusiasts’ and ‘the alarmists’. The enthusiasts consist of those researchers who view China’s educational expansion as an ‘educational miracle’ and an exemplary achievement that promotes economic growth and creates opportunities for mobility for Chinese rural youth. The alarmists point out that the spike in university graduates has led to these youths being precariously positioned in the labour market and claim that the rural Chinese graduates, who make up the lion’s share of the new entrants into the higher education system, have now become the fourth weakest social group in Chinese society, after farmers, migrant workers and the unemployed (Si 2009).

The enthusiasts tend to highlight the incredible statistics that show enormous growth in the number of Chinese institutes and students. They understand these developments as a sign of China’s success and the country’s rise to power, and generally view education as a driver of economic growth and social stability (Li et al 2008; OECD 2009; Yeravdekar & Tiwari 2014; Yue et al 2018). The last sentence of an article by Yue et al is typical of their viewpoint: ‘As China moves toward becoming a high income country, continuing to strive for high levels of human capital for all, including rural residents, will be essential for maintaining growth and stability’ (2018: 110). This is clear: everybody should be educated, since education is a positive force that benefits both citizens individually and the country as a whole. The Chinese government is strongly positioned in the enthusiasts’ camp, which is demonstrated by government policies documents, including the National Outline for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020), and public statements by Chinese politicians. On September 10th 2018, China’s 34th ‘Teacher Day’, President Xi said, for example, that education is the foundation for national revitalisation and social progress, and that it is significant for promoting people’s overall development, strengthening the nation’s innovation capability and realising the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (China Daily, September 11th, 2018).

The group that I have named ‘the alarmists’ can be seen to be headed by Chinese sociologist Si Lian, who coined the term ‘the ant tribe’ in his 2009 study among rural university graduates. Si, a researcher at Peking University, proposed this term for its emphasis on how rural graduates struggle, work hard, and are optimistic. He explained that these students are like ants because they are always moving, but remain stuck to the ground. Si’s ‘ants’ live in lousy and crowded accommodations on the outskirts of cities, have little or no income, and embarrassment keeps them from going back to their hometowns. His research inspired a number of articles emphasising the precarious position of rural graduates in contemporary Chinese society (Han 2010; Chan & Lu 2011; Gu & Sheng 2012; He & Mai 2015; Bregnbaek 2016). These studies note rising unemployment rates and depict the millions of rural graduates as struggling in the margins of urban society. The alarmists’ view was picked up and strengthened by Chinese and international media, with reports describing how a Chinese ‘Army of Graduates Struggles for Jobs’ (The New York Times, December 11th, 2010).3 The most common explanation for rural graduates’ unemployment in this literature is the Chinese labour market ‘not yet being ready’ to accommodate large numbers of university graduates, without seriously engaging with questions about why rural and urban youths are differently positioned in the labour market, or how pre-existing rural-urban inequalities interact with processes of educational expansion.

The contrasting narratives of the enthusiasts and the alarmists do not form opposite ends of one debate, but rather exist alongside one another. Are the enthusiasts unaware of rising unemployment among graduates, or do they measure educational success in different ways? Are the alarmists too focused on the school-to-work transition, based on a human capital-driven logic, to see what educational expansion has been achieved? The ethnographic perspective in this dissertation, which is very different from many of these statistics-based studies, counteracts both of these viewpoints. It shows that studying education through a human capital theory lens provides only a narrow perspective that fails to include the myriad of other ways in which education can influence youths’ trajectories, including the connection between educational pursuits and physical mobility, and education’s influence on youths’ self-perception and social status. At the same time, this research also shows that the enthusiasts’ macro-perspective is built on vague assumptions about education’s power to promote ‘development’ and ‘growth’, without taking into account, for example, how existing rural-urban inequalities are expressed in the education system and therefore reproduce these dynamics. My research, which was conducted in both Hubei province’s countryside and Wuhan, shows the importance of studying these youths’ educational trajectories in the context of China’s larger story of rural-urban transition. It describes how rural youths’ and

---


---

2 Link to the article: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201809/11/WS5b96c0eda31033b4f4655422.html
families’ educational desire is informed by changing conditions in the Chinese agrarian sector as well as by the ‘education for development’ ideas so popular with the enthusiasts. These ideas are part of an ideology of development that depicts the rural Chinese society as backward and underdeveloped, whereas it paints the city as a symbol of modernity, progress and the future. According to the education for development logic, education can form a bridge bringing youth from the rural to the urban, not only for their personal benefit, but also for the development of the country as a whole. Yet, this same logic, which is built upon this rural-urban hierarchy, and which views the rural and the urban as two stages in a process of development with the one clearly lagging behind the other, does not only promote rural-urban migration and dreams about white-collar, urban careers, but also forms the basis for the stigmatisation of rural citizens that haunts education migrants after their graduation.

The idea of ‘ants’ really caught on as it drew attention from scholars, media and even musicians who composed a popular Chinese song titled ‘the ant tribe’.

In this dissertation, I use the term ‘education migrant’ to draw attention to the mobility experienced by these youths, as well as the ways in which their experiences overlap with those typically thought of as belonging to migranthood. Education migrants are precariously positioned in society, with limited access to local subsidies and services, weak social networks and scant knowledge of the workings of local society. Currently, the great majority of studies of migration, including those on Chinese students, focus on international migration (e.g. Liu-Farrer 2009; Xiang & Shen 2009; Fong 2011; Guo, Porschitz & Alves 2013). Following the dominance of transnationalism and globalisation in debates on migration since the 1990s, studies of internal migration have fallen by the wayside. Part of these discussions has been the critique of methodological nationalism that challenged the assumption that the nation-state is the natural social and political form of the modern world (Wimmer & Glick-Schiller 1992: 301). This critique increased researchers’ awareness that migrants are simultaneously connected to multiple societies (e.g. Levitt 2001), but did not put rural-urban mobility back on the research agenda. Today, even though the large majority of all migrations worldwide occur within one country’s borders, those migrants who refrain from border crossing remain underrepresented in the literature on migration. This is especially true for research on Chinese students of whom merely two percent go abroad, while the other 98 percent practices some form of internal migration.

### Education and Mobility

A large body of literature exists on China’s rural-urban labour migrants and the workings of the Chinese hukou-system. Yet the present study of rural-urban education migration can make a meaningful contribution since it demonstrates how patterns in Chinese rural-urban mobility are changing, and how the Chinese state differentiates between different kinds of migrants, giving priority to the integration of the country’s highly educated migrants. These findings support those of scholars of international student migration who have described student migration as a starting point for more permanent high-skilled labour migration (Hazén & Alberts 2006) and have argued against the idea of this type of migration as merely temporary and therefore a less significant form of migration (Hazén & Alberts 2006; Matzner 2010). But more importantly, the stories of education migrants complicate visions of Chinese rural-urban migration, and helps us to connect these patterns of mobilities to greater narratives of urbanisation and development.

In this dissertation, I use the term ‘education migrant’ to draw attention to the mobility experienced by these youths, as well as the ways in which their experiences overlap with those typically thought of as belonging to migranthood. Education migrants are precariously positioned in society, with limited access to local subsidies and services, weak social networks and scant knowledge of the workings of local society. Currently, the great majority of studies of migration, including those on Chinese students, focus on international migration (e.g. Liu-Farrer 2009; Xiang & Shen 2009; Fong 2011; Guo, Porschitz & Alves 2013). Following the dominance of transnationalism and globalisation in debates on migration since the 1990s, studies of internal migration have fallen by the wayside. Part of these discussions has been the critique of methodological nationalism that challenged the assumption that the nation-state is the natural social and political form of the modern world (Wimmer & Glick-Schiller 1992: 301). This critique increased researchers’ awareness that migrants are simultaneously connected to multiple societies (e.g. Levitt 2001), but did not put rural-urban mobility back on the research agenda. Today, even though the large majority of all migrations worldwide occur within one country’s borders, those migrants who refrain from border crossing remain underrepresented in the literature on migration. This is especially true for research on Chinese students of whom merely two percent go abroad, while the other 98 percent practices some form of internal migration.

---

6 This calculation is based on numbers provided by China’s Ministry of Education which shows that China had approximately 30 million students enrolled in graduate and post-graduate education in 2017: http://en.moe.gov.cn/Resource/Statistics/edu_stat2017/national/2018085/20180808_3446698.html. An article in Xinhua newspaper of March 30th 2018 states that 610,000 Chinese students went abroad in 2017: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-03/30/c_1370777465.htm

4 The names of these musicians are Li Liguo and Bai Wanlong.

5 Link to the WSJ article, published on December 21st, 2010: //blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2010/12/21/eight-questions-lian-si-author-of-ant-tribe/
Education migrants are twice underrepresented in the literature on mobility and migration, as internal migrants and as student migrants. The large body of literature on Chinese rural-urban migration is almost exclusively focused on labour migration and the Chinese hukou-system (e.g. Solinger 1999; Chan & Buckingham 2008; Fan 2008), which I will discuss below. In the literature on Chinese rural-urban migration, the term ‘new generation migrants’, introduced by Cheng Zhiming (2014), comes closest to what I call ‘education migrants’. Cheng argues that Chinese rural-urban migrants born after 1980 are different from the previous generation of migrants: they are ‘better educated, less connected to the countryside, and have a broad urban dream’ (Cheng 2014: 125). Yet, even though he emphasised that these youths’ participation in the higher education system is increasing, Cheng, and subsequently He & Wang (2016), still studied education and labour migrants as one group, including all migrants ‘who were born from 1980 onwards and are currently primarily engaged in or looking for non-agricultural urban employment’ (Cheng 2014: 126).

In this dissertation, I argue that it is important to study education migrants separately from their labour migrant peers. Of course, there are many commonalities between education and labour migrants in terms of both their experiences in the cities and their backgrounds. Yet there are also important differences that can only be studied if research differentiates between the two, which I will discuss in the empirical chapters of this dissertation. These will include reflections on how education migrants’ mobility patterns, as well as their relationship with the ‘home environment’, are very different from rural-urban labour migrants. Starting from a young age, education migrants move step by step through a series of schools from villages to towns, cities, and the provincial capital. Having grown up in mobility, they can be considered to be uprooted, without an alternative home base to which they can return. Their mobile backgrounds inspires these youth to relate to their environment differently and feel strongly motivated to grow new roots in the city.

The Hukou-System

The hukou-system in particular has been the subject of studies of Chinese rural-urban migration. In recent years, the centrality of this system in those studies has been critiqued by scholars who argue that the rural-urban division in Chinese society runs much deeper than the hukou-system (Zhan 2011; Cheng 2014; Lan 2014; Jakimow & Barabantseva 2016). In this dissertation, I will contribute to that debate by showing that education migrants are not necessarily interested in hukou-conversion. I argue that the administrative dimension of the rural-urban divide should be considered as only one layer of a multi-dimensional concept. But first things first, what is this hukou-system exactly?

China’s hukou-system is a population registration system introduced after the Communists established the People’s Republic of China in 1949. A Chinese citizen is assigned a hukou-registration at birth, following either one of their parents’ registration, and is independent from their location of birth. The process of changing one’s hukou-registration is known to be expensive and complicated (Zhang & Tao 2012). A hukou-registration specifies a location of registration and the type of registration: either agricultural or non-agriculture, also referred to as rural and urban (Chan & Zhang 1999). The great difference between rural and urban hukou registrations has always been that urban citizens’ subsistence was guaranteed by the state, while rural citizens were responsible for feeding themselves. In addition to food, the state also provided other services for urban citizens, ranging from education and health care to retirement and subsidised housing, whereas those in rural areas were expected to practice collective self-reliance (Cheng & Selden 1994). The hukou-system has also long been used as a mobility restricting measure, but after these restrictions were lifted at the start of the reform era hundreds of millions of rural hukou-holders moved to Chinese cities. These people, often described as China’s ‘floating population’, can live and work in the city, but their rural hukou-registration still prevents them from having access to urban resources. In recent years there have been state initiatives that have allowed rural migrants to register in smaller Chinese cities, which led to scholars raising the question of whether the hukou-system might be abolished soon (Chan & Buckingham 2008). Yet careful evaluation of these changes shows that not much has changed on a fundamental level, and that there is no good reason to expect the ending of the hukou-system any time soon (Chan & Buckingham 2008; Goodburn 2014; Cheng 2014; Jöfsson 2017).

Recent developments in China’s second-tier cities, including Wuhan, ask for a revisitation of these ideas. In an effort to attract university graduates to their cities, local governments have started to offer benefits to those who decide to settle in their cities, including local hukou-registrations. This means that education can simultaneously spur on rural youths’ disconnection from the countryside and offer families, who have long lived in a perpetuated state of mobility, some hope for a new stability. Yet, and as I will discuss in the first chapter of this thesis, the hukou-system is no longer the most important mechanisms of in- and exclusion in urban society, and education migrants’ inability to overcome these makes them generally uninterested in hukou-conversion.

---

7 The origins of the system lie in the baojia-system, a community-based system for law enforcement and civil control that dates back to the Ming dynasty, but its reinstatement was under direct influence of Soviet advisers who modelled it after the Soviet passbook system (Cheng & Selden 1994; Buckley 1995; Fan 2008).

8 Until 1998 newborns were assigned to their mother’s hukou registration. Also, adjustments to the hukou system have been made, but despite excited reports in the media, these initiatives have had little impact on the foundation of the system (Chan & Buckingham 2008).
In the next section, I will discuss the developments that have led to rapid rural-urban migration with a focus on the changes in the agrarian sector that have forced Chinese rural youth to explore alternative life strategies and the ideological framework that forms the foundation of these developments.

Towards an Urban Future

The changed conditions in China’s countryside and the strong orientation towards the city in Chinese developmentalist ideology are important for shaping education migrants’ trajectories. I will therefore describe how cities came to be seen as the pinnacle of development, while the Chinese countryside came to be associated with backwardness and the past. The city took central stage in China’s new development policies starting in 1979, when China’s new leadership, headed by Deng Xiaoping, departed from Maoist policy and started to construct a commodity economy. At this time the Chinese state’s position on rural society turned 180 degrees from where it was during the revolutionary days when the countryside was ‘the classroom of society’ and urban youth were encouraged to learn about being good socialists from the farmers. ‘The peasant’ and ‘the rural’ came to be seen as problems that needed to be overcome on the way to modernity, and urbanisation was deemed crucial for society’s modernisation and was therefore actively spurred on. The Chinese state now advocated for the rural to model itself after the urban, promoting the idea that a modern society is an urban society.

After the initial growth of the rural Chinese economy following tax reduction and increased state investment during the first few years of the reform period, this economy started to falter when government expenditure on agriculture dropped and the once-so-promising township-and-village enterprise (TVE) sector lost its lustre (Chan 1994; Wen 2008; Zhang, Oya & Ye 2015). At the same time, the Chinese state and foreign investors continued to invest heavily in the country’s urban development, causing rural-urban inequality to soar throughout the 1990s and the 2000s. In 2009, the income per capita in urban areas was three times higher than in rural areas (Li 2016). In Hubei province, the rural economy was still a bit smaller than the national average, mainly due to the weak economy of the province’s western regions (Feng 2012). In the year 2000, a rural cadre from Hubei province named Li Changping called attention to poverty among farmers when he published an open letter in what is considered the most outspoken newspaper in China, Southern Weekend. His letter brought the idea of China’s agriculture being in crisis into the Chinese public and intellectual sphere, and inspired new government policies with the aim of ‘building a new socialist countryside’. Among Chinese scientists the debate about the future of the Chinese countryside has been heated ever since, with some arguing that we are witnessing ‘the end of the peasantry’, and others claiming that if the state partly protects farmers from market forces, farmers have a long future in China (Day 2008: 58).

If we understand ‘a peasant’ as somebody who works in agriculture, statistics prove that the number of Chinese ‘peasants’ is indeed dwindling very fast. Whereas in 1978 70.7 percent of the Chinese labour force worked in agriculture, in 2017 this percentage had dropped to 27 percent (Guldin 2001; Statista 2018). A rough calculation based on possibly inexact numbers indicates that this meant a drop in the actual number of Chinese farmers from 491 million in 1978 to 212 million in 2017. In addition, in an effort to improve agricultural productivity in order to feed 19.78 percent of the world’s population using only 7.63 percent of the world’s cultivated land, the Chinese state is rapidly moving away from the small family-sized plot through land consolidation projects (Jin et al 2017), and the majority of those who still farm have lost most of their autonomy coming under the influence of so-called ‘dragon head enterprises’, which are rural enterprises authorised by the state to ‘guide masses of farmers towards industrialisation, and to lead the nation on the path to modernisation’ (ScUeider 2016: 7). All these developments led to fewer people working on more land. And thus, even though urban expansion has diminished the amount of arable land in Hubei province, the average cultivated area per farmer in the province grew from 800 m2 in 1982 to 3700 m2 in 2010 (Wong, Han & Zhang 2015: 253).

Farming in China has clearly changed rapidly. At the same time, decades of urban-centred government policies have widened the gap between Chinese rural and urban lives. It is therefore no surprise that I felt a strong sense of ‘ending’ during my research stays in villages in Hubei province’s countryside. In these villages, there were no youth who were learning to farm or who had the intention of taking over family farms. In general, youths were a rare sight in rural villages. In one village, I stayed with a family while they were in the midst of the busy harvest season. In the mornings, the daughter of the family and I stood in the field watching how the parents harvested their rape seeds with a huge machine. When an elderly neighbour walked by and noticed us standing there, she snapped at the daughter: ‘You escaped all of this, you’ll never have to do any of this’.  

---


10 Due to the difficulty of finding precise statistics and definitions of the Chinese 1978 labour force, please read these numbers as an indication only. I based this calculations on statistics on the Chinese labour force in 1978 published in a report by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1992 (Colby, Crook & Webb 1992): For the size of the Chinese labour force in 2017 I used World Bank statistics, that can be accessed via the following link: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.IN?locations-CN. I cannot confirm whether these two institutions used similar definitions of ‘labour force’. 

---
In the village where Morning Sunshine grew up, inhabitants had recently stopped farming when all their land was lost to a consolidation project, which was now farmed by ‘a big boss’ who only allowed the villagers to work on their land as day labourers for a day rate of 60 renminbi (7.50 euro). This development caused a labour migration exodus from the village, since most people could not afford to work for so little. Morning Sunshine’s parents had worked on their land until this take-over, and since then had been forced to accept jobs in an asphalt factory and as a tree planter in Wuhan. Even before the land take-over, the four children of this family already lived and worked in Wuhan and Ningbo, a big city in Zhejiang province. These changes to Chinese rural life are very important for understanding the life choices of the education migrants discussed in this dissertation. Different from those conceptions of rural-urban labour migrants whose rural base gives them a feeling of safety and insurance, or a place to return to when city life does not work out (Zhao 1999; Fan & Wang 2008), the stories of education migrants illustrate that they no longer conceive of the countryside this way. Having spent little time in the countryside growing up, and having seen most of their families move to towns and cities, education migrants do not view agriculture as a viable alternative for urban life. Their lack of experience with rural life and dearth of agrarian knowledge makes ‘returning’ to the countryside as unlikely for them as for most of their urban peers.

Yet, it is more than the changed conditions in the Chinese countryside that explains why Chinese youth are drawn to the city. Ever since the start of the reform period in 1979, when incoming foreign investment and rapidly developing industries in Chinese cities started to attract great numbers of rural youth, rapid urbanisation has been a key characteristic of Chinese society. The post-reform Chinese state considered urbanisation to be an important driver of the country’s domestic economy and made its stimulation a key priority in the state agenda. Between 1979 and 2016 the percentage of the Chinese population living in cities rose from 18 to 56 percent.11 Moreover, the ‘National New-Type Urbanisation Plan (2014-2020)’, released in March 2014 by the central committee of the China Communist Party (CCP), states the Chinese government’s aim to further increase the share of the Chinese population living in cities to 60 percent by 2020. This plan also asserts the importance of urbanisation for achieving ‘modernity’ and stimulating the economy, reminding its readers that urbanisation should be considered as the successful outcome of the Chinese state’s modernisation agenda.12


12 The content of the plan can be downloaded here: [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2014-03/16/content_2640075.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2014-03/16/content_2640075.htm)
Chinese policy documents consistently describe the function of education as twofold: promoting development and curbing inequality. Yet an extensive body of research has shown that the Chinese educational expansion has deepened rural-urban inequality in terms of access to higher education (e.g. Liu 2007; Qiao 2010; Hua 2015, Li et al 2015, Loyalka et al 2017). Nonetheless, my research shows that many students, parents and teachers in Hubei province still have a steadfast belief in education as an equalising force that promotes economic growth. The official narrative about education for development was often echoed in general conversations; for example, by this retired teacher who spent his whole life working in a middle school in Hougang town, a small town in central Hubei province:

Our economy grows so fasts now. This year the growth is between six and seven percent, and that is considered little! Because for a long time it was over ten percent every year. If we want our economy to keep growing, we need stability and high quality people with a high level of education. Education is important for economic development. If you improve a country’s level of education, you stimulate its economy. And when the economy keeps growing, we will attract more and more foreign investment. We have so much talent in China, think about it... millions of graduates per year! The level of education of our whole population has increased so much in recent decades. Just wait and watch China in 5 or 10 years! (...) (Interview with retired middle school teacher, June 8th, 2016)

China’s educational expansion is often hailed as a great success by the Chinese media and political leaders. During the 19th CPC National Congress in October 2017, Chinese president Xi Jinping stated that educational expansion should continue and that ‘priority should be given to education to speed up its modernization and develop education that satisfies people’ (China Daily, October 22nd 2017).13 Expanding access to education to stimulate economic development has been an integral part of the Chinese political narrative since the start of the reform era. According to this education-for-development logic, youth do not only educate themselves for their own and their families’ benefit, but also for the development of the nation. Moreover, the Chinese government has promoted education as a major solution to the country’s dramatic inequalities. By providing areas and individuals that are perceived as ‘lagging behind’ with extra resources for education, the government aims to bridge the growing gap between China’s upper- and lower-classes as well as urban and rural populations. In 1998 the Chinese state had specific reasons for expanding the country’s higher education system, after the Asian economic crisis of 1997 caused Chinese unemployment levels to rise. Educational expansion could both boost the country’s domestic consumption and accommodate the admission of the quickly increasing number of Chinese high school graduates (following the implementation of nine years of compulsory education in 1986) into the higher education system, preventing them from entering an already saturated labour market and further driving up the level of unemployment.

Chinese education is a highly political subject that cannot be studied separately from the ‘discourse of developmentalism’ that is popular in all layers of Chinese society and strongly promoted by the state. According to this discourse, predicated on the pragmatic ideas of Deng Xiaoping, the political leader in charge during the era of reform, China follows a phased out plan based on scientific notions rather than ideology. According to this plan wealthier areas help ‘pull up’ poorer regions to turn China into one united, wealthy, civilised and harmonious society. Wu Jinting’s book Fabricating an Educational Miracle (2016) is set in China’s Guizhou province, an area considered in need of ‘pulling up’. Her work discusses the power relations behind rolling out educational policy with the aim of promoting development and describes the disenchantment with new educational policies among people in two rural villages. The people in Wu’s book are doubtful about whether schooling is a worthwhile pursuit given its cost and occupational outcomes, and knowing that few students can continue their education beyond middle school (2016: 34). Wu quotes local scholars who explained to her rural youths’ attitudes towards education with the analogy of ‘a dwarf attempting to catch grapes high up on the vines’, meaning that trying to gain education was too difficult, the danger of a fall too great, and the pay-off too little (2016: 51). Moreover, Wu shows that by implementing compulsory education policies the Chinese state monopolises the right to define what kind of knowledge is worth acquiring and preserving. A narrow view on what development is and what it should look like comes to dominate the lives of hundreds of millions of Chinese youths through the education system.

Ideas about ‘education for development’ are not at all particular to China. In fact, their popularisation in China is tied to the country’s turn towards the global community in the 1980s, in which education has long been viewed as a positive force that has the power to foster equality by emancipating vulnerable groups in society. The relation of causality between, for example, education for women and gender equality is accepted and promoted by a plethora of organisations, including Plan, Unicef, the Malala Fund, and the World Bank. For example, the World Bank describes education as a ‘powerful driver of development and one of the strongest instruments for reducing poverty and improving health, gender equality, peace and stability’ (World Bank website)14. Yet the interwovenness of China’s

---

13 Article in the China Daily, October 22nd 2017: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-10/22/content_33567329.htm

14 This is the link to the website: http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education
drive for development through education and the country’s push for urbanisation do seem to be particularly Chinese. Urbanisation is key to the Chinese vision of development and modernity, since ‘the rural’ has come to be seen as a hindrance to China’s modernisation, and that which needs to be developed (Yan 2008; Wu 2016). It thus makes sense that the ‘quality’ and ‘development’ that education is said to promote equals furthering the country’s rural-urban transformation. The structure of the education system does not only physically move youth from rural to urban areas, but education in general is also aimed at preparing youth for white-collar futures in an urban environment. In that sense, education drives ‘the urbanisation of the Chinese people’, which Chinese scholars and policy makers consider to have fallen behind on (Sorace & Hurst 2016). In their article on Chinese ‘ghost cities’, Sorace and Hurst write that local governments ‘have a wide-ranging “tool kit” for pursuing urbanisation, ranging from administrative border-drawing to expropriation of rural land and investment in expanding urban infrastructures’ (ibid.: 305). This dissertation demonstrates that China’s education system should also be considered to be part of that tool kit, and that it is not only considered as such by the state, but that education is also seen as an important pathway to a new stability in the city by rural youth and their families who have experienced hyper-mobility as a result of being rural citizens in an era of rapid rural transformations.

Unpacking the Education System
In discussions about higher education it is crucial to ‘unpack the higher education system’. How is it built up and what kind of processes exist inside of it? In this section I will set out the structure of the Chinese higher education system as it is relevant to the trajectories of education migrants, which will help me bring some clarity to the discussion about educational expansion. In the Chinese context it is clear that educational expansion has gone hand in hand with substantial stratification of the higher education system, making the question of what kind of higher education youths have access to all the more pertinent.

The expansion of China’s education system has turned it into the largest system of higher education in the world. It currently consists of 2,880 institutes. To dive deeper into the workings of this education system it is important to first provide insight into its highly stratified structure. The Chinese higher education system can be thought of as pyramid-shaped, with a small number of high quality institutes at the top and a large base of lower quality institutes. At the top of this pyramid-shaped system there are the Chinese ‘key point universities’ that are funded by the country’s most famous state initiatives for promoting educational quality: the 211 and the 985 projects. These projects were launched respectively in 1990 and 1998 with the aim of giving a small number of institutes enormous financial injections to rapidly establish China’s first world-class universities. Currently, nationwide 39 universities are funded by the most prestigious 985 project and 117 universities are funded by the 211 project. In Wuhan, there are five such ‘key point universities’, of which two are funded by both the 985 and the 211 project and three more receive funding from the 211 project alone. Especially the first two universities, Wuhan University and Huazhong University of Science and Tecology (HUST), which are the beneficiaries of both funding projects, inspire much awe in Hubei province. They are considered incredibly difficult to get into and the ultimate springboards for promising careers. Hubei’s top five universities are ‘national universities’, which means that they are directly under control of and financed by the central government’s Ministry of Education, in contrast to the ‘provincial universities’ which fall under the responsibility of the provincial bureaus of education. In addition to the national/provincial divide, universities are organised in three ‘classes’, which I will simply refer to as class one, two and three.16 The lines between the classes are clearly drawn by the central state that publishes a university entrance exam score line every year for each class. With the help of these score lines universities can be grouped into one of the three classes. For example, as can be seen in Figure 3, every university with an average score line for its liberal arts programmes between 448 and 510 is considered class two.

Figure 3 Hubei Province Score Lines 2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score Lines</th>
<th>Liberal Arts</th>
<th>Science</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class one</td>
<td>510</td>
<td>521</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class two</td>
<td>448</td>
<td>477</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class three</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhuanke</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


An important divide is the one between class one, two and three universities and zhuanke-universities. The zhuanke-universities offer three-year study programmes and zhuanke-degrees. The class one, two and three universities, on the other hand, offer four-year programmes and Bachelor degrees. On the urban labour market, employers often demand Bachelor degrees, which means that zhuanke-graduates have fewer opportunities, as I will

15 Li et al (2011) collected numbers to illustrate the size of these investments: “The top 11 universities (those universities included in the 985 Project at the first phase) received more than 17.43 billion RMB from government funds in 2004” (526). Figures in the 11th 5-year plan also illustrate that the proportion of public education expenditures to GDP was to increase from 3.4 percent in 2002 to 4 percent in 2010. The 211 project is similar to the 985 project, but less exclusive.

16 In Chinese, this is jiben, erben, sanben.
illustrate in Chapter Two. Students who knew that they stood no chance of going to top universities often stated their goal as ‘staying above the Bachelor line’, hoping to avoid having to go to a zhuanke university. Finally, there is the division between public and private universities. The majority of the private universities is found among the class three and zhuanke universities. For most education migrants private school was unaffordable, with tuition fees easily double those charged in state universities. Therefore I focus mainly on public universities in this dissertation. 

It is important that the readers of this dissertation are aware of the stratification of the Chinese higher education system to understand the significance of different moments in the trajectory leading from primary school to university. In all of China, students are assigned to primary and middle schools within their district of registration, but access to high school and university is based on test scores and quota. The transition from middle to high school marks the end of nine years of compulsory education and is the first important moment in which a rural-urban separation within the urban educational landscape becomes visible.

The fact that rural students are at a disadvantage within the Chinese education system in relation to their urban counterparts is broadly accepted and supported by statistical research (Wu & Zhang 2010; Qiao 2010). Studies into rural students’ access to China’s top universities show significant rural-urban inequality and the general pattern these studies bring out is that the number of students from rural backgrounds drops as the institutional rank rises (Qiao 2010; Xie 2015; Loyalka et al 2017). Returning to earlier discussed ideas about education and development, it is interesting to note how current inequalities in access to education have a place in the development narrative that promotes education as the key to growth and equality. In 2010, Ross and Wang edited two special issues for the journal Chinese Education and Society on the university entrance exam, connecting to a long-standing debate among Chinese scholars on equity and inequality issues associated with the exam. In one of the articles published in these issues Chinese scholar Qiao Jinzhong statistically measures the extent of rural-urban disparity in access to higher education and goes on to explain this disparity, which he proved to be large, as a result of China being a ‘developing country’. He writes:

Currently, China is still a developing country. We have only just begun the process of popularising higher education, and opportunities to attend college are, in general, still fairly scarce. Scarcity inevitably leads to competition. In a competitive environment, rural-urban disparities at the elementary-school level necessarily place rural students in a fairly disadvantageous position with regard to access to higher education. Rural students’ disadvantages are even more marked in competition for access to the top colleges and universities. Therefore, the constraints of a developing country are a major cause in the disparity between rural and urban access to higher education (2010: 28).

Qiao leans on the ‘trickle-down theory’ promoted by Deng Xiaoping in his explanation. Deng promoted the idea that it was necessary to ‘let some get rich first’, promising that the rest would follow. Despite soaring inequality in post-reform China this idea of step-by-step development still plays a major role in the imaginaries of rural students who are set back by their limited access to educational resources. But, as I will argue in this dissertation, the reasons for rural-urban inequality in access to high-quality education go beyond scarcity and stem from education policies that privilege urban students. This difference is important, because whereas Qiao suggests that this inequality can be alleviated by increasing the amount of education, my research argues that in some scenarios more education can be harmful instead of beneficial. In the case of those education migrants who remain stuck in the lower segments of China’s higher education system, their improved access to higher education calls for great financial and time investments, and does not always increase their social mobility, giving rise to frustration, stress, and disappointment.

17 The English word ‘private’ is a clunky translation for minban, the Chinese word used to describe these schools that literally translates to ‘by the people’. In practice these Chinese ‘private schools’ remain under state supervision and are mainly different in that they are being privately financed. Sometimes private institutes were institutes within larger state institutes with lower score lines and higher education fees, functioning as cash cows for their mother institute.
Part Two: Research Setting & Methodology

In the second part of this introduction I will first introduce the parts of Hubei province where I conducted my research and then discuss the project’s research methodology. To start, I will describe Hubei province, a landlocked province of China with approximately 60 million inhabitants. The name of the province means north (běi) of the lake (hú), referring to Dongting Lake, situated between Hubei and Hunan provinces. Hubei province is part of an area known as Central China, which consists of six provinces: Anhui, Henan, Hunan, Jiangxi, Shanxi and Hubei. Hubei province’s rich water resources from its many rivers and lakes has made it China’s hydropower base, with the most famous dam project being the Three Gorges Dam near Yichang city. The Hubei landscape is varied, with high mountains in the west and sprawling plains suitable for agriculture in the center and east of the province. Hubei’s provincial capital and only megacity with 10 million inhabitants, Wuhan, is located in the east (see Figure 2). The province’s second and third cities, Yichang and Xiangyang, with respectively 1.3 million and 466,000 inhabitants, are located in the centre of the province.

Economically, Hubei province is one of the strongholds of inland China. In 2016, the province’s gross domestic product (GDP) reached 3.2 trillion renminbi, making Hubei province the 7th largest provincial economy in China. The province’s key industries are automobiles, iron and steel, petrochemical, food, electronic information and textiles, and it is among the provinces with the highest urbanisation rates in China. On the provincial government’s website it is stated that at the end of China’s 12th five year plan in 2015 the province reached an urbanisation rate of 56.6 percent, a 7.13 percent increase since 2010.

On government websites as well as in popular speech, Hubei province is often referred to as a ‘big education province’. It is not considered to be one of the provinces that needs ‘pulling up’, but rather a site where the ‘educational miracle’ has already come to fruition. Before going further into Hubei province’s education system, I will first introduce the two most important locations within the province for this dissertation, being Wuhan, the provincial capital, and Jingmen, a prefectural city in central Hubei.

Wuhan: Different Every Day

Wuhan is the biggest city in central China. It is impressive with its intricate network of roads, state-of-the-art bridges, endless tunnels and gigantic digital billboards. The city is often referred to as ‘Big Wuhan’ and the city slogan, written on posters displayed throughout the city, reads: ‘Wuhan, different every day!’ This slogan aptly describes the situation in Wuhan: a city still under construction, with cranes dominating the horizon, the relentless sound of drilling, digging and sawing, and new buildings popping up left and right. Wuhan’s population grew from 2 million inhabitants in the 1970s to 11 million in 2018. The subway system, which was first introduced in 2004, already had 102 stations and two hundred thousand daily users in 2015, while still being expanded in every direction. The construction, on top of the great number of cars and factories in Wuhan, makes for a city plagued by heavy pollution. On most days, the sky is smoggy and grey and visibility is regularly limited to only a few hundred meters. The city has become very susceptible to floods since the great majority of its lakes were turned into buildings sites, diminishing the area’s natural ability to absorb water in the event of heavy rains. Traffic in Wuhan is notoriously bad, with serious gridlock and accidents happening every day. Despite all this discomfort, the city’s residents and leaders are generally optimistic and future-oriented, focusing on the rapid speed at which Wuhan is changing rather than on its present state.

The oldest traces of urban settlement in Wuhan date all the way back to the Shang Dynasty (16th-11th century BC). Historically, the city consisted of three towns: Hanyang and Hankou on the west side of the Yangtze river and Wuchang across the water, on the east side. The towns were administratively consolidated to become Wuhan in 1926 by the Nationalist government, under the leadership of Sun Yat Sen. In that year, the Nationalists moved from Guangzhou to Wuhan with the aim of making the city China’s new capital. Subsequent developments, including the depression of the world economy in the late 1920s, the war against Japanese invasion (1937-1945) and ultimately the founding of the People’s Republic of China, prevented the implementation of the Nationalists’ plans, but the consolidation of the city was not to be turned around. After 1949, the Communists invested in Wuhan to make it the largest industrial base in Southern China. The first bridge crossing the Yangtze was built in 1957, further strengthening the connection between what had now become three parts of Wuhan city (Han & Wu 2004). Today, Wuhan has sprawled far beyond the scope of what once were these three towns and is made up of a total of thirteen districts, of which two are Hanyang and Wuchang. Hankou has been further subdivided into three.

---

20 The article on the website of Hubei Province: http://www.hubei.gov.cn/zwgk/bmdt/201601/t20160121_781364.shtml
21 Information about ‘the big education province’ can be found on this government website: http://en.hubei.gov.cn/education/overview/201305/t20130521_449976.shtml
22 In Chinese, it is Da Wuhan, and Wuhan, meitian buyiyang!
23 Between 1949 and 2015 the number of lakes in Wuhan decreased from 127 to 40. This article in the China Digital Times discusses this issue. Published on July 8th, 2016. https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2016/07/severe-floods-corruption-overbuilding/
districts. Hanyang is now home to many industries and factories, while ‘the three Hankou districts’ harbour most commerce and financial services. Wuchang and its surrounding districts are where the great majority of the city’s educational institutes and students can be found and thus where I carried out most of my research.

During my eleven months in Hubei province, I spent approximately eight months in Wuhan. It was neither my objective nor among my accomplishments to develop a deep understanding of this city’s dynamics. I also did not geographically demarcate a specific ‘field’ within this city. What I was focused on within Wuhan were the ways in which my interlocutors, rural students and graduates, engaged with the city. This means that I became especially familiar with specific areas in Wuhan where my interlocutors studied, worked and enjoyed themselves. I myself lived in a small studio in the area around Yuejiazui subway station in Wuchang district. But I spent most of my time meeting my interlocutors on their campuses, near their work sites or in malls and parks where they went to relax on the weekends, which were mainly located within (the immense) Wuchang district as well.

**Jingmen: A Prefecture-Level City**

Another important site for this research project was Jingmen. Jingmen is one of Hubei province’s twelve prefecture-level cities. A prefecture-level city is like an umbrella administrative zone covering an urban centre, which I will refer to as Jingmen city, and a large number of counties, townships and villages. Jingmen’s population is 3,023,000, but Jingmen city only counts 400,000 residents. Jingmen city is surrounded by counties that are like smaller-sized administrative umbrellas, covering the townships and the villages. The townships are yet smaller-sized umbrellas held over a group of villages. The prefecture-level city is therefore an administrative zone that covers both the rural and the urban. In rural areas, farmers mainly produce rice, cotton and rapeseed, while the largest industries in...
urban areas are petroleum refinement, power generation and the production of agricultural chemicals and cement.

Jingmen is located in the centre of Hubei province, roughly 300 kilometres to the east of Wuhan, in an area that is relatively flat and covered in plains. The city is connected to Wuhan by railway and expressway. On the fastest train the journey takes a bit over four hours, while a car can cover the distance in three hours if traffic is favourable. Different parts of the Jingmen area are less well-connected and journeys between the urban centre and rural villages often involve long bus rides on small, congested roads. For my research project, I travelled to smaller towns and villages that were part of Jingmen to trace back the histories of my interlocutors and to meet younger generations who were currently going through earlier phases in the education system. Many of my interlocutors’ families originated from the rural villages surrounding a town named Hougang, which is a sleepy town with 80,000 inhabitants that is part of Shayang county, an area that makes up the south of the Jingmen prefecture.

As I wrote before, during my stays in villages in the Jingmen prefecture there was a strong sense of ‘ending’. It was impossible to find young people who engaged in agricultural work, and people who still farmed also tended to the land of family and neighbours who had already moved to other parts of the province and country to work in factories or study in universities. Villagers did not expect the next generation to carry out farm work in the way that it was done now. The lack of facilities in the villages in addition to the lack of security and opportunity in rural areas created a strong belief that everybody would be better off elsewhere, despite the fact that conditions in Jingmen’s villages compared favourably to other regions in Hubei province in terms of the usage of machines and the amount of land cultivated per family (Wong, Han & Zhang 2015: 253). It could even be said that these favourable conditions have only increased the capital available for families to enable their children to break categorically with their families’ agrarian histories and focus completely on developing their futures in towns and cities.

The different kinds of communities found in Jingmen helped me to gain some insight into the variety of levels between the rural and the urban. It was hardly the case that all of the people who gave up farming now worked as labourers in one of China’s big cities, since many people moved but stayed within the prefecture itself, working or doing business in a nearby township or town or in Jingmen city. Their movements certainly complicate ideas about rural-urban migration, because even though on paper these people would be considered rural-urban migrants, they would never describe themselves that way, especially since they consider other parts of the Jingmen area as an extension of their home, an idea strengthened by a familiarity with the environment, a shared local dialect and great numbers of family members living in different parts of the area. The prefecture-level city allows for people to simultaneously practice rural-urban migration and ‘stay at home’. Moreover, families are often connected to different parts of the prefecture at the same time. For example, the Li family that is central to my dissertation originated from villages that are part of the Jingmen area, but the parents now both worked in Jingmen city after years of working in Hougang, a smaller town. Some of the mother’s family members still farmed in rural villages and the maternal grandmother lived in a township. On the father’s side, most family members were in Jingmen city and a smaller city within the Jingmen prefecture called Shayang. The family’s son was also in Jingmen city, while the daughter worked in Wuhan. Still, everybody but the daughter, Anna, was ‘in Jingmen’ and thus ‘at home’. To a lesser extent this idea of an extended home also applies to Wuhan, which is sometimes also conceived of as part of home by youth from Hubei province, and even to the south of China, an area youth from Hubei province feel connected to as ‘Southerners’.

Other places that are important for my research are Xiaogan, Huangshi, and Shenzhen. Xiaogan is a small city located 60 kilometres northwest of Wuhan, where one of my interlocutors conducted her Master’s research and where I stayed with her on two occasions. I also spent a week with Morning Sunshine’s family in a rural village that was part Huangshi, a prefectural city 100 kilometres southeast of Wuhan. The rural conditions in Huangshi were in stark contrast with the conditions in Jingmen’s villages. People had access to much less land per capita (in some cases, Huangshi families farmed merely 10 percent of the land that Jingmen families farmed) and farmers wielded pickaxes whereas Jingmen farmers used state-of-the art machines. Finally, I spent a week in Shenzhen to get a glimpse of the lives of three interlocutors who I had met in Hougang town, and who had subsequently moved via Wuhan to Shenzhen.

**Research Location**

It was for a good reason that I selected Hubei province, and especially Wuhan, as the location to carry out this research project on education migrants. While doing research into Chinese student mobility in preparation for this project, I often came across the claim that in 2011 Wuhan had been the city with most university students of all cities in the world. When I further researched the higher education system in Wuhan, it became clear to me that this city is a very important education hub in central China, attracting students from all over the province, as well as from surrounding provinces. I was thus certain that plenty of China’s education migrants would choose this city as their destination.

---

24 This information is given in many profiles of the city, including this one on the website of Wuhan University: [http://admission.whu.edu.cn/about/show-2020.html](http://admission.whu.edu.cn/about/show-2020.html)
Hubei province has a total of 123 higher education institutes, of which 85 are located in Wuhan. Wuhan ranks third on many lists of China’s ‘best cities for education’, and is only surpassed by Beijing and Shanghai. The education climate in Hubei province is the main reason why I chose this area as my research site. In comparison to other provinces in China, Hubei province has a high number of universities and students, both from Hubei province itself and from other areas of China. Its top institutes are especially attractive to students from the surrounding provinces that, except for Jiangxi province, have relatively fewer educational resources. Yet the province still only boasts two famous top universities, making the competition for access to those institutes especially heated. Hubei province is therefore a suitable research location not only for studying mobility, but also for observing the tensions that arise in relation to the division of educational resources. Hubei province’s higher education institutes range from the top universities to zhuanke universities. Figure 4 gives an overview of the make-up of the Hubei higher education system and introduces the categories I will make use of in the rest of this dissertation to refer to different kinds of universities.

Figure 4 Overview of Hubei province’s education system 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hubei education system, 2014</th>
<th>Total number of institutes: 123</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Numbers provided by the Wuhan Bureau of Education, May 2016)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 1 985 + 211 project National University Public 2 In Wuhan: 100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>211 project National University Public 3 In Wuhan: 100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>none Provincial University Public 14 In Wuhan: 93%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 2 Provincial University Public/private 25 In Wuhan: 60%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 3 Provincial University Public/private 24 In Wuhan: 62%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhuanke Provincial University Public/private 55 In Wuhan: 60%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The province’s political leaders often emphasise its educational success. In 2011 the province announced having achieved nine years of education universally, and on government websites the link between the province’s educational achievements and its economic success is highlighted. Statistics confirm that students in Hubei province have better access to education than, for example, students in Guizhou province (OECD 2009: 61). But, on top of questions about the trustworthiness of these statistics, especially after Wu Jinting’s extensive descriptions of the ways in which educational statistics are manipulated (2016: 105-140), my research will demonstrate that Hubei province’s educational resources are not equally available to all and that rural people’s limited access to these resources especially is a strong force that drives the perpetuation of the rural-urban divide in Chinese cities.

In this dissertation, I sometimes refer to phenomena as being ‘Chinese’ and make statements about ‘China’, even though I am aware that a study in one particular context is not representative of everything ‘Chinese’. First of all, my interlocutors were all Han-Chinese, and Hubei province is a relatively well-to-do Chinese province. In the developmentalist Chinese narrative Hubei province is a province doing the pulling, not a province in need of pulling up. A study of Hubei province therefore represents a different side of the coin compared to studies of education and development in the Chinese regions considered to be ‘less developed’, e.g. Wu Jinting’s study in Guizhou province (2016), even though parents and students in Hubei consider themselves to be disadvantageously positioned in relation to places like Shanghai and Beijing. The reason why I believe it to be reasonable to speak of ‘China’ in this dissertation, even though I will have to ask the reader to remember that other, less dominant, realities also exist within China, is that my analysis is focused on national-level educational and development policies. My study is therefore not more representative of ‘Hubei province’, with its enormous regional differences, than of ‘China’. I believe that my findings are representative of education migrants’ situations in Chinese second-tier cities, where people’s lives are shaped by identically-structured educational systems, the hukou-system, and the national drive for urbanisation. This belief is strengthened by multiple Chinese second-tier cities simultaneously rolling out new policies for attracting education migrants to settle in their cities, and protests in reaction to the redvision of educational resources – orchestrated by the central government – sparking protests in many cities across China. Therefore, for the sake of readability and in the knowledge of such a decision always being imperfect, I choose to use the words ‘China’ and ‘Chinese’ in my analysis.

Methodology & Positionality

I conducted my research between September 2015 and August 2016. During the summer of 2017, I returned to Hubei province for a short visit to catch up with my interlocutors. It was during that visit that I was able to meet Misty’s employer and observe Misty in her office environment, and attend a graduation ceremony at one of Wuhan’s key point universities. The previous sections, which introduced some of the places where I conducted my research, already indicated that I carried out a multi-sited research project. Being interested in rural-urban mobility and relations, it was important that I had the opportunity to spend time in both rural and urban areas. I viewed decisions regarding the educational trajectories of my interlocutors as being made in the context of the family unit, which meant that spending time with family members was a crucial part of my research. Additionally, rural graduates

25 One of these lists can be found on this website: http://edu.qq.com/a/20160321/034085.htm
26 Link to information: http://www.stats-hb.gov.cn/wzlm/zdzl/cszkhb/18215.htm
and their family members are highly mobile, leaving me no choice but to move with them were I to not lose sight of them.

The starting point of my research were the rural students and graduates themselves, who I met in Wuhan by visiting urban areas that are popular with students for window shopping and strolling around. I visited these areas, striking up conversations with youths, introducing my project and asking for their cooperation. After I had made my first contacts this way, I expanded my group of interlocutors through the snowball method, meeting friends of friends. When I felt comfortable with interlocutors, after having met them three or four times, I told them that I was interested in meeting their family members and learning more about their backgrounds. Of course, I relied on the great kindness and generosity of a number of key interlocutors who went out of their way to facilitate my requests, freeing up time to bring me back to their home area, sometimes on numerous occasions.

This kind of multi-sited ethnography has been criticised for moving away from the traditional anthropological method of doing fieldwork within one field for an extended period of time, which is often identified as the backbone of the discipline (Ortner 1984; Geertz 1998). Of course, a lot has happened since the start of this debate and many anthropologists, especially those interested in mobility, have constructed their fields within other than geographical boundaries, often along the lines suggested by Marcus (1995). In his deliberation on multi-sited fieldwork he names a few modes through which objects of study can be defined in the case of multi-sited projects, which includes following people, things, metaphors, stories, biographies and conflicts (ibid.: 110). I constructed my field in a number of ways. First of all, I was interested in the ways rural-urban migration was shaped by the education system, so I wanted to retrace my interlocutors’ educational trajectories. In that sense, I followed their biographies, asking them to travel backwards with me through their histories. Yet, as we undertook these journeys to visit the schools they had once attended and the places where they had once lived, we came across two kinds of people. We met those family members who still resided in their home town or whose visits coincided with ours, as well as a younger generation that was now going through a phase in the education system that my interlocutors experienced years before. Both of these groups offered me opportunities to deepen my understanding of the lives I was studying, giving me insight into the ways rural youths’ engagement with the education system changes over time. In addition to the challenges of logistics of this project were fertile grounds for fostering intimate relationships with my interlocutors, since they allowed for long and deep conversations during train and bus journeys as well as many late night chats when sharing rooms, beds – and even pillows – in family homes. But, on the other hand, for this project I spent time in two major cities, two small cities, two county towns, a township and numerous villages, all in 11 months’ time, and I cannot claim to possess a deep understanding of any of these places. When I did have the opportunity to spend, for example, several weeks with one family, I felt my understanding deepen as layers peeled off every day. I have therefore come away from this project as a firm believer in the value of long-term fieldwork in one location or situation. As a mobile researcher, I brought depth to my project by staying close to a small number of interlocutors, making a concerted effort to understand as much about their histories and their lives as possible by following them into different situations and meeting the key figures in their lives.

It is important to mention that I did have previous experience in China that helped me develop and carry out this research project. I started studying Mandarin when I was seventeen years old and lived in Beijing for six years between 2006 and 2013. I first went to China as a language student and started conducting anthropological research projects in 2012 as part of a Master’s programme at the University of Amsterdam. For this PhD research, I purposefully took myself out of my long-established network in Beijing to fully focus on learning about a social group that I was not yet very familiar with: education migrants. Aside from a short orientation trip to Wuhan in the summer of 2013 I had not spent any time in Hubei province prior to my fieldwork. Except for one Dutch friend who worked in Wuhan as a representative for the Dutch government during the time of my field research and who at times provided me with valuable contacts and advice, I did not know anybody in the city. It was useful to conduct this research project in an area that I was less familiar with, because it helped me to focus completely on the subjects of my study. However, I would of course not have been able to carry out this project without the language abilities and experience of living in China that I had gained in earlier years.

During my fieldwork, the relationships between me and my interlocutors were very informal. I frequently discussed my project with them, trying to involve them in finding within the education system and including the perspectives and stories of the people we met along the way.
the most interesting angle from which to approach my questions, always explaining why I
was interested in particular developments and how my questions connected to debates in
anthropology. My interlocutors influenced my project greatly by advising me as to what
to focus on and helping me find the questions that seemed most pertinent to them. Some
became interested in anthropology and started to read about anthropological studies,
developing a good understanding of what I was trying to do. Many interlocutors introduced
to me to their peers, family members and employers and invited me to events they thought
I might be interested in. I often explained that I was not there to conduct formal interviews,
but that part of conducting anthropological research is about ‘being there’, which meant
that I joined them for activities that were directly related to my research as well as for many
strolls, trips, dinners, chats and even swims that were only for the sake of spending time
with them. Those activities were often as informative as the visits to labour fairs, offices,
schools and dormitories. Some interlocutors had the key to my studio in Wuhan, which
they used both when I was and was not there, and I also visited their rooms and work places.
When I had the opportunity to speak with government officials, professors or teachers, I
exchanged messages on a daily basis and I have continued to communicate with them on
a regular basis in this way ever since. Communication via this application went beyond the
making of appointments, often including daily updates in the form of writing as well as
voice and video messages and chat conversations about topics that concerned them. There
were a few times when important events had happened but distance prevented me from
being there in person, and I discussed these with interlocutors via Skype.

In addition to physically spending time with people, I also communicated with all my
interlocutors via the popular phone application weixin, which is comparable to the messaging
application ‘Whatsapp’, which is better known in Europe. With most of my key interlocutors
I exchanged messages on a daily basis and I have continued to communicate with them on
a regular basis in this way ever since. Communication via this application went beyond the
making of appointments, often including daily updates in the form of writing as well as
voice and video messages and chat conversations about topics that concerned them. There
were a few times when important events had happened but distance prevented me from
being there in person, and I discussed these with interlocutors via Skype.

My reason for being interested in education migrants’ experiences in China might have
something to do with my personal trajectory. In the Dutch village where I was born many
years ago, I was born many youths of my generation, including myself, were also the first in our families to go to
university. When meeting Chinese education migrants, their experiences of social and
physical mobility and of carving out their own paths in unfamiliar worlds often resonated
with my own. My ability to relate to education migrants in some ways both sparked my
interest in this group and helped with developing the relationships necessary for a research
project like this. Having said that, I do not want to glance over the worlds of difference
and privilege between us. However much I tried to share in the insecurity and worry that
my interlocutors felt so strongly, I was always only a temporary observer ensured of being
able to return to a relatively easy and comfortable life in the Netherlands, whereas they
were bound to experience serious precarity throughout their lives. While in the field, I
mostly presented myself as ‘a student trying to write a thesis’ in an effort to mitigate this
stark contrast between us. It is my impression that those interlocutors with an interest
in traveling and foreign countries especially found it interesting to spend time with me,
since this gave them the opportunity to gain some insight into a world beyond Wuhan
and China. Yet, after I had established contact with a small number of youths and started
to meet people within their networks, I also came into contact with youth who were not
especially interested in traveling.

Finally, all characters in this dissertation have been given pseudonyms, which are based
on the names they used to introduce themselves to me. In many cases, interlocutors liked
using the ‘English names’ they had chosen for themselves during their English classes in
high school, even though most of our communication was in Mandarin Chinese. For these
interlocutors I have picked an alternative but similar English name. For those interlocutors
who used their Chinese names, I have chosen alternative Chinese names.

Overview of Chapters
In the first chapter of this dissertation I analyse the rural-urban as a multi-dimensional
concept, focusing on its symbolic, administrative and experiential dimension. Through
discussing these different layers, it becomes clear that China’s rural-urban divide runs deeper
than the hukou-system, for it is also upheld by forms of rural identity-based exclusion. In
the popular narrative of developmentalism that has underpinned China’s development since
the start of the reform era, the rural has always been portrayed as belonging to the past,
lagging behind, and lesser than the urban. In this chapter I show how these ideas continue
to influence the ways education migrants are perceived in urban society, despite their lives
being increasingly disconnected from rural Chinese society. This chapter also contributes to
debates about the centrality of the hukou-system in discussions about rural-urban relations
in Chinese society. It demonstrates that education migrants, like labour migrants, are not
necessarily keen to transfer their hukou-registration, since they feel unable to get past other
mechanisms of exclusion, including the urban real estate market.

In the second chapter, I demonstrate how rural-urban inequality in terms of access to
education is produced and what the consequences are for rural youths’ self-perception and
ideas about the future. Largely invisible structural inequalities in the Chinese education
system, with its strong meritocratic reputation resulting from its focus on testing and
ranking, leaves low-scoring education migrants feeling undeserving of future opportunities.
This chapter shows how rural youth fall behind in the middle to high school transition
by giving the example of youths’ transitions from a middle school in Hougang town to
a Jingmen city high school. In addition to being excluded from entering key point high schools, rural youths also suffer from a lack of knowledge and guidance when trying to navigate China’s higher education system. Badly made choices regarding their educational trajectories leave youths feeling frustrated and hopeless, sometimes resulting in their dropping out of university. Finally, this chapter argues that educational credentials have become an important marker of belonging in urban society, making access to educational resources a hot political topic, crucial for understanding the renegotiation of rural-urban relations in the urban environment.

In the third chapter, I demonstrate how inequalities in access to higher education translate into education migrants’ lack of opportunities in the urban labour market. This chapter focuses on the sales sector, which is a burgeoning segment of the informal, white-collar labour market. In the sales sector, education migrants can easily find office work, but these jobs do not offer more security or higher wages than lesser-educated labour migrants’ jobs. Precarious labour conditions and the tiresome experience of frequently changing jobs causes great stress and isolation among education migrants. Still, these sales jobs have a higher status than manual labour because they are set in an office environment and require an education. This chapter shows that education migrants’ labour strategies should be studied in relation to their families’ greater household strategies. Since China’s skewed sex ratio following decades of the one-child policy and the continued preference for sons has created a lack of women of marriageable age, realising a son’s marriage has become a great challenge for rural families. Education migrants, who are often the first and only person in their families with an education, try to contribute as much as they can to realising this family goal, and allowing their parents to retire.

In the fourth and last empirical chapter, I focus on women’s experiences on marriage and labour markets. I argue that young women are simultaneously positioned on these markets, with their actions in the one influencing their position in the other. My research shows that education does not necessarily strengthen women’s position in society and can also be considered as improving young women’s ‘marriage capital’, making them better mothers and wives instead of independent professionals who feel empowered to navigate, and possibly even challenge, patriarchal social structures. Women who are keen to develop professional careers are branded ‘hero women’, a term that carries the connotation of a woman who lives alone without a family. Since the unbalanced sex ratio has strengthened women’s negotiation position for marriage, rural families have started to demand that the groom’s family provide a ‘marriage house’ in a (semi)-urban environment. This development, which is sometimes considered to strengthen women’s position in society, is countered by rural female graduates’ obligation to help their parents achieve marriage for their brothers in this competitive marriage market, which eats up their savings and makes them more dependent on their future husbands for housing and financial stability.

In the final and concluding chapter, I look back on the arguments made in this dissertation and make suggestions for further research. I highlight the main contributions made in the empirical chapters, including to the debates on the centrality of the hukou-system on studies of Chinese rural-urban relations, as well as debates on education and mobility, equality and gender. Finally, I suggest that in the Chinese case it is especially important to consider educational expansion as a state strategy for driving rural-urban migration, inviting alternative perspectives regarding which goals this expansion is meant to achieve.
CHAPTER

Beyond Rural-Urban
Beyond Rural-Urban

The Wuhan Bureau of Education generally does not keep track of whether students are rural or urban. China’s urbanisation is very fast now, so I estimate that rural students (those with rural hukou registration) will be fewer and fewer.

(Email from an official at the Wuhan Bureau of Education, December 13th, 2018)

This quote is from an email sent to me by a representative of the Wuhan Education Bureau, a city-level government body overseeing educational institutes in Wuhan. I met this representative during my fieldwork and followed up with her during the writing process to inquire after the number of students with rural hukou-registration currently studying in Wuhan. Her reply was typical and in line with the general tenet of Chinese government communication about rural-urban dynamics, reminding me that the urbanisation cure is rapidly taking care of the rural problem.

In the introduction of this dissertation I explained how ideas about ‘the rural’ and ‘the urban’ are woven into developmentalist narratives that describe China as coming from a rural past and moving towards an urban future. Within this narrative, rural and urban are oppositional terms representing the past and the future and the traditional and the modern. In this chapter, I describe this symbolic opposition as one of three dimensions of the rural-urban divide in Chinese society. The other two dimensions are the administrative divide, which takes shape in the hukou-system, and the experiential divide. As I unpack these different dimension of China’s rural-urban divide, I will develop several arguments. First of all, there is an argument in the approach itself, which treats the rural-urban as a multidimensional concept. By including multiple dimensions in my analysis, I can deepen our understanding of the ways in which the hukou-system contributes to China’s rural-urban divide. The second argument flows from this approach as I will demonstrate that the hukou-system does not only divide rural and urban citizens, but also maintains other, less frequently discussed divisions in Chinese society. Finally, I will question what it means to be rural for the education migrants in this dissertation, who have spent very little or none of their lives in the Chinese countryside. In relation to them, is it still appropriate to speak about rural-urban inequality at all?

Thus far, discussions about rural-urban relations have mainly focused on labour migrants. Education migrants are interesting because they personify China’s rural-urban transition. They have already walked the path laid out by the state, a path imagined to improve the quality of their personhood to such a degree that they would be able to become valued members of urban society. Yet this dissertation will show that a university education does not necessarily protect these youths from being essentialised and stigmatised for their ‘ruralness’. This is especially striking because – as was also argued about the ‘new generation migrants’ (Cheng 2014; He & Wang 2016) – ‘being rural’ does not mean much to these youths themselves, who often grew up in small towns rather than in the countryside, or, for those whose parents lived in the countryside, spent most of their lives in boarding schools. Another reason why it is interesting to include the perspective of education migrants in discussions on rural-urban relations is that it is easier for them than for labour migrants to gain an urban hukou-registration in China’s second-tier cities, including Wuhan. Yet similar to what studies among labour migrants in smaller Chinese cities have shown (Zhan 2011), this opportunity for hukou-conversion is not always seized upon. Through a discussion about education migrants’ motivations for wanting or not wanting rural-urban hukou-conversion, I will contribute to discussions about the importance of the hukou-system in debates on Chinese rural-urban relations started by scholars in recent years (Zhan 2011; Cheng 2014; Lan 2014; Jakimow & Barabantseva 2016).

Chinese political and media campaigns have long put forward the idea that the urban and the rural represent two different phases on a spectrum of development on which one obviously lags behind the other (for examples of these campaigns, see Yan 2008; Bach 2010). The prevalence of these ideas is of great consequence for the position of those who are considered rural in Chinese cities and have at least as much segregating power as the administrative system that lays at its foundation. In the following section I discuss this as the symbolic dimension of the rural-urban divide.

The Power of Symbols

Jonathan Bach’s 2010 essay on Shenzhen’s urban emergence gave a beautiful description of the ways in which ideas of progress and modernity had become inextricably connected with ideas about the urban. Shenzhen is one of China’s largest and newest cities, developed in a region where mere decades ago only some fishing villages existed. Bach described how narratives about Shenzhen’s development were saturated with rural-urban developmentalist ideology:

In conversations with professionals and officials in Shenzhen, through advertisements and in official exhibits, websites, and newspapers, Shenzhen often appears as the proverbial opening to the imagined West – modern and market oriented, entrepreneurial and well-ordered, atomised and universal. Conversely, whether in popular perception or musealized forms, the former villages of barely one generation ago represent the past, the (closed) East, the feudal, the mythic, the collective, the particular. If Shenzhen is a narrative about speed, progress and civilisation, its villages serve as the narrative’s other, its measure of progress (Bach 2010: 422).
Chapter One

The ideological context of China's urban development as an unstoppable and positive force is the backdrop of many studies on developments in the country in the last decades. The earlier mentioned book by Wu Jinting (2016), for example, describes the rolling out of educational policies in areas of China that are considered underdeveloped. Development agendas are pushed through with the help of the development discourse that holds cities as the hallmark of progress and modernity and pathologises the rural as backward and unenlightened. Wu describes how everything rural – and in this case ethnie since she studies China's Miao and Dong populations – is seen as outside of, and morally and culturally lower than, the norm. Supported by modernist myths, the state carries out its 'civilising mission', political work with the aim of 'revitalising the countryside' and putting those spaces and their inhabitants on the path to modernity. In this process, local knowledge, practices and autonomy are lost as spaces and people become increasingly integrated in capitalist markets through education and tourism. Another example of a study that captures how these grand and untouchable ideologies siphon into real human interaction is Yan Hairong's 2008 book *New Masters, New Servants*, in which she describes the experiences of two generations of migrant women from Anhui province in Beijing. Yan's subjects work as domestic helpers, placing them within the urban household, which means that she observes rural-urban interaction in the most intimate realm, the home. Yan's descriptions demonstrate how these narratives of rural and urban people being differently positioned in what she calls a 'development teleology' come to expression in real life. Urban recruiters and employers treat their rural employees' 'ruralness' as something that has to be washed away and deleted. Or, equating rural subjectivities to 'nothingness', they treat these women as 'blank slates' upon which proper forms of subjectivity still need to be inscribed. By filling in these blank slates, employers and recruiters consider themselves to contribute not only to the wellbeing of the rural worker, but also to the development of the country as a whole.

Yan's domestic workers were of course very precariously positioned in Beijing. They were very far from home, hardly educated, and often young. In contrast, the education migrants I studied in Wuhan were confident, close to home and the first in their families to gain a university degree. Yet they were not immune to dealing with the same rural stigmas that Yan's domestic workers dealt with. Their rural family backgrounds continued to play an important role in their interactions with employers and classmates. In the next section, I will illustrate this point by describing a meeting with one of my interlocutors' urban employers and introducing the concept of the 'phoenix boy'.

Only weeks after Misty, a 23-year old accountancy graduate who grew up in Hubei's countryside and who is one of the main characters in this dissertation, was hired by Mrs Xu, we shared a hot pot lunch among the three of us. Mrs Xu was a 44-year old Wuhan native who was in charge of the Hubei province branch of a nationwide enterprise selling advertisement space in cinemas. She was elegantly dressed in casual business attire, and sat next to Misty, with whom she already seemed to have formed an intimate, but also tense and hierarchical relationship. In the midst of picking at the food in front of her and telling me her life story, she sometimes turned to Misty to suddenly launch back into work mode: ‘When are you going to see that client again? Call him!’ Then, looking back at me, she smiled complicity and continued her account. While discussing her recruitment practices, Mrs Xu explained how she was always hiring and firing youths, looking for those who could make sales, and shedding those who did not hit their marks. Amidst a flood of encouraging remarks about the high gains Misty would be able to reap if she would sell well, she noted coldly that Misty would be let go, like so many others before her, if she would not close some deals soon. Mrs Xu was under a lot of pressure from the company's head office herself, always receiving emails that ranked her branch against others, and knew that she too could be disposed of easily were she not to meet her sales goals. This pressure, and her many years of experience, had helped her to develop clear recruitment strategies for her staff. I asked her why she had hired Misty:

When I first met Misty, I asked her why she wanted to make money. She said: ‘Because I want to give my parents a better life.’ I liked that. When youths have these kinds of motivations, it makes them capable of ‘eating bitterness’. 27 This is why some employers like to hire kids from outside. 28 Urban youths cannot eat bitterness the way rural kids can. We work long hours, from 9 am to 9 pm, urban kids can’t do that. They don’t need money the way rural kids do, so they’re just not as motivated. (Mrs Xu)

The way Mrs Xu spoke about employing Misty reminded me of the employers described in Yan Hairong’s book who explained that they feel less comfortable ordering around urban women, and talking about hiring a rural worker as a way of helping an underdeveloped person develop themselves. In one of the stories about finding the perfect domestic worker analysed by Yan Hairong, she describes how the employer views the worker as a commodity of pure labour power waiting to be inscribed with instruction and training and in need of developing a subjectivity that will match that of its employers so as to render its domestic labour motivated and affective (2008: 93). Mrs Xu spoke with an air of benevolence about giving Misty, this ‘rural kid’, a chance to prove herself, even though Misty was immediately expected to work extremely long hours, often going over eighty hours per week, to take

---

27 ‘Eating bitterness’ is the translation for the Chinese expression chiku, which means bearing hardship.
28 ‘From outside’ is a popular way of referring to migrants or ‘rural’ people. In Chinese ‘outside’ is used as an adjective: waidi.
out personal loans to purchase a laptop and undergo work-related training, and to work without a labour contract for a meagre base salary. Mrs Xu contacted Misty at all hours of the day with questions about her communications with clients, admonishing her if she had not followed up with somebody fast enough, and reminding her of the consequences of failing. Still, Mrs Xu spoke about herself as Misty’s benefactor, giving a ‘poor rural kid’ the chance to prove herself. Interestingly, in seeing their interaction, it was clear that Misty knew exactly what was expected from her and that a particular form of ‘rurality’ was considered her strong suit in this relationship. She did not shy away from exaggerating her humility and work appetite to please her employer. As Mrs Xu talked about her decision to ‘give Misty a chance’, Misty kept putting food on her plate respectfully and made repeated comments about how much she admired her employer. In this case, employer and employee seemed to have agreed to try to make this master-servant relationship work for them. But, Mrs Xu explained, not all employers are of this mindset:

Some employers rather hire kids from the city, because they feel like a rural kid can never attain the same level of quality (nzshi) as an urban kid. The environment they grew up in is different, and they can just never reach the same kind of level. No matter how much education they have had. (Mrs Xu)

Mrs Xu’s comments echo the developmentalist rhetoric propagated by the Chinese state since the start of the reform period that has pegged ‘the rural’ as ‘the underdeveloped’, and ‘the urban’ as ‘the future’. She uses the concept of ‘quality’ to explain what separates rural and urban youths, regardless of their educational achievements. How does this kind of narrative serve somebody like Mrs Xu? In broad strokes, the idea of ‘the rural’ as a substandard segment of the Chinese population places the country’s more powerful, urban class in a dominant and comfortable position, with access to abundant cheap labour. Their hiring of rural youths cannot only be explained as an act of benevolence, but also improves class in a dominant and comfortable position, with access to abundant cheap labour. Their hiring of rural youths cannot only be explained as an act of benevolence, but also improves their position within the labour market. Yet, as the following section will illustrate, those rural youths who manage to enter Wuhan’s key point universities also struggle with prejudices connected to their rural background. One concept that I came across repeatedly, and which illustrates this point very clearly, is the term ‘phoenix boy’.29 I was first introduced to this term while spending time with the classmates of one of my very successful interlocutors who was enrolled in a Master’s programme in one of Wuhan’s key point universities. As I understood the way in which the term was used, I realised it illustrated the impossibility for rural youths to shed their rural background in the eyes of urban peers. Phoenix boy refers to young men who have ‘risen from the ashes’ like a phoenix, which means that they grew up poor in the countryside and have grown up to be successful in the city. Yet stories told about phoenix boys indicate that the term’s function is rather to remind the listener of the ashes that the phoenix has risen from, rather than the heights to which it has flown. The students who first told me about this term used it to refer to one of their classmates, who was a very good student from a rural background. As part of our conversation about rural-urban relations in the classroom, they tried to explain the difficulties of a phoenix boy dating an urban girl by telling me a story about their classmate:

We had this girl in our class, and she was really excellent. She had really high grades, she was very beautiful, and her father was a high general in the army in Beijing. She started dating this guy who came from the countryside. He was a phoenix boy. He was in our class, and was a very good student, but their backgrounds were obviously very different. So, everybody thought, their love couldn’t last long, they were too different. One day, they went on a trip together to Shanghai. They walked past a luxury store, you know, where they sell expensive LV bags, and clothes, and such.30 She wanted to go in, but he didn’t want to. ‘Why can’t we go in?’ she asked. ‘We don’t have to buy anything!’ He didn’t want to go in. This became such an issue that they ended up arguing in front of the store, and it signified the end of their relationship. So, I believe that it still matters, and that if you come from such different experiences, it will cause problems. If the girl is used to going out for nice dinners, but the boy only wants to eat at home to save money, she won’t be happy in the end. (Chong)

29 The Chinese term is Fenghuangnan. This term is usually used in the male variant.
30 LV = Louis Vuitton.
The term ‘phoenix boy’ has a strong enough discursive power to identify and marginalise successful young men from rural backgrounds. The term is highly effective as a segregating device, highlighting differences between rural and urban people. On the internet a proliferation of fetishising articles exists, in addition to blog posts with advice for and warnings against dating these men, with titles like: ‘Pay attention to these three points when dating a phoenix boy!’ and ‘Absolutely never date a phoenix boy!’ The aspect that gets the most attention in these posts is the same point that Mrs Xu made before: people from rural backgrounds have dependents they need to take care of. Now, whereas this might increase these youths’ appeal for some employers, it is considered a burden for those who want to date them. According to one Baidu blogpost it is important for girls to know that the urban lifestyle they consider normal is ‘almost a sort of heaven’ for phoenix boys. She further claims that getting involved with a phoenix boy means becoming part of his lifelong struggle to repay his family for the opportunity to study: ‘If you choose a phoenix boy, it is not enough to only accept his past. You have to spend a lifetime repaying his family together with him, because without his family, today’s successful version of him would not exist’ (Baidu Blogpost, August 9th, 2017). Another recurring theme in these texts is the idea that phoenix boys are troubled psychologically. Their background of poverty is said to cause these young men to perceive of the people surrounding them as their enemies, and the authors of the blogs claim that their sense of inferiority and guilt is so deep-rooted that it can never be overcome.

These kinds of identity-based forms of social exclusion and stigmatisation cannot be overcome by only reforming the hukou-system. Following decades of a state urbanisation agenda that has created this strong symbolic rural-urban division and hierarchy, the rural has become a euphemism for everything less and lower-class in a society uncomfortable with the idea of class itself, following its recent political history of violent class eradication. Having said that, the administrative rural-urban division continues to exist, even though the division it enforces today seems to rather be the one between China’s first-tier cities and the rest of the country, than between its rural and urban areas.

An Administrative Divide
In the introduction of this dissertation I described the workings and the history of the hukou-system. This relatively unique system that administratively divides the Chinese population into rural and urban, or agrarian and non-agrarian, has long been central to studies of rural-urban migration. Many of these studies describe this residency registration system as a discriminatory system that undermines the position of rural migrants in Chinese cities (Solinger 1999; Alexander & Chan 2006; Chan & Buckingham 2008; Fan 2008). Chan and Buckingham, for example, write that the hukou-system is ‘perhaps the most crucial foundation of China’s social and spatial stratification, and arguably contributes to the country’s most prevalent human rights violations’ (2008: 583). Alexander and Chan argue that it can be described as ‘a quasi-apartheid pass system’ (2006). Yet, without denying the continued importance of the hukou-system today, some scholars have recently suggested that the hukou system is given too much weight in studies of rural-urban relations in China, supporting their claims with studies demonstrating how the rural-urban divide in urban Chinese society is upheld by the hukou-system as well as identity-based forms of social exclusion (Zhan 2011; Jakimow & Barabantseva 2016).

Zhan (2011), for example, carried out a comparative study among labour migrants in Chifeng city in Inner Mongolia and Beijing. He argues that the hukou-system is no longer of fundamental importance for determining migrant workers’ life chances, and that changing one’s hukou-registration is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for settlement in the city. In his study, Zhan highlights the distinction between identity-based social exclusion and hukou-based legal exclusion, and argues that it is more meaningful for a migrant to overcome the former than the latter. Lan’s (2014) findings strike a similar chord. She conducted research among rural-urban migrant families in Shanghai, where migrant children’s access to local education had recently improved. In her article, she argues for the differentiation between institutional and cultural ‘incorporation’ — a term she uses for its ability to underscore the institutional nature of hukou-boundaries in studies among Chinese rural-urban migrants. Her study shows that migrants simultaneously deal with exclusion and marginalisation based on their lack of a local hukou-registration, as well as cultural prejudices and discrimination against their rural backgrounds and identities (2014: 246). Finally, a study conducted by Cheng among highly educated rural-urban migrants also concludes that the hukou is no longer of utmost importance: ‘One thing is for sure: hukou is not the only factor in these issues. Migrant workers’ wellbeing and status in cities are principally determined by their stock of human and social capital in the market economy’ (2014: 147).

As it turns out, in recent years China’s second-tier cities have become eager to see university graduates settle in their cities. These youths’ education is considered an indication of their future spending behaviours as well as of their ‘human quality’. In an effort to make their cities attractive, they have started to offer benefits, including hukou-registrations, for graduates interested in settling there. ‘A grabbing war’, were the words a Chinese friend used to describe these cities’ behaviours, referring to the way cities are in competition with one another in making themselves attractive to these graduates. I first heard about these
developments in a meeting with Dr. Tang, a representative of Wuhan’s Education Bureau in March 2016, who explained to me that only twenty percent of Wuhan’s graduates remained in the city. She said:

Holding on to these graduates is one of the city’s most important challenges. Currently, our goal is to increase the percentage of graduates who stay in Wuhan from 20 to 30 percent. We know that graduates are important for our city’s economy in the long-run. When they’ve just graduated they might still be changing jobs a lot and be unsure of what they want, but when they settle down and start a family, they start contributing to society (Dr. Tang, representative Wuhan Education Bureau).

The words of Dr. Tang illustrated the importance of rural citizens as consumers. The projected consumption power of education migrants is high, even though they struggle in their years after graduation, and this makes them attractive for city governments dependent on real estate markets and citizen consumption to achieve economic growth. In 2016, Dr. Tang mentioned that there was financial help available for graduates who were interested in purchasing a house and subsidies for those who wished to launch entrepreneurial initiatives. However, throughout 2017 and 2018, many of China’s second-tier cities, including Wuhan, also rolled out initiatives to provide university graduates with local hukou registrations. As an interlocutor put it: ‘There is competition between cities. All cities need more people who are likely to be beneficial to the development and the construction of the city’. Encouraging graduates to get their hukou registration, websites clearly explain the very straight-forward process step by step.32 According to Chinese media reports, Wuhan’s policies are taking effect. The China Daily reports that between June 2017 and June 2018 500,000 new and recent graduates arrived in Wuhan to work, which is double the amount compared to the same period a year earlier. Of these 500,000 graduates, 200,000 registered for a hukou, which was six times more than the previous year (China Daily, 26 July 2018).33 This spike can be explained by a relaxation of the rules, as well as the city government’s other policies to attract graduates, including offering cut-price apartments, releasing minimum-wage guidelines, and launching a Talent Introduction Bureau.

With the introduction of these new initiatives, the education migrants in my research project were now suddenly eligible for urban hukou-conversion. Yet by January 2019 none of them had applied for one, nor expressed a strong interest in reaction to my inquiry. ‘What’s the use?’, I was asked in response to my questions about why they had not applied, ‘of having a hukou in a place where I can’t live’, referring to their inability to buy real estate in the city and settle down. In this phase of their lives, being in their early twenties, my interlocutors do not yet have children, need little medical attention, and their pension feels light years away. As such, the urban hukou-registration does not yet offer them any advantages. Moreover, it might be easy to change their rural hukou to an urban hukou in this moment, but it is basically impossible to change it back, which means that those youths who opt for hukou-conversion will be permanently excluded from receiving compensation were the government to announce plans for urban development in the locations of their rural hukou-registration.

Young women explained that they were not interested in changing their hukou-status before marriage because they do not yet know ‘where they will be married’, referring to the location of the ‘marriage house’, which is the house a groom purchases as part of the marriage negotiations, a phenomenon I will expand on in Chapter Four of this dissertation. Their reactions illustrated how owning urban property is considered more important than being locally registered for this generations’ sense of belonging in urban society. They do not perceive of the hukou-system as essential for their success in the city. In contrast to the perception of those scholars who have long argued against the hukou-system as being the foundation of rural-urban inequality and injustice (Solinger 1999; Alexander & Chan 2004; Chan & Buckingham 2008), education migrants do not view rural hukou-registrations as a serious obstacle between them and their goals. They rather agreed that it was their inability to purchase their own homes in the city that stood between them and becoming a real urbanite. Following the value increase of urban Chinese real estate in recent years, it has become increasingly difficult for education migrants to settle in the city. Misty’s employer, Mrs Xu, who herself derives much status from owning three apartments In Wuhan, put it succinctly: “Those rural kids cannot even make enough to buy themselves a toilet, right!”

But if education migrants are uninterested in hukou-conversion, then who is causing the spike in hukou-registrations reported by the Wuhan government? The numbers reported by the city make no mention of rural-urban hukou-conversion, only counting the rising numbers of people who have registered in Wuhan. Taking into account youths’ hesitant attitude towards rural-urban hukou-conversion and the fact that many of the talent programmes and cut-price apartment deals by which people might be attracted to Wuhan are not easily available to them, being mainly aimed at graduates from key point universities,

32 Links to these websites are: http://wh.bendibao.com/live/20171012/89076.shtml; https://jingyan.baidu.com/article/60cbe58bc4dc3064ac6819756.html; http://wh.bendibao.com/live/20150223/75170.shtml
I would suggest that it is likely that this spike in registrations is caused by students from cities surrounding Wuhan, both in- and outside of Hubei province, who have enough capital to buy into the Wuhan real estate market and are well enough positioned on the Wuhan labour market to find good employment.

At this time, the line between China's first- and second-tier cities seems to gain importance, possibly more so than the one between rural and urban status. Even though most studies focus on differences between rural and urban hukou-registrations (e.g. Treiman 2012), there are also significant urban-urban and rural-rural differences. One graduate, reacting to my surprise about her being uninterested in a Wuhan hukou-registration, texted: 'Hahaha, it's not like it's a Beijing or a Shanghai hukou' (Anna, 22 September 2018), indicating that those are the most coveted urban hukou-registrations. Yet, while many of China's second-tier cities have started to allow hukou-registration for university graduates, it has only become more difficult to register one's hukou in China's largest cities (JoUson 2017). JoUson, who highlights the parallels between national citizenship policies and China's hukou system and argues that the two share important functions, 'including the management of migrant labor and the safeguarding of state resources for the benefit of officially resident populations' (2017: 100), writes that the decentralisation of hukou administration that has led to easier hukou-transfer in smaller cities has in fact led to higher barriers in China's largest cities (2017: 94). This supports the argument gleaned from the reaction of my interlocutors that transferring one's rural hukou to an urban hukou is not necessarily attractive, but that only a very particular kind of urban hukou that is considered worth having.

This finding was further corroborated during a visit to a post-university entrance exam meeting for the highest scorers at a famous key point high school in Jingmen city, which I will describe in detail in the following chapter. Whereas I had never heard hukou being mentioned at other education fairs or in conversations about which university to go to, in this meeting hukou-policy came up multiple times. When talking to students about the decision they were about to make, they talked as much about the city in which their university would be located as the university they would attend itself. Most of these students had scored high enough to apply for universities in Beijing and Shanghai, something that was extremely rare in the 'normal' high schools education migrants generally attend. One student explained to me earnestly that in addition to the university she would attend, she also had to think about the city it was located in, since this would be the place in which she would develop her network and therefore be likely to have her professional future. She said, 'We don't want to spend our whole lives in Hubei province, we don't want to live here later, so we care about this decision. We think about a city's labour market, climate, and its distance from home.' Another student added, 'We also think about where we can get a hukou. Beijing might be a good city to develop your future in, but you can't get a hukou until you're 45 or 50 years old.' When I asked why the hukou-question was so important to them, a female student answered: 'In China, a hukou is a lifeline. It's connected to all your social rights: education for your children, health care, your insurances... and if you want to marry somebody, the family will care about whether you have a local hukou or not.'

These reactions make very clear that blanket statements about the importance of the hukou-system can never be fully appropriate and invite further thought about why a hukou is considered 'a lifeline' by some people and completely unimportant to others. My explanation for this is threefold. First, as I said, it is not just gaining an urban hukou-registration that is attractive, but it is being able to gain the right kind of urban hukou-registration. For example, a Beijing hukou-registration does not only mean access to more high-quality education for one's children, as I will discuss in the next chapter, but also gives one more access to Beijing's healthcare system, and puts one at an advantage on the Beijing real estate market. Additionally, there is of course the status that comes with a local hukou-registration that strengthens one's position on labour and marriage markets. Secondly, these students who were concerned about their hukou-registration were also in a different starting position compared to students in normal high schools. Many of the students in the key point high school already had urban hukou-registration in Jingmen city and were expecting to enrol in a key point university. Their expectations of their future social mobility made it relevant for them to think about buying a Beijing apartment or marrying an urbanite. For the rural students in the normal university who enrolled in class two universities in Wuhan, these kinds of expectations were out of the question. Even in their wildest dreams for their future, which might include buying property on a less competitive real estate market and marrying a man from a similar background to theirs, an urban hukou-registration did not play as big a role. Finally, it can also be said that education migrants who never had many benefits associated with their hukou-registration were not very aware of these benefits, whereas those from families with urban hukou-registration were very well-informed concerning the advantages related to improving their hukou-registration.

In the same way that differences between different kinds of urban hukou-registrations are important, rural hukou-registrations were also valued for a variety of reasons. In some cases, and especially for those hukou-holders in areas surrounding cities, a rural hukou-registration can be of great value when those who are registered qualify for government compensation in the case of city expansion. The chance of this happening makes many rural-hukou holders unwilling to change their status.
In sum, the varying interest in rural-urban conversion illustrates that the administrative rural-urban divide is more complicated than it sounds. Existing studies have already shown that there is little enthusiasm for hukou-conversion among rural-urban labour migrants in small Chinese cities (Zhan 2011). My research shows that education migrants are also not immediately keen to change their hukou-registrations into those second-tier city hukou that have become available to them. Whereas the lack of enthusiasm among labour migrants could be partly explained by difficulty meeting the conditions for conversion, which were ‘possession of stable employment, maintenance of a stable income, or residence in a regular dwelling place’ (Zhan 2011: 245), or these migrants’ intention to return home eventually, these restrictions and intentions are not as relevant for graduates who can meet the requirements set for them and who generally intend to stay in the city permanently. Still, education migrants do not rush at the opportunity either, and explain their choices by highlighting the limitations that cannot be undone by changing one’s hukou-registration, including the inaccessibility of the real estate market. In the following section, I will discuss these limitations as part of the experiential dimension of the rural-urban divide.

The Experience of ‘Being Rural’

This section about the experience of ‘being rural’ consists of two parts: the first part focuses on the period before moving to Wuhan, and the second part is about the period after arrival in Wuhan. For this section, I focus mainly on the experiences and family history of one particular interlocutor: Anna, who will be an important character throughout this dissertation. When I met Anna in 2015, she was 22 years old and had recently graduated from the Hubei University of Education in Wuhan where she studied editing. At that time, she had been working as a project manager at the Wuhan plant of the Taiwanese electronics manufacturer Foxconn for four months.

A ‘Rural Background’

Before university, Anna attended high school in Jingmen City, roughly 300 kilometres east of the provincial capital. Her parents and brother had been living in Jingmen city for the past seven years. Prior to moving there, the family lived 80 kilometres further south in a small town called Hougang, which is also part of the Jingmen prefecture, where the parents ran a shop and Anna and her brother attended primary and middle school. Anna’s parents moved to Hougang town three years after their wedding in 1989, when their son was only two years old and their daughter had not yet been born. At the time, there was a job opportunity in an alcohol distribution centre, and since the family had experienced difficulty getting by with the small-sized plot of land available to them, they decided to go. This family’s trajectory and network spans from the villages where the parents were born and raised to the local town and city, as well as the provincial capital where Anna attended university and is currently working. On paper, Anna’s family belongs to the hundreds of millions Chinese families that have practiced rural-urban migration since the 1980s. Yet, having always lived within the area of one prefectural city, albeit on several different points of the rural-urban spectrum within that area, they consider themselves as ‘having never gone out’, with ‘going out’ being a popular way of referring to rural-urban migration.

Anna’s parents were both the fourth out of five children born in their respective families. Among their eight siblings, only three still farm with regularity. Out of the sixteen children that make up the next generation of this family none have any farming experience. As I explained in the introduction, this family’s complete turn away from an agrarian existence is reflective of a larger trend in Chinese society. As we can see in Anna’s family, leaving the countryside can be done in a variety of ways. The cousins of Anna’s generation are dispersed across the country, from Shenzhen and Guangzhou, gigantic cities in southern China, to Wuhan, the provincial capital of Hubei province, and Jingmen, their local urban centre, as well as smaller towns in the vicinity. The split between those who migrated as labourers and those who migrated as students is right down the middle.

The differences between these trajectories are quite important. As Guldin (2001) points out, following the famous Chinese anthropologist Fei Xiaotong (1986), in China, urbanisation also means ‘townisation’, the in-place transformation of rural villages and towns into cities. In the case of Anna’s family, her parents’ home villages had not been subject to townisation, but the combination of a lack of land and the increased number of job opportunities in rapidly growing towns nearby motivated them to move there, contributing to the townisation of other previously rural parts of their home area. This form of short-distance rural-urban migration is not nearly as dramatic and life-changing as the more often described migratory trajectories that lead all the way from Chinese villages to China’s biggest cities. People who practice this kind of short-distance migration continue to be embedded in their social networks, speak a version of the local dialect, are familiar with their surroundings, and do not suffer social exclusion to the same degree as migrants in the big cities (Zhan 2011). When reflecting on these short-distance moves it was very uncommon for people to use the language of migration. They rather considered themselves to have moved in order to reposition themselves and their families in response to a rapidly changing social context, trying to avoid dead-ends and seeking new opportunities.

Anna’s position of being in-between the rural and the urban is very common for people of her generation. She has very little experience with life in the countryside and does not identify as rural, but administratively and symbolically she is considered rural by the state as well as by urban peers and employers. On a visit to a rural village to attend a wedding,
Anna talked about her lack of familiarity with the rural environment and her perspective on rural education:

People from the countryside don’t often go to university, you know? Their education is not so good... that’s also why there’s such a big difference between the city and the countryside. The people in the countryside just don’t learn many things. They don’t go to university, they mostly go out to work somewhere. In Hougang it’s at least a lot better... I was born there... and I grew up there. I am not used to being here (Anna).

Anna’s words call into question whether it is useful to classify her and youths like her as rural at all. It is a label with little bearing on her history that is often used against her as a mechanism of exclusion, branding those who are considered rural as ‘the other’ in urban society, an entity against which the concept of the urban citizen in contemporary China is formulated (Jakimow & Barabantseva 2016: 8). When Anna is discussed as a rural person it is no longer in connection to factors generally considered rural, such as living in the countryside and practicing agriculture. It is rather a way of saying that she is ‘not from here’ or ‘not local’, which comes to expression in the often-used Chinese term *wuaidiren*, which translates as ‘outsider’ and is also the term Anna chooses when I ask her how she would self-identify. The conception of herself as an ‘outsider’ is at odds with the way Anna still considers Wuhan to be a part of her ‘home’. She knows that other people look upon her as an outsider, but in her experience home has always been a mobile concept shaped by the educational trajectory that led from Hougang town to Wuhan. Education migrants’ lack of a fixed space to call home and the contestedness of their place in urban society led to me describe education migrants as being uprooted.

*In Wuhan*

In Wuhan, Anna spends most of her time on the Foxconn factory grounds in the city’s southeast Wuchang district. The site where the factory is located is quiet, grey and industrial, with dusty, two-lane roads flanked by enormous company terrains. On the Foxconn campus where Anna has resided since 2015 about 20,000 employees are currently housed. The single bus line connecting the factory to Wuhan’s hip Optics Valley Square and the metro network is always crammed full of people and regularly takes more than an hour to cover the fifteen kilometres distance on the city’s congested roads. Foxconn workers therefore only rarely make the journey to this newly-built area that is popular with students for its shiny malls and opportunities for window shopping.

When I visit Anna on a Sunday, I am not allowed to enter the factory terrain, so we stroll around the area, trying to escape the unforgiving cold on this winter day. The air is thick with pollution, adding to the feeling of grey emptiness, which is very much in contrast with the Wuhan that I grew accustomed to in the past months: a city that is never quiet, let alone empty. This area is the opposite of Wuhan’s lively and chaotic city centres, it is plain and efficient, a place for production. Anna’s cheers up her surroundings in her bright, red coat. She leads me past the factory, through an underpass, and up a small hill to a square-spaced area made up of three short one-storey lanes lined with eateries and tea shops. Despite the freezing temperatures, none of these small businesses are heated. They keep their doors swung wide open to the icy street, as if to say: do not come in here looking for comfort. In an effort to keep warm, we buy ourselves extra pairs of socks, put them on, and march around at a quick pace. It is easy to understand why Anna does not come here very often, preferring to spend these cold, winter days in her dorm room. She explains:

It’s winter, so I like to spend a lot of time under the blankets. I normally just stay inside. Sometimes I come out here to eat something, but then I go back to the dorm right after. Also, I only come here if I’m with other people, because it can be pretty dangerous. It’s not safe to walk around here alone at night, I’ve heard horrible stories... about girls getting raped and that sort of thing. It’s pretty dangerous here. The conditions are more like the countryside. Or, well, the countryside is very safe... This area is like the countryside, but with the dangers of the city. (Anna)
At this moment in time, Anna does not yet possess the urban lifestyle that she dreams about having in the future, when she hopes to be married and be living in her own apartment in the city. For both men and women, the years between graduation and marriage are considered as a liminal phase; everything is fluid, until marriage – and especially the purchase of real estate – will fix them in a certain location, community, and class. During this period, many education migrants live similar lifestyles to Anna, with their experience in the city for the large part restricted to the company terrain on which they work and live. This attitude of isolating oneself in one’s dorm room was referred to with the popular internet term zhai, which was explained to me as meaning not often wanting to go outside, being shy, keeping to oneself. Graduates who considered themselves to be zhai named a variety of factors that contribute to their unwillingness to leave their place of work, including inconvenience – ‘roads are always jammed, buses are always full’ (Xi) – work pressure, safety, and the lack of money, friends, and local knowledge. Anna, who is more outgoing and adventurous than most of the education migrants I met, sometimes left the Foxconn grounds for short outings to the mall or other popular hang-out spots for young people. But for the most part, she also stays inside.

The first time I saw Anna was when she was on such an outing to a café on Tanhuadin, a hip Wuhan shopping street lined with artisan boutiques and cute coffee shops. On this Saturday afternoon, Anna looked glamorous wearing a silky white sleeveless shirt and tight jeans. Her nails were painted red and her hair was pulled back tightly. She sat alone, sipping on an overpriced cup of black coffee, a beverage I later learned she found horribly bitter. We did not know one another, but when I asked her if I could talk to her, she agreed enthusiastically. Anna insisted on speaking English to me, despite sometimes finding it difficult to express herself. As the afternoon progressed, she talked about her recent graduation and her office job at Foxconn, the world’s largest electronics manufacturer. She was excited to have found her first job on such ‘a big stage’ and spoke confidently about how this job would benefit her ‘development’. Being on a big stage, explained Anna, was her whole reason for wanting ‘development’. Being on a big stage, explained Anna, was her whole reason for wanting ‘development’. Foxconn, a large and international company, was described in similar terms, for its worldwide presence gave the impression that the company could take her anywhere. Some of Anna’s colleagues had actually spent periods abroad. One of her colleagues told me about having spent five months in a factory in Juarez, Mexico. Despite her having enjoyed the blue skies, she said her stay there was ‘like being in a prison’, since her bosses considered the area too dangerous to let staff leave factory grounds independently, and only allowed a small number of group outings organised by the factory. The girl sighed thinking about her return: ‘Now I’m probably gonna be in project management forever’. For Anna, Wuhan had not yet offered her the kind of mobility of which she had dreamed. As the months she spent on the Foxconn factory grounds, far removed from the lively and interesting urban areas that had attracted her to the city, turned into years, the mobility she had hoped to find remained elusive. Still, Anna looked upon her life on the Foxconn grounds as temporary, a phase that would end as soon as she would marry and settle into her ‘real life’. In this life, she would live in an urban apartment, work in a well-paid and interesting job, and spend her evenings socialising with friends over delicious meals. Of course, the contrast between her lived reality and her expectations inspired some angst with the passing of time. One day, Anna confided:

Sometimes I’m really worried.. I feel afraid that some of the things I’m thinking about won’t happen. Having a family.. or making a lot of money. I’m afraid that these things won’t happen, and I will just live a miserable life, and always be very miserable. (Anna)

Anna’s words disturbed me. They felt like an admission, since she had always seemed so relentlessly optimistic. Her words illustrated her feeling of not yet having arrived in the urban life she planned to live, and her holding on to the hope that she will one day make it there. Living in an urban society without being fully able to participate was a frustrating and saddening experience for her. She was on the outside looking in, stuck in a peripheral area, on factory grounds, in a situation very different from what she had imagined as the urban ideal. This predicament led Anna to suffer from sleepless nights and anxiety as she worried about how she would enable herself to move in the direction of the life she wanted. 

Across the sprawling city if not the country, it was hard for her to have a social life. Most of her communication with friends therefore happened via social media. Being isolated in a peripheral part of the city made it difficult for her to experience some of the urban life that had attracted her to Wuhan. Moreover, whenever problems occurred, as I observed several times with other interlocutors, there were very few friends to ask for help.

Despite her experiences thus far, Anna still thought of the city as ‘a big stage’ that offered lots of room for ‘development’. Foxconn, a large and international company, was described in similar terms, for its worldwide presence gave the impression that the company could take her anywhere. Some of Anna’s colleagues had actually spent periods abroad. One of her colleagues told me about having spent five months in a factory in Juarez, Mexico. Despite her having enjoyed the blue skies, she said her stay there was ‘like being in a prison’, since her bosses considered the area too dangerous to let staff leave factory grounds independently, and only allowed a small number of group outings organised by the factory. The girl sighed thinking about her return: ‘Now I’m probably gonna be in project management forever’. For Anna, Wuhan had not yet offered her the kind of mobility of which she had dreamed. As the months she spent on the Foxconn factory grounds, far removed from the lively and interesting urban areas that had attracted her to the city, turned into years, the mobility she had hoped to find remained elusive. Still, Anna looked upon her life on the Foxconn grounds as temporary, a phase that would end as soon as she would marry and settle into her ‘real life’. In this life, she would live in an urban apartment, work in a well-paid and interesting job, and spend her evenings socialising with friends over delicious meals. Of course, the contrast between her lived reality and her expectations inspired some angst with the passing of time. One day, Anna confided:

Sometimes I’m really worried.. I feel afraid that some of the things I’m thinking about won’t happen. Having a family.. or making a lot of money. I’m afraid that these things won’t happen, and I will just live a miserable life, and always be very miserable. (Anna)
She now realised that her university degree would not open as many doors for her as she might have hoped. In the confines of a factory dormitory she tried to find creative ways to embellish this time spent in the in-between. For a while, she ran an online shop selling ripped off language courses to make some extra money. Additionally, she was always busy trying to ‘improve herself’ through reading, studying English and learning to play the piano. One day, after she had arranged a private room for herself, she got herself an electric keyboard on which she taught herself to play classical piano music. In this way, she turned her lonesome evenings into moments of ‘self-development’ and creative expression, which boosted her confidence and sense of self-worth and brightened up a daily life that she generally described as rather dull.

Conclusion
In this chapter I have shown that the rural-urban divide is a multi-dimensional concept and discussed three dimensions in which it can be perceived, being the symbolic, the administrative, and the experiential. I have argued that China’s rural-urban divide runs deeper than the hukou-system alone, which is often the sole focus of studies of rural-urban relations in China. Additionally, and also in relation to discussions about the importance of the hukou-system in these debates, I have demonstrated that the importance of this system is dependent on contextual factors and that it does not only uphold a rural-urban divide, but also an urban-urban divide, between those registered in China’s first-tier cities and those with urban hukou-registrations in second- or third-tier cities. This chapter has illustrated that education migrants continue to face the consequences of long-established rural-urban hierarchies in Chinese society, in the same way that labour migrants have done for decades. These hierarchies are founded on the symbolic meaning given to ‘the rural’ and ‘the urban’ in the ideology of Chinese developmentalism, which paints ‘the rural’ as the past and a point of departure, and ‘the urban’ as the future and the destination. Yet, even though education migrants cannot easily lose the stigma connected to their rural backgrounds, there are ways in which their positions differ from those of their less educated peers. For one, having experienced a long educational trajectory makes education migrants more determined to build up a stable life in the city. Moreover, the administrative rural-urban divide in the form of the hukou-system is less of an obstacle for these highly educated youths, since they are now considered welcome new citizens in Chinese second-tier cities where they are viewed as beneficial to the urban economy.

Yet education migrants, like labour migrants, do not jump at the opportunity to gain an urban hukou-registration because they remain unconvinced of the benefits it will bring, pointing out its inability to help them overcome obstacles resulting from other mechanisms of exclusion, including the urban real estate market and the labour market. Finally, this chapter answers the question of what being rural really means if it is no longer about living in the countryside or doing agrarian work. It shows that the idea of ‘being rural’ has been adopted as a euphemism for everything ‘lesser than’ and ‘not local’ that feeds into the emerging class system in Chinese urban society. In China, the idea of a rural-urban divide thus functions as an ‘ideological screen’ that hides class and inequality in a society that is uncomfortable with these concepts due to its recent political history. Education migrants therefore continue to struggle in the margins of urban society after graduation, finding it difficult to achieve the urban lifestyles they dreamed about while growing up in the education system.

In the next chapter, I will focus on the education system and show how access to educational resources has become one of the main factors separating the outsiders from the locals and the rural from the urban.
CHAPTER
Everybody Educated?
We know that we can't really work as accountants anyhow.  
We know this degree is worthless.  
Maybe we can find a job in a shop of some sorts.

(A zhuanke-university accountancy student)

It was April 2016 when Morning Sunshine asked me to accompany her to the university from which she was by now on medical leave for problems with depression and anxiety. She needed to collect some summer clothes from her dormitory and knew I was interested in meeting her classmates, so she asked me to tag along. As we entered, the light was dim in the girls' dorm room. The sparse daylight that came in through the windows in the back of the room lit up the seven silhouettes of the girls sitting on beds, small stools and chairs. The small room was home to four girls, all nineteen years old. There were four desk-bed combinations, with the desks forming the support for the 'high-sleepers' placed along the walls. The sleeping spaces were shrouded in gauze, providing students with a little privacy and warding off mosquitoes. The girls sat around, having skipped class for Morning Sunshine's visit, chatting, making jokes and chewing on candy. This was one of Wuhan's zhuanke universities, the lowest segment of China's higher education system. All the girls in this room were studying to be accountants.

The prevailing attitude in the dorm room was one of cynicism. 'Graduation equals unemployment', said one of the accountancy students when I asked her what she would do after graduation.34 The others snickered. 'It's very hard to find a job. At least, to find a job you like', another student explained. To the hilarity of the other girls, she added dramatically: 'In my next life, I'm going... to a better university'. A student in the back of the room intervened earnestly: 'You have to keep hope for this life', she reacted, 'You have to keep hope that you can at least accomplish something'. Shoulders slumped in big coats, bearing the cold of an unheated room, the girls sat together quietly, as they watched their friend, Morning Sunshine, preparing for her departure.

Chinese researchers who have conducted research into rural-urban inequality in the higher education system have noted far-reaching rural-urban segregation, and an obvious pattern: the further up the hierarchy in the stratified Chinese higher education system one looks, the fewer rural students one will find (Xie & Li 2000; Liu 2007; Qiao 2010; Li et al 2015). This means that the great majority of the rural students who have come into the Chinese higher education system since the start of the educational expansion of the last two decades have enrolled in universities at the bottom of China's higher education system. These findings are in line with my observations in the field and the results of an online survey I conducted in the spring of 2016 among 128 university students and graduates in Hubei province, which showed that most rural students attended class two and zhuanke universities. The students attending these institutes who filled in the survey indicated that more than eighty percent of their classmates were other students from rural Hubei province, with the other part being made up of students from other provinces.35 Moreover, both Chinese and Western media have repeatedly reported on the decrease of rural students in China's key point universities, which is clearly visible in the numbers reported for China's two top universities (Qinghua University: 50 to 17 percent from 1970 to 2014; Beijing University: 30 to 10 percent in the last decade).36

Following these statistics-driven studies, this chapter offers an etUographic perspective that gives insight into how rural-urban differences in terms of enrolment are produced and experienced. It demonstrates how access to educational resources has become a crucial privilege-producing privilege, meaning that it is currently mainly serving those who are already well-positioned in society and therefore perpetuates existing power relations, especially between China's rural and urban citizens. It describes how protests broke out in reaction to changes being made in regards to access to educational resources, illustrating that those with access to these resources are willing to fight for this privilege. Finally, this chapter demonstrates how youths' educational experiences shape the ways they perceive of themselves and envision their future, which means that the structural inequalities in China's higher education system result in rural Chinese youths feeling as if they have failed and are therefore undeserving of opportunities in the city.

In the next vignette of this chapter I return to Morning Sunshine and her classmates in the dorm-room. These students' experiences illustrate youths' difficulty in dealing with the contradictory experience of going to university and finding out that obtaining a degree from this particular institute will not bring the opportunities and social mobility for which they had hoped.

In the Zhuanke-university
My visit to Morning Sunshine’s dorm room helped me understand what had happened between the moment we first met six months ago and the day we picked up her clothes

34 She said: biye dengyu shijie.
35 Not all students could recall exactly the backgrounds of their classmates, so these numbers are based on the ones that could (about 50 percent of all respondents).
from her room. On the day we met she had approached me on her own initiative as I was hanging out with Anna at the mall. Morning Sunshine had been keen to practice some English and chat with us about her life. That night, we ended up staying in the mall until late in the evening, talking about every topic under the sun, and from then on we continued to see each other frequently throughout my research period. On that first day, Morning Sunshine had already talked about being worried about the choices she had made. She had never wanted to study accountancy and now came to realise that the university she had enrolled in did not offer her many prospects at all. Her parents, who were both labour migrants, had invested a lot in her education. They had even allowed her to re-sit the last year of high school in the hope of improving her score, which had meant coughing up an extra year of high school tuition fees. Yet, despite this extra investment, her score on the university entrance exam had not gone up enough for her to ‘stay above the Bachelor line’.

When the time came to apply for universities, her cousin and parents convinced her to let go of her dream of becoming a teacher and study accountancy instead:

I felt a lot of pressure. My parents wanted me to study accountancy, but I don’t like accountancy at all. My parents asked my cousin, who has a Master’s degree, for advice, and after talking to her I didn’t have the self-confidence anymore to pursue my dreams. I had already taken my final year in high school a second time, but still I didn’t have a very high score. I could only really go to a zhuanke, and my cousin said that if I’d study education there, I would only be able to work in a kindergarten, because my degree wouldn’t be enough to work as a teacher in a middle or high school. Also, if I’d study English in a zhuanke, I wouldn’t be able to compete with students who had studied English at Bachelor level. So, I’d better study accounting. On top of that, studying the other majors was much more expensive. I was really interested in this major called ‘international travel’, but it cost 17,000 rmb per year, while accounting was only 5,000. I’m still trying now to also get other certificates while I’m studying, so that I still have the choice to not work as an accountant when I graduate (Morning Sunshine).

After Morning Sunshine enrolled in a zhuanke-university, called Wuhan City Polytech, to study accountancy, she was disappointed by the dullness of the programme and the dim prospects she learned her degree would offer in the urban labour market. For some time, she hoped to study for both her accountancy degree and a separate certificate that would enable her to work as a teacher, but this proved too much to take on. The pressure of combining programmes while working – and with debt slowly amassing – became too much and a mental breakdown forced Morning Sunshine to quit.

As she tried to reckon with the disappointment of her university experience, Morning Sunshine fell into a deep depression. She started taking medication, and her bright and curious character was soon difficult to detect in this girl who became so quiet and distracted. When she first dropped out, she intended to return to her studies the following school year. However, when the time came, a return proved impossible, since the school made one of her parents living near the school campus a condition for her return, which was a condition her parents could never meet since they could not afford to rent an apartment on top of all the other school fees. Just like that, Morning Sunshine’s fifteen years of struggling in the education system ended with disappointment and frustration.

The stories of Morning Sunshine and her classmates, who were from similar family backgrounds and equally disappointed with their university experience, are important because they inspire us to think critically about the role of higher education in rural youths’ trajectories. As the only person to pursue higher education in a family of six (two adults, four children), Morning Sunshine had received a lot of support from her parents and siblings, both in terms of contributions to her tuition fees and in being allowed to spend her time studying instead of working, while her parents were in the midst of the difficult transition from farming to migrant labour. Morning Sunshine and her family members had always believed that the energy, time and financial investments in her education were worthwhile, because they thought her education would enable her to live a life she would enjoy and strengthen the position of the family as a whole. Yet, the combination of having been pressured into studying accountancy and learning that the degree she was working towards was not worth much in the labour market, caused a crisis of belief in Morning Sunshine. What was the sense in continuing to pour money into an education that was not leading her anywhere?

To understand what a girl like Morning Sunshine is trying to achieve, it might be helpful to think about what she is trying not to do. When she talked about her dreams, Morning Sunshine’s descriptions often remained vague. She would speak about wanting to live an excellent and busy life, wanting to travel, and wanting to have a nice job. Her inability to

37 The great majority of rural students in Hubei province were enrolled in public universities that charged between 5000 and 6000 renminbi (650-780 euro) per year. Fees were generally paid for by parents who often also provided a monthly allowance, of approximately 1000 renminbi per month, for their children’s food and other costs. Only the students from the poorest background needed to work or take out a loan. In some cases, families could only afford tuition fees for one out of two children, and were students were supported by siblings as well as parents.

38 Morning Sunshine was borrowing 6000 renminbi (780 euro) per year from the bank for her studies.
describe those dreams in more exact language might stem from her not knowing anybody who lives the kind of life to which she aspires. In fact, most of Morning Sunshine’s peers and family members’ lives rather inform her about what kind of life she is trying to move away from, which is working as a labour migrant in a restaurant, shop or factory. When I heard Morning Sunshine’s classmates talk about how they did not expect their education to facilitate this type of move, I understood why she had felt so torn up by her university experience. Had she gone through all this studying to end up in a shop after all?

The fact that it is mostly rural students who end up in these zhuanke-universities is widely accepted. In the following section I will delve deeper into the reasons behind this and demonstrate that the expansion of the Chinese higher education system since 1998 has not only exacerbated rural-urban inequalities in this higher education system, but has also made these inequalities more invisible.

Rural-Urban Inequalities in Chinese Education

Existing research has shown that rural-urban inequality in terms of access to university is deep (Qiao 2010; Li 2015; Xie 2015). Research comparing rural-urban inequalities to differences in terms of access between, for example, poor and non-poor youths in cities, shows that rural-urban differences are especially pronounced (Li et al 2015: 204). Chinese scholarship focused on rural-urban inequalities in terms of access to education is generally statistics-driven studies that measure this inequality, asking whether educational expansion has led to equal opportunity. They show, unanimously, that the answer to this question must be a clear ‘no’. Yet knowing that inequalities exist should not be the endpoint of this discussion. This research offers an etÚography of this inequality. It describes my interlocutors’ educational pathways, going back to the towns they grew up in and the schools they attended, and demonstrates how educational policies mix with ideologies, not only producing inequalities, but also fostering certain understandings of these inequalities, with considerable consequences for how youths perceive themselves and others. Xie (2015) and Loyalka et al (2017) research shows that the transition to high school is an important moment in which rural-urban inequalities arise. I will therefore first describe the high school landscape in Jingmen city, where most of my interlocutors went to high school, and show how ideologies and educational policies interact to produce the rural-urban divide at this level.

Everybody wants to go to Longquan High School!

Anybody who visits Jingmen city, the urban centre of Jingmen prefecture in central Hubei province, will soon have heard about Longquan High School, which has a reputation of legendary proportions. In the smaller towns surrounding Jingmen city primary and middle school students talk about Longquan High School as a place where dreams come true. In a conversation with middle school students in Yang Fan village, a quiet rural village in the Jingmen prefecture, the name of the school kept coming up. When I asked students what they hoped for in their future, they spoke in one voice: ‘Of course, we all dream of going to Longquan High School’. In other conversations about middle and high school education Longquan High School was always present. For example, students in the villages unquestionably interpreted their results in middle school in terms of being able or not being able to go to Longquan High School. ‘How are you doing in school?’ was answered with: ‘I don’t think I’ll be able to go’ [to Longquan High School]. And, in conversation with students in another high school in Jingmen city students laughed when I asked about their motives for choosing this particular high school, and then answered in unison: ‘Because we didn’t get in’ [to Longquan High School].

The reality is that only very few students from the middle schools in ‘the towns’ go to Longquan High School. High school admission in China is organised by similar mechanisms as admission to universities, including student quotas, a high school entrance exam, and score lines. Admission to Longquan High School, a key point high school, is regulated by a student quota that determines the number of students who can be admitted from each middle school, and score lines that are differentiated to give an advantage to students from middle schools in the urban centre. In 2008, the year that most of my informants took part in the high school entrance exam in West Lake Middle School in Hougang town, there were 1600 exam takers in this school and 20 places reserved for this cohort in Longquan High School. These 20 students needed to score higher than students in the urban centre, even though their schools scored much lower on average. In this way, students from Jingmen city and the townships directly under its administration were given an advantage. According to the Jingmen city website, the score line for students from the urban centre was 606/597 points in comparison to a score line of 611 points for students from, for example, Shayang county, the administrative zone to which Hougang town belongs. The website does not provide quota information, stating that these are communicated directly with the schools, but it shows that aside from Longquan High School no other high schools in Jingmen city work with either a quota system or differentiated score lines.39

The policies behind admission to high schools are the fundament under rural-urban inequalities in university admissions. They are difficult to circumvent, because young rural students are assigned to primary and middle schools in their area of hukou-registration, a situation that can only be influenced by those with the right connections and the ability

39 The website of Jingmen city stating this information: http://jys.jingmen.gov.cn/e21web/content-139443.html
to pay additional fees. For youths from rural areas, who are assigned to middle schools in small towns, this means that the student quota for key point high schools will make it very difficult for them to enrol in these schools. After having entered ‘normal high school’, only a small percentage of students still manage to defy expectations and obtain test results that get them into a key point university. A comparison between the test results of 2015 reported by Longquan High School and the more average scoring Duodaoshi High School, both located in Jingmen city, quickly makes clear how different the perspectives of the students of these two schools are. In that year in Longquan High School, 144 out of 1100 students scored more than 600 points on the university entrance exam, a score that is high enough to be accepted by one of China’s key point universities. In the same year, in Jingmen’s Duodaoshi High School, two out of 933 students crossed that 600 point line. Additionally, out of the 933 students who took part in the exam in Duodaoshi High School in 2015, 148 students, or 16 percent, scored high enough to enter a non-key point class one university, the highest quality universities after key point universities. In Longquan High School almost 95 percent of the exam-takers, 1038 out of 1100 students, scored high enough for admission to these universities.

A key point high school is to high schools what a key point university is to universities. In the introduction I explained that China’s key point universities are on the receiving ends of the 985- and 211-projects through which billions of renminbi are invested in rapidly improving the quality of the country’s higher education. Key point high schools have a similar history. They are the outcome of a development strategy based upon Deng Xiaoping’s ‘trickle-down theory’: first invest heavily in a small number of areas or institutes to make them economically successful, and then use these economic or educational strongholds to ‘pull up’ those who had been ‘left behind’ (Hua 2015). However, even though it is true that in Jingmen city, for example, high school education in general has become more widely accessible and students from its surrounding rural areas now enrol in larger numbers than ever before, the separation between the key point and other high schools facilitates the continued segregation of urban and rural students within this expansion. It could be said that the second phase of Deng Xiaoping’s idea never materialised. First, the trickle-down theory was used to support very focused investments mainly benefiting the country’s urban population, and then the ‘pulling up’ was never seriously taken up. With the following vignette, I will give some insight into the extent of the difference between students’ experiences in these high schools.

Separate Worlds

After having made multiple visits to two ‘normal high schools’ in Jingmen city, I finally had the chance to go to Longquan High School, the school I had heard so much about. It was the 25th of June 2016, and right in the middle of the busy weeks during which the university fairs on high school campuses were organised. Those who had taken the university entrance exam that year had received their scores, and were now making decisions about their university applications. To help students in their decision-making, high schools organised fairs where different universities could present themselves on the school grounds, and where students could get ideas about the options available to them. I had already visited these fairs at Duodaoshi and Jingmen no.1 High School, two ‘normal high schools’ in Jingmen city. When I visited the Longquan High School campus where I accidentally stumbled onto a small version of these university fairs, held only for this year’s highest scorers.

First of all, when I passed security and walked onto the campus ground of Longquan High School I was immediately struck by the difference between what was in front of me and the high school campuses I had previously visited. The campuses of Jingmen’s no.1 High School and Duodaoshi High School were bare and straight-forward, with paved paths leading to cement, and unadorned buildings with basic facilities for learning and living. Longquan High School’s campus was green and luscious with white stone bridges over meandering water streams, quiet outside seating areas decorated with traditional Chinese woodwork, recently painted school buildings built in an elaborate, traditional Chinese architectural style, and a large, state-of-the-art sports field. Longquan High School was the oldest school in the area, with a history dating back to the Qing dynasty, but its campus was perfectly maintained.

As I walked around I noticed a group of parents crowding around some tables. When I got closer I realised that I had walked into another one of the university fairs I had been busy attending on high school campuses in the last couple of days. Yet this one was very different from the ones I had seen before. Whereas the other university fairs were organised on high school campuses or on nearby sports fields, where droves of students strolled around looking at hundreds of information stands representing universities, this event was clearly not public, only three universities were represented, and parents — not students — were doing all the talking. The three universities that were represented were Wuhan’s two best key point universities [the only two financed by both the 985 and the 211 programme]: Huazhong University of TecUology (HUST) and Wuhan University, and the University

---

40 Please refer to Figure 4 for an overview of the structure of China’s higher education system.
42 Tuition fees for all high schools were largely similar, approximately 1000 RMB per semester (130 euro) including the dorm.
of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (UCAS) located in Beijing, which promoted itself as China's first seven-star university, the newest and highest distinction of all.

As I listened in on what was happening, I soon learned that this event was organised especially for this year’s highest scorers. Most parents stood crowded around the representatives of HUST and Wuhan University, figuring out to which programmes their child’s score would gain them admission. UCAS was less popular for having a very high minimum score of 670 points, a level very few students had reached. Two dads explained to me how they viewed the quality division between different kinds of universities. One said:

You can divide universities into three groups. Group one consists of Qinghua and Beijing University, and also Fudan, Zhejiang and Shanghai Jiaooda, those top universities. Group two consists of Wuhan University and Huazhong University of TecUology, those kinds of local schools. Group 3 are other 985 schools that are also alright, like Hunan University.

I realised they did not even consider those key point universities only funded by the 211 project, only including those 38 universities in China that receive the absolute maximum in terms of government financing. ‘But, who decides which category a school is in?’ I asked. ‘We just know these things from talking to each other. We discuss the histories of different universities, and what kinds of jobs its graduates have. How much money they make... and just... where they work’, the other dad answered. The Wuhan University representative at this event, tired of answering an uncountable amount of questions, confirmed that parents were mostly worried about their child finding a well-paid job after graduation. She said, ‘All the parents ask is: “Which major should my child choose to have a good future? Which major will get my child a good job? Which major will get my child a high salary?” That’s what they are concerned with. So they all want to study finance, or electrical engineering, that kind of thing. Those are the majors that lead to the best-paying jobs now.’

Observing this event was not only interesting because the options these students and their parents considered were so select and different from students in other high schools who reckoned themselves lucky if they could attend a lower-class university. I remembered a student who I had observed the previous day at another university fair, walking from stand to stand, who asked only one question: ‘Do you have any programs I can apply to with 335 points?’ At the Longquan High School fair, the dynamic between students and parents was also very different. Whereas the other university fairs were mainly visited by students, sometimes accompanied by their parents, this meeting was completely dominated by parents. Students were present, but stood at a distance waiting for their parents to collect the information they needed. I thought about how these parents had even divided the top category of China’s key point universities, the 985 project universities, into three categories, whereas one of the two rural students I knew who had entered such a university did so without her parents ever having heard about the 985 project. During a visit to this student’s home village I had asked her mother, with whom she had a warm and loving relationship, about her daughter’s exceptional achievement of gaining admission to such a famous university. When the mother looked surprised, the daughter nudged me not to continue my questioning, muttering: ‘They don’t know what that is... a 985 university’.

When I attended this student’s graduation ceremony in the summer of 2017, I learned that her family members were not in the enormous crowds of friends and family members that filled the university’s large stadium that day. These moments gave me the impression that her parents had not fully understood what a remarkable feat their only daughter had achieved, especially considering how the odds had been stacked against her.

Another way in which this difference in the involvement of rural and urban parents came to expression was during the decision making process leading up to university application. On the day of the university entrance exam in Jingmen city I spoke with a group of parents from Jingmen city in a hotel lobby across the street from the school’s entrance, where their children were taking the exam. Some of their children had stayed the night in this hotel, to be sure that no calamity could keep them from getting to their exam on time in the morning. These parents were extremely well-informed, they knew school rankings and salary indications for different careers by heart and based their expectations for their children’s scores on statistics and the results of previous years’ exams. Rural parents lacking experience with higher education and white-collar careers found it difficult to have these kinds of conversations, leaving them no choice but to resort to trusting their children in making their own decisions. Some rural students regrettfully admitted that this lack of guidance resulted in them not knowing what their major entailed before they started it, and the making of random decisions:

We only chose accountancy because it sounded as if we’d then still be able to make some money. Most of us didn’t even know what accountancy was when we enrolled. (Morning Sunshine’s class-mate)

How I chose my university? I just looked at my score. I mean, I did not have that many options. There was only one class two university in Wuhan that accepted my score: the Hubei University of Education. For my major... I honestly had no idea what it meant. Most people don’t know what they get into before they start. Parents don’t know either. They have never studied at
Chapter 2

Invisible Inequality

In light of these previous sections, some questions may arise. If there are these blatant inequalities, then how do rural youths deal with them and why do rural families keep pushing their children to educate themselves? In this section I will show how China's educational expansion has decreased rural students’ chances of going to China's key point universities, and that rural-urban inequalities have also become more invisible now the question is no longer whether students can go to university, but rather to what kind of university they can go. The murkiness of these differences thicken the veil of meritocracy that hides structural rural-urban inequalities within the system from view.

Scholars have written about both Chinese urban and rural families’ commitment to their children’s education (Tomba 2004; Fong 2004, 2011; Murphy 2014, Kipnis 2001, 2011). This commitment is reflected in the great investments families make in education. A study conducted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) reflects that education expenses are the largest expenditure for Chinese households, trumping both pensions and housing expenditures (Li et al 2011: 524). In conversation with rural parents they often explained their belief in education as being ‘the only way out’ and the key to their children’s ‘better life’. Taking into account the centrality of the city in China’s vision of development, it is not surprising that people who have spent the last few decades in the Chinese countryside, watching their country change and prosper from the sidelines, have started to feel as if they are stuck in the past and wish for their children to play a part in their country’s future. Education is seen as a pathway to this future. These ideas were put to me by the aforementioned retired middle school teacher in the following way:

I taught for decades in schools in the countryside. Those children have to study well in order to develop and have future perspectives. If they don’t, they will just stay there, where they have no future. If they do well enough, they will find a job somewhere eventually. Some of the students from those places now even go abroad. And a lot of them you can find all over China. They have good jobs, they are doing well! One of my previous students is now a manager of a China Mobile store in Shanghai. Without education, he would not have had this opportunity. It makes us teachers happy to know that they are doing so well.

During my research I found that this idea of education as a bridge between the rural, ‘where they have no future’, and the urban was the dominant narrative used by rural parents and teachers when they explained why they wanted their children to go to university. These ideas were connected to the strong belief in education for development and the meritocratic nature of the Chinese education system. Being able to gain educational credentials through honest, hard work held a huge promise for Chinese rural families who had long been excluded from the story of Chinese growth and progress. But how come the structural limitations on rural youths’ access to higher education were so little understood and discussed?

The Chinese university entrance exam – a crucial vehicle for producing rural-urban inequalities – has the general reputation in Chinese society as an institute promoting equality by giving a fair opportunity to all. Yet this reputation does not correspond with the views of scholars who have long pointed out the exam’s potential to exacerbate inequality. Kwong, for example, already argued in 1983 that the popular phrase ‘Everybody is equal before the system of grades’ is false. She found that parents’ social position and privileged access to educational resources had a profound effect on children’s educational achievement and access to higher education (Ross & Wang 2010). More recently, Zachary Howlett studied the exam as an important tool in the ‘fabrication of fairness’ (Howlett 2017). Yet, despite the existence of these critical views, and as also shown by these studies, people in Chinese society still view the exam as a cornerstone of meritocracy. For example, speaking with parents waiting in front of a Jingmen High School while their children were taking the university entrance exam outside, it was clear that they viewed this test as a moment of ‘fairness’. After their children had walked through the school gates, the parents stood silently, holding up their umbrellas to protect themselves from the drizzle that descended upon them, their eyes filled with a mix of hope and fear. They saw the test as decisive, not only of their children’s futures, but also of their future as a family, and a rare moment when it did not matter who you were and where you came from, as long as you filled in the right answers. In conversation with the retired middle school teacher, he also echoed
this sentiment: ‘In China there’s a lot of corruption, but at least the exam is fair’, he said. In the Chinese media the exam is even said to be especially important for rural students, since for them, in contrast to urban students who are seen as having multiple ways of achieving success, it is considered their only opportunity to effect real change in their lives (for example, Qu Bowen in the China Daily, November 23, 2012). THERE ARE DIFFERENT UNIVERSITY ENTRANCE EXAMS THAT STUDENTS CAN TAKE. STUDENTS TAKE THE EXAM THAT CORRESPONDS WITH THE HIGH SCHOOL TRACK THEY HAVE FOLLOWED, BEING SCIENCE, LIBERAL ARTS OR ARTS. THE STRUCTURE OF THE EXAM IS OFTEN DESCRIBED AS 3 + X. THE THREE STANDS FOR THE REQUIRED SUBJECTS: CHINESE, MATHEMATICS AND ENGLISH, AND THE X FOR THE ELECTIVE COMPONENTS: FOR EXAMPLE, BIOLOGY, CHEMISTRY AND PHYSICS FOR SCIENCE STUDENTS, AND GEOGRAPHY, HISTORY AND POLITICS FOR LIBERAL ARTS STUDENTS. IN 2016 IT WAS NO LONGER POSSIBLE TO OBJECTIVELY ‘FAIL’ THE UNIVERSITY ENTRANCE EXAM. SOME ZHUANKE INSTITUTES HAD VERY LOW SCORE LINES THAT WERE ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO GO UNDER, SO ON PAPER EVERYBODY WHO TAKES THE EXAM SHOULD BE ABLE TO FIND A SCHOOL THAT ACCEPTS THEM. OF COURSE, STUDENTS OFTEN SET AN AIM; FOR EXAMPLE, PASSING THE SCORE LINE FOR CLASS ONE UNIVERSITIES, AND THEY CAN FAIL TO ACHIEVE THEIR GOAL. THE COMPLEXITIES THAT HAVE ARISEN FROM STUDENTS BEING ABLE TO PASS THE EXAM TO DIFFERENT DEGREES, INSTEAD OF JUST PASSING OR FAILING, REQUIRES A MORE SOPHISTICATED UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHINESE EDUCATION SYSTEM TO INTERPRET EXAM RESULTS, MAKING THE STRUCTURAL EXCLUSION OF RURAL STUDENTS FROM HIGH-QUALITY EDUCATION HARDER TO SEE. ADDITIONALLY, THE VEIL OF MERITOCRACY OVER THIS EDUCATION SYSTEM HELD UP BY THE FOCUS ON ‘OBJECTIVE’ EXAMS AND TEST SCORES TAKES THE FOCUS AWAY FROM STRUCTURAL DIFFERENCES, AND PUTS FORWARD A READING OF YOUTH’S ‘FAILURES’ AS A RESULT OF THEIR PERSONAL SHORTCOMINGS.

The point of students no longer being able to fail the exam is important. It shows that the exam no longer decides whether students can go to university, but merely to what kind of university they can go. The development that has contributed greatly to the invisibility of rural-urban inequalities in the Chinese higher education system follows the explosive expansion of this education system. The students who enrol in university have risen sharply. In 1977, the year the exam was reinstated after having been cancelled for eleven years during Mao’s cultural revolution, it was rare for anybody to get into university. That year, 5.7 million people took the exam and less than five percent, 278,000 students, gained admission to a university (Barendsen 1979: 10). In 2018, 9.7 million people took the exam and, aside from the students who decided to re-take the last year of high school to aim for a higher score or who chose to join the army, all of these students were expected to find a place in a university. Yet, of course, many millions of these exam-takers, and especially those from rural areas, will enrol in lower-segment institutes that might not offer them the opportunity for learning and future social mobility they hoped for when they set out on their educational journey. In addition to rural youths’ restricted access to high-scoring high schools, there are other mechanisms that are part of the process of university application and that are important to understand how rural-urban differences are produced, including the student quota system and the area protection policy, which I will briefly explain here.

**THE STUDENT QUOTA SYSTEM AND THE AREA PROTECTION POLICY**

In Hubei province, the university application process worked as follows in 2016. After students receive their exam scores, they submit a ranked list of the nine universities they wish to apply for online. For each university they include in their ranking, they need to fill in six majors of interest, again ranked from first to sixth choice. There is a real science to making these decisions. Students have to think beyond their personal desires, and calculate their chances of being admitted to universities based on their knowledge of previous years’ student quotas and score lines. Next, every year in late July, all universities in China receive a student quota from the central government’s Ministry of Education that specifies four points:

- **Point 1:** The number of students that the university must recruit per faculty and per major.
- **Point 2:** The number of students the university must recruit per province of origin (specified per major, for example, major: English. Total to be recruited: 50. From Hubei province: 30. From Henan province: 3. From Yunnan province: 5. And so forth.)
- **Point 3:** The differentiated scores lines universities must implement, depending on the province students are recruited from.
- **Point 4:** The tuition fees the university must charge per major.

I argue in this dissertation that the interaction between this student quota system and a policy called the ‘area protection policy’, which is not discussed in the literature, now forms the foundation of rural-urban inequalities in the Chinese higher education system. This is because this interaction creates the difference between the student quotas of the key point universities and all other universities — including class one, class two, class three and zhuankan universities. This policy determines that all non-key point universities, which

---


44 To see an example of such a student quota, please see Appendix One.

45 Area protection policy is my own translation. The Chinese name of this policy is 高校地域保护政策.
number 118 out of 123 universities in Hubei province, have to recruit a high percentage of their students from the province they are located in. For example, in 2017 Hubei province’s University of Education, which is a typical middle-sized class two university in Wuhan that some of my interlocutors graduated from, had to recruit 2933 students in total, of which 2175 students (74 percent) were to be recruited from Hubei province. At the same time, Hubei province’s key point universities, which are the national universities directly overseen by the national Ministry of Education, are not affected by this policy and therefore admit a much lower percentage of local students. For example, in 2017 Wuhan University recruited 1577 out of 7200 students (22 percent) from Hubei province. With only five of Hubei province’s 123 institutes of higher education being key point universities, it is clear that the area protection policy affects the student quotas of the great majority of Hubei institutes, working as an invisible wall around the province’s higher education system.

For rural students, who are generally lower-scoring and of which the great majority enrol in non-key point universities with student quotas shaped by the area protection policy, this policy is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it improves their access to higher education within the province. But, on the other hand, the existence of this policy also strengthens the separation between the non-key point and the key point universities, from which they subsequently remain largely shut out. It improves their access to higher education vis-a-vis rural students in Chinese provinces with fewer educational resources, but it also increases the distance between rural and urban students within Hubei province. Policy adjustments in this regard might be more meaningful for the future of rural-urban equality than the much more discussed adjustments to the Chinese hukou-system.

This brings me to the next section of this chapter in which I will show that what is really important for the shaping of social relations is access to China’s key point universities, not only because these universities give access to jobs, but also because of the status and the networks that come with being educated in these institutes. Having said that, I will also describe how there are still mechanisms of exclusion that the small segment of rural youths who do gain access to key point universities have to deal with.

**Why Should They Eat From Our Bowls?**

In June 2016 parents in Wuhan took to the streets in an outrage. They protested in reaction to an announcement by the Ministry of Education about a reshuffling in the division of educational resources. Parents feared that the announced future greater allocation of resources to students from western China’s poorer autonomous regions would result in reduced access to quality education for their own children. In reaction, they gathered in droves in front of the Hubei provincial bureau, where they chanted: ‘Head of the bureau, come outside!’ and ‘Fairness in education!’ In the days that followed pictures and videos of this protest, as well as others like it that had happened around the country, circulated on weixin, a very popular Chinese social media application. The videos featured protesting parents as well as officials pleading with angry crowds. There were even videos showing violent clashes between parents and police, with parents being dragged away into police vans. Within a few days’ time, the protest against the redivision of educational resources spread to two dozen Chinese cities, and soon after a counter-protest was also organised where parents from poorer regions demanded ‘equal love’, or better access to education, for their children. In essence, the original protesters and the counter-protesters wanted the same thing: better access to high-quality education for their children, and both parties resorted to developmentalist ideologies to defend the legitimacy of their claims. Whereas parents from poorer areas argued that it was time for wealthier regions to ‘share their wealth’, parents in Wuhan claimed it was unfair that they had to share so much while citizens in China’s wealthiest cities, Beijing and Shanghai, shared so little. The chants and arguments protesters used illustrate that ideas about fairness in access to education are based on ideas about belonging and deservedness, and that the higher education system is a site where citizens’ inclusion into and exclusion from particular segments of society is negotiated. Moreover, the fact that so many parents protested, despite the threat of police violence, shows that the division of educational resources is a hot political issue in China.47

The protesting parents asked why it was ‘from their bowl’ that the students from China’s poorer regions had to be fed. They felt that a disproportionate number of the new students had been assigned to their provinces. The national Ministry of Education had announced that the number of admissions for students from poorer, mainly western regions of China, had to be increased by 140,000 students. Hubei and Jiangsu provinces, both famous for being ‘big education provinces’, were respectively assigned 40,000 and 38,000 extra students, more than any other province. Shanghai, for example, was only assigned 5,000 extra students. In addition to the large number of students assigned to their province, parents also resented the ‘unfair competition’, especially in regards to the coveted spaces in their top institutes, which implement a much lower score line for students from poorer regions than for their own children. They reacted to the perceived threat to their own children’s opportunities in the education system, fearing that more space in the quota for ‘outsiders’ would bring down the chances of their own children being accepted into these institutes.

46 Link to information about Wuhan University student quota: www.sohu.com/a/146854320_355684

47 These protests were reported on in the New York Times on June 11th, 2016: www.nytimes.com/2016/06/12/world/asia/china-higher-education-for-the-poor-protests.html
The arguments parents used in their protest against this redivision of educational resources illustrated that their ideas about fairness in terms of access to education were intertwined with ideas about local citizenship and entitlement to resources. The way the student quotas work, identifying how many students should be recruited per province, inspires people to think about educational resources as belonging to the province. Even though, for example, key point universities are mainly funded by the national government through the 985 and the 211 programme, these universities still have a strong provincial and city identity. As a result, Wuhanese parents feel that their children should be the ones given privileged access to the key point institutes in their city. In the discussion about the changes in student quotas in the Chinese media, there was a strong focus on the perceived threat of reduced access for urban locals into these universities. And, in statements made by the local government, much emphasis was put on the promise that key point institutes would not be affected by these changes. In the comments sections of newspaper articles in which these issues were discussed, some people argued that the provinces with relatively large amounts of educational resources at their disposal should be more gracious about sharing their wealth with their poorer fellow Chinese, but others maintain that it is unfair for those students in Hubei and Jiangsu province, for whom it is already hard enough to test into a good university, to have to share such a disproportionate amount of their resources.

Interestingly, whereas these parents felt very threatened by the influx of students from outside of Hubei province into the Hubei higher education system, they were not at all concerned about the growing number of students from rural Hubei province. The reason for this is simple: score lines are maintained at the level of the province. This means that whereas students from outside of Hubei province can be accepted into Hubei universities with scores ‘lower’ than local students, rural and urban students in Hubei province have to cross the same lines. Since people generally know that rural students are grossly disadvantaged in this competition, and are thus easily outcompeted in the race for the most desired positions by their urban counterparts, they are not considered a threat to the success of urban students. Even those students who were born in rural-urban migrant families in the cities do not threaten urban dominance in the education system, since they can only take part in the university entrance exam in their area of hukou-registration, which means that they have no choice but to attend a high school in the ‘home area’. The students from outside of the province who compete for enrolment in universities in Hubei province have to be very high scorers in their own province in order to stand a chance, which means that the majority of these students will have attended the better, urban high schools in their own provinces. And, even though the strongest reaction to these changes came from parents in Wuhan, it is likely that these outer-province students will also worsen the access to higher education for Hubei province’s rural students.

During the protest the idea of ‘fairness’ was raised by all sides. There were people who claimed that it was unfair for students from Hubei to have different score lines from their outer-province competitors, even though university entrance exams differ per province and scores can therefore not be compared between exam-takers from different provinces. It was also felt as unfair that Hubei and Jiangsu province had to ‘contribute so much to the development of China’s western regions’, whereas China’s most affluent cities did not. Finally, there were the parents from poorer regions who were protesting for the redivision of resources, asking for better access to education for their children, with signs saying ‘fair education’. In these pleas, different ideas about what should be considered fair resulted from speakers basing their beliefs on different, sometimes conflicting ideologies. Whereas the socialist egalitarian model at the centre of pre-reform politics promoted education as a means for achieving equality, the post-reform liberal competitive model looks at the education system as a meritocratic and competitive system that puts the right people in the right places (Hannum 1999). Shifting between these two ideologies seems to be crucial to

---


49 I emphasise again: scores between provinces cannot be compared because they use different tests. Yet, the score lines for students from these provinces are often objectively lower, as in lower in number.
the strategy of the Chinese state for negotiating the clash between education’s tendency to deepen inequalities and its promise to mitigate them. While educational expansion is promoted as a measure for reducing inequalities, those inequalities that subsequently arise are explained away by referring to the liberal competitive model which, in combination with the education for development ideology, turns inequalities into temporary differences between spaces and people due to their being located within different stages of development. Those parents from poorer regions asking for better access to education for their children refer exactly to this notion of phased-out development, made popular by Deng Xiaoping, saying that the eastern and coastal regions were the first to receive investment and have now become wealthier; therefore they should ‘pull up’ the poorer regions. At the same time, those in Hubei province base their argument that Beijing and Shanghai should take a leadership role in providing educational resources for poorer areas on the same logic. Finally, the emphasis on ‘fair competition’ and equal score lines is interesting and illustrates how China’s university entrance exam is still perceived as an important pillar upholding China’s meritocratic education system, despite the fact that Chinese scholars widely agree that it is ‘unfair’.

Tensions clearly exist between those who consider themselves to be ‘local’ in cities and who feel that they should have privileged access to education, and those who are not yet local and who see education as an important vehicle for becoming local. This kind of dynamic is neither unique to China nor this era, and has long been described by scholars interested in higher education as a site of in- and exclusion (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977; Archer, Hutchings & Ross 2003). Bourdieu’s assertion about the special importance of school systems for concealing the reproduction of class relations in societies that frown upon the hereditary transmission of power and privilege sheds some light upon why the Chinese education system currently plays such a central role in forming social relations. As I will further explain in the next chapter, educational credentials have become especially important in the urban Chinese labour market ever since the liberalisation of this labour market during the reform era. Now the existing elite can no longer rely on the state to safeguard their strong position in society, higher education has become an important alternative means for class-reproduction.

What is particular in this Chinese case is that the way in which the higher education system works to reproduce class is intricately intertwined with the greater social transformation of the country, especially in regards to its shrinking agrarian sector in terms of its share of the country’s labour population as well as the rapid growth of the proportion of the country’s population living in cities. It is now quite common in China’s largest cities for half of the population to have a recent background of rural-urban migration. In light of this sudden co-habitation following decades of high rural-urban mobility, the higher education system plays an important role in translating the long-existing hierarchical power relations between the country’s rural and urban people into class relationships in the urban environment.

External and Internal Exclusion
In the previous chapter I described the symbolic rural-urban divide that paints rural and urban people as being of different ‘quality’ and stigmatises ‘the rural’ as being less developed. In this chapter, I want to show how this symbolic division further inhibits education migrants’ ascent through the higher education system and fosters feelings of unworthiness in these youths, leading to their self-exclusion. Of course, these two processes can strengthen one another. When youth who already have low self-esteem have to assert themselves in an environment where they feel stigmatised for being ‘rural’, the challenge can feel so big that they rather choose to give up and go back to an environment where they feel more easily accepted.

Xi’s departure
This happened, for instance, to Xi, a student who was one of those rare students who enrolled in a ‘dream school’ – a key point university in Beijing – despite having attended a ‘normal high school’ in Jingmen city, and who subsequently dropped out. He told me:

We took the gaokao exam in June, I think it was June 6th or 7th. Around June 20th we got our results. I was in our village, so I didn’t have internet and couldn’t check. I asked a friend to help me check for me. He told me it was 606. I was just jumping. I did not even realise I was jumping. I had expected to have reached about 590, and all I wanted was to go over the yishenxian (line for class 1 universities). My score was the 6th highest in the whole school. My parents were really happy. Later, when I got the news that I was accepted by the Beijing University of Agriculture, they threw a big banquet for me. (Xi)

Unfortunately, Xi’s great success quickly turned into sour disappointment after university started. He did not like his original major, electronic and information engineering, and switched to machine manufacturing, a major he found only slightly more interesting. He had difficulty making friends and felt very lonely in Beijing. He often skipped classes to spend his days playing computer games. When I visited Xi in the spring of 2016 on his university campus in Beijing, I was surprised to find him in a very depressed state. He had been introduced to me in Hougang town a few months earlier as the guy who had gotten this amazing score that allowed him to go to this dream university. His friends had boasted
cheerfully about his incredible accomplishment. But it turned out that the experience of it all had not been as glamorous as Xi had hoped. He explained:

> It might sound successful when people hear that you go to a big 985 / 211 university in Beijing, but I learned that the ranking and reputation of your university are really not that important. It’s important what you do there, who you are with, what your time in the university is like. Maybe it’ll give me some advantages later... on the labour market, but that does not compare to having a good university experience. I don’t think it’s been worth it. My friends in Wuhan were able to meet each other, go out for meals. They could meet up and spend time in each other’s company, I really wanted to do that, too. If I could choose again, I’d want to go to a school in Wuhan, I’m 100 percent sure of that. I just wanted to be closer to home. I haven’t been very comfortable here. I don’t like the food and I have very few friends here. (Xi)

Xi did not plan to find a job in machine manufacturing after his graduation: ‘I just don’t want to do it. The field doesn’t interest me whatsoever.’ Looking back, he wished he had studied English in a language university, but at the time when he was making decisions regarding his future he did not have the insight he needed. He said:

> I think it is important that you’re asking these questions. To figure out why we make all these decisions regarding our education. Because I myself also really don’t know why we do. And I know that many young people wonder why they do. I’ve seen online discussions about this, asking why we spend so much time and energy on our studies while we feel like we’re not learning anything we find even remotely interesting. I don’t know why we do it. Maybe it is because of the hopes of our families. If you look at our families, all the way back... parents, grandparents... nobody has ever gone to university. I am the first one to go. If you then get that kind of opportunity, you feel like you have to go for it. (Xi)

Shortly after we met and before he was supposed to graduate Xi disappeared from his university campus. For months, he could not be reached and his friends worried about his wellbeing. All conversations started with: ‘Have you heard from Xi yet?’ Finally there was word from him saying that he was working as a car mechanic in Guangzhou, a large city in the south of China, and that he was never going to graduate.

Xi had described two sets of problems during our meeting in Beijing. The first problem was that he did not manage to turn his high score into a successful university career, because beyond focusing on scoring high, he had never tried to explore where he might want to go with his life. When he filled in his university application form, he put down Ligong University as his first choice. Looking back, Xi admitted he knew nothing about that university, but liked the pictures of its architecture he saw online. Even when we spoke on the university campus, Xi still seemed quite lost in terms of knowing what might make for a viable future strategy. He spoke about writing about sports and video games or becoming an English tutor, even though he had not spoken English in a long time and did not feel like he remembered much of what he had once known. Xi’s parents were farmers who had encouraged him to choose engineering, thinking it was major that would result in a well-paying job. Xi had never felt interested in this field. The lack of thought that went into his university career caused this very promising student to suffer in silence through his time at university and to leave without a degree. Xi’s second problem had been of a social nature. As I described in the previous chapter, it is not always easy for ‘phoenix boys’, those young men who are perceived as having risen from the ashes of the countryside to the heights of the urban university, to blend in on the university campus. Xi went from a high school where nearly all his classmates came from a similar background to a university where he was surrounded by students from different, and mainly urban, backgrounds. He felt very lonely throughout his years on campus, with nobody keeping track of his life and studies, and unable to make any friends. In the end, Xi’s exclusion by others in his university environment led him to radically self-exclude. He left, without a degree, to give up on the ideas that had once seemed so attractive and become a labour migrant after all.

**Feelings of Failure**

The girls in Morning Sunshine’s dormitory described themselves as ‘having failed’ while they were still studying, referring to their performance in high school. For my interlocutors to describe themselves in this way was rather common. Having enrolled in lower segment universities meant they had not scored very high on the university entrance exam, which was something they carried with them throughout the years as proof of ‘being failures’. Students and parents remembered the exact number of points scored on the university entrance exam even years later. This score was considered to have had a pivotal influence on life developments after high school and was sometimes described like a medical diagnosis rather than as an exam result. Those students who considered themselves to ‘have failed’ on the exam felt undeserving of future opportunities because of this. To them, their score was objective proof of their being either ‘stupid’, or ‘lazy’, or ‘all about having a good time’. Research on what is called ‘high stake testing’ warns against the psychological effect of these tests, which are said to take a great psychological toll on students, including negatively
affecting their self-esteem (Polesel, Dulfer & Turnbull 2012). According to media reports, the 2014 Annual Report on China’s Education also claims that there is a link between the Chinese culture of exams and youth suicides. In this section I will demonstrate that the veil of objectivity that hides structural inequalities and emphasises self-responsibility, and which is produced by constant testing and scoring, results in education migrants feeling defeated and undeserving of better opportunities. This has significant consequences for the way these youths envision their position in urban society and thus for the way rural-urban relations take shape in the urban environment.

In addition to the university entrance exam, the general focus on testing and ranking within the Chinese education system also caused students to interpret their study results as an objective measure of their ‘quality’. In the previous section I described how Chinese high schools can be very different from one another. When I visited high schools in different parts of Hubei, I learned that students were very aware of the status of their high school, and its connection to the way they had performed in middle school, including on the high school entrance exam, and that their understanding of their school’s status influenced the way they imagined their futures. In fact, it would have been difficult for students not to know exactly what kind of path the school in which they were enrolled was likely to roll out for them. Outside of the school gates enormous posters showcasing last year’s test results were on display and on campus there were many displays showing previous years’ results, as well as plaques celebrating the school’s most successful students.

Daye High School, a school in a poor rural township hundred kilometres southwest of Wuhan, was the school Morning Sunshine attended. On average, students in this school scored very low and it was rare that any of this school’s graduates tested ‘over the Bachelor line’. As the teacher kept saying apologetically, ‘This school is very, very bad. Really very, very bad. Only students with low scores enrol here’ (Teacher at Daye High School).

Morning Sunshine had been one of the better students in her class, but even after retaking the last year of high school she only crossed the score line for admittance to a zhuanke school. In high school classes it is common to find only students who want to go to university. Since the start of high school enrolment marks the end of nine years of compulsory education, it only makes sense for those who want to continue into higher education to invest in high school tuition fees. This was also true for the students who I met in Daye High School. All forty students, except from one boy who wanted to join the army, raised their hands when I asked, ‘Who wants to go to university?’ Of course, these students also knew about their school being ‘bad’, and their understanding of how that affected their prospects was reflected in what they indicated would be their majors of choice. In the three Jingmen city high schools I visited I noticed that many students were interested in studying finance, which was considered the major that offered the best chance of landing a well-paid job and one of the more difficult majors to gain acceptance into. I asked different classes in Jingmen high schools which major students were most interested, and heard ‘finance!’ chanted back at me from all corners of the room. Yet, when I asked the same question in Morning Sunshine’s Daye High School, students answered: music, English, dancing, kung fu, acting, history and computer science. Surprised by these answers, I asked these students whether they were not interested in studying finance, when a boy immediately joked: ‘Our IQ is not high enough for that. We are too stupid!’, sending a roar of laughter through the classroom. Yet his joke made it clear that students were able to calculate which options for enrolment would be available for them after the university entrance exam, and already took their pick out of those majors that were accessible for low-scoring students.

---

Students could not only predict their own performance based upon their knowledge of how their school had historically scored, but also on their personal ranking within the high school. Most schools divide their students into different classes based on their study results. These classes were referred to as 'rocket class' for the top scorers, 'A class', 'B class', and 'normal class'. Within the classes students were again divided into different levels, with the seating plan in the classroom sometimes based upon the class ranking. Despite China's educational policies claiming the country's turn towards 'quality education', a shift that is supposed to encourage a more holistic approach to education with less focus on tests and rankings (Dello-Lacovo 2009), all the schools I went to were still extremely test-driven. The constant testing and ranking did not only have a significant effect on students' ideas about what was reasonable for them to expect in terms of future opportunities, as illustrated by the responses in Daye High School, but also on their expectations regarding what kind of university they would be able to enrol in. One afternoon on the campus of Duodaoshi High School, the 'normal high school' in Jingmen city where only two out of 933 students scored over 600 points in 2015, I sat on the curb surrounded by at least 25 students as we talked about their studies and expectations of the future. I asked them what university they hoped to get into, when a girl said in a bold tone: 'Wuhan University!' to give rise to an immediate burst of laughter that rang throughout the whole group. Surprised by this strong reaction I asked them, 'What is this? Why are you all laughing?' The same girl, still smiling, answered: 'Because we can never go there, we can not get that kind of score.'

Students constantly being confronted with scores and rankings played into what Pierre Bourdieu (1974) calls the 'ideology of giftedness' that forms the cornerstone of the social and educational system. This ideology suggests that students owe their social fate 'to their individual nature and their lack of gifts', and exists in connection to the idea that different social groups having different relationships to schools. The position of what Bourdieu refers to as 'the dominant classes' is legitimised and reproduced by schools, while the relatively underprivileged classes, for whom it is more difficult to obtain educational capital, have their status confirmed by this lack of capital (ibid.: 42; in Harker 1990: 94). Being endlessly reminded of their bad performance in high school tempers rural students' expectations of their future and nurtures the belief that they are personally responsible for whichever future they are moving towards.

Students’ expectations were also shaped by their peers and family members. I observed a moment in which this occurred when I traveled to a wedding in rural Hubei with Anna, who is a graduate of Jingmen Number 1 High School (a school similar in results to Duodaoshi High School). During the wedding we met her younger cousin who was about to graduate from a middle school in one of the Jingmen county-level cities. As we chatted about her education I noticed that Anna tried to temper her cousin's expectations for the future. When the cousin shyly admitted that she hoped to go to Wuhan University, Anna reacted promptly, doing away with her cousins dream:

It is very, very hard to get into a university like that. That's very unlikely to happen. But, there are also many other good universities, and... it really doesn't matter so much. The class two and class three universities are also good. It would be better if you got into a class two... But, these schools are all good schools, there are many good schools in Wuhan. The only difference is that some have access to some more funds than others, but don't worry, class two and class three universities are also good... It would be best if you got into a class two university, because their fees are lower than those in class three (Anna).

Without any insight into her cousin's study results, Anna knew that there was no possibility for her cousin to go to Wuhan University. She encouraged her younger cousin to change her expectations in the same way as she had adjusted her own just a few years earlier. She also familiarised her cousin with the narrative that is often heard in lower-segment universities and that takes away the emphasis from the structure, putting it on the individual: 'It does not matter, all schools are similar, as long as you work hard, you will be successful'.

Conclusion
This chapter dissects how the various segments of China's stratified higher education intersect with existing rural-urban inequalities and work to reproduce these inequalities in urban society. It shows that it is important for scholars to study educational expansion critically, demonstrating that not every educational trajectory is worthwhile, and that in some cases education can not only deplete families' savings, but also damage youths' confidence and self-image. The feeling of failing in a meritocratic system leaves rural students feeling academically inferior to their urban peers for having been unable to achieve better results. In China, the great expansion of the country’s higher education system has also led to further stratification of the higher education system, which has not only reduced rural youths’ access to key point universities, but has also made rural-urban inequalities in access to education more invisible.

Inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's studies of the role of education systems in the production of class, this chapter demonstrates that the Chinese higher education system is not only a vehicle driving rural-urban migration, but also works to translate long-existing rural-
urban hierarchical social dynamics into urban societies where people who were previously classified as belonging to either the rural or the urban now share the urban environment. In this new reality educational credentials have become one of multiple mechanisms of in- and exclusion, drawing a line between in- and outsiders in the city. Access to a key point university is not only important for being able to compete on the liberalised Chinese labour market, but also for gaining valuable networks and status. The protest that erupted in reaction to recent news about the reshuffling of educational resources demonstrated that privileged access to educational resources is considered crucial for maintaining a dominant social position by those who currently enjoy this privilege.

To better understand how rural youths’ disadvantaged position within the Chinese higher education system affects rural-urban relations in urban society, in the next chapter I will describe education migrants’ experiences in the urban labour market.
CHAPTER

White-Collar Hustling
Chapter 3
White-Collar Hustling

理想总是丰满的，现实总是骨感的
ideals are always full, reality is always skinny

(Julia’s diary, August 2016)

Julia wrote this phrase in her diary as she was going through a tumultuous stage in her career. In February 2016 she had left her first job with a Shanghai clothing brand after having worked there for a little under a year to take a job with an ‘internet finance’ company in Shenzhen. After having been in this job for only two months, she figured out that her boss, who had promised to cut her into the profits of this new venture, could not be trusted. She was left with no option but to quit without pay. She found her next job, with a bridal fashion brand in Guangzhou, through a previous class-mate. It started with promising conditions, but turned sour when this employer also failed to keep the promises she had made. Feeling desperately disappointed, Julia moved back to Shenzhen again. This time she was going to work in sales for an education company selling English language learning courses. Julia had a knack for sales and made a small fortune within a few months of selling these courses, before another disagreement between her and her employer put a stop to this career. Julia’s job mobility was far from exceptional. The speed with which she changed jobs was common among many of my interlocutors. Yet Julia was more daring than most in the way she fearlessly moved between cities, determined to find a job that would make her financially independent and enable her to support her family.

Building upon previous chapters that described education migrants’ mobility, desire for stability, and limited access to the higher education system, this chapter provides insight into the tension that exists between these three nodes. Youth try to achieve stability through labour, but their precarious position in the labour market resulting from their restricted access to high quality higher education means that they experience hyper-mobility in a hire-and-fire system. Connecting with debates on the Chinese labour market and the employment situation of China’s university graduates, this chapter offers unique ethnographic descriptions of the employment experiences of China’s education migrants, answering often-posed questions about the employability of these youths and the reasons behind their constant ‘job-hopping’.

This chapter focuses on those education migrants who I describe as ‘white-collar hustlers’, a category that most of my interlocutors fell into at least some of the time. What I mean by this category is youth who work with zero job security in the large sales sector, where wages are largely commission-based.51 This chapter argues that whereas informal labour — which is known to make up a very large and growing part of the Chinese workforce — is generally considered as a form of employment common among the lowly educated and, in China, rural labour migrants, has also become the most prevalent form of employment among China’s education migrants (Cooke 2008; Park & Cai 2011). According to the International Labour Organisation, labour is ‘informal’ when it is characterised by a lack of stability and security (Park & Cai 2011). In this chapter I use the term to mean that workers have no formal labour contract or access to ‘the five insurances’, the term commonly used to refer to the five compulsory labour-related social insurances under the Chinese labour law, which include pension and medical, unemployment, maternity, and work-related insurances.52 In practice, it also means that workers do not know how long they may hold onto a job and can be suddenly let go without reason or pay, and that when problems at work occur they can be subject to (spontaneous) fines, penalties or salary cuts.

A job is considered ‘white-collar’ when it does not involve manual labour. These jobs are set in an office environment, involve computer work, and are considered higher in the status hierarchy than the sectors rural-urban labour migrants have long been active in, including factory, construction and domestic work. Through working in white-collar jobs, education migrants feel that they have achieved upward social mobility in relation to their lesser-educated peers, even if their remuneration, including wages and commissions, do not exceed those of labour migrants (Ye, Gindling & Li 2015). Working in these jobs means they no longer belong to the category of workers (gongren, in Chinese), which used to refer to rural labourers in the city who work in manual jobs. Yet despite this self-perceived status mobility, working in white-collar jobs does not protect education migrants from experiencing precariousness in ways similar to those described in the literature on rural-urban labour migrants in China (Solinger 1999; Keung Wong et al 2007; Zhan 2011).

The two bodies of literature on the Chinese labour market most relevant to this chapter consist of discussions about the informalisation of the Chinese labour market and the rural-urban divide within this labour market. Overall, there is strong agreement among scholars that the Chinese labour market has seen rapid informalisation since the start of the reform era. With the exact definition of this term being somewhat murky and statistics not very reliable, estimates vary, but often go as a high as, and higher than, 50 percent of

---

51 One of the meanings of ‘to hustle’ is to engage in illegal activity. This is not how I use this term in this dissertation. I rather use it to emphasise youths’ hard work and constant efforts, as well as their having to deal with rapid changes in an unsafe and precarious work environment.

the urban labour market being ‘informal’ (e.g. Park & Cai 2011; Lee & Kofman 2012; Zhou 2013). Overall, these studies note that informalisation is a result of the privatisation of the Chinese labour market and the disassembly of many state-owned enterprises, as well as increased rural-urban mobility. The reintroduction of the labour contract system is considered one of the greatest changes of the Chinese reform period (Zhu & Dowling 2000). Before reform, urban workers had been employed in the work unit system, in which they worked for state-owned companies that were responsible for providing both lifelong employment and all the services they needed, including education for their children, health care and pensions. When state-owned companies started to privatise, urban workers, who were generally under-educated and unskilled, had to start competing with rural workers for badly paid and flexible jobs on the labour market (Solinger 2002). Yan Yunxiang, who wrote about the individualisation of Chinese society, called this introduction of the private labour market, which marked the ending of the state monopoly on resource allocation, the most radical shift that led to the further (institutional) individualisation of China (2010: 496). Following this gradual withdrawal by the state, job allocation programmes for university graduates were cancelled in the late 1990s. University graduates were now also responsible for finding their own way into society and studying at a university no longer meant definite job security (Obendick 2016).

In her study conducted in Wuhan in 1999 and 2000, Dorothy Solinger shows that in the early years of state withdrawal there was a real moment of competition between the urban ‘laid-off’ and rural-urban migrants (2002). Yet this moment proved short-lived and today a significant rural-urban divide exists in the urban Chinese labour market in terms of occupational attainment as well as wages (Meng & Zhang 2001; Demurger et al 2009; Meng 2012). It has also been noted that rural workers work without a labour contract more often than urban workers (Cheng, Smyth & Guo 2015). It is only logical that educational credentials have become more important in the Chinese labour market since competition for jobs has replaced the system of state job allocations (Walder, Li & Treiman 2000). In reaction to this development, both rural and urban parents have started investing heavily in their children's education. Yet, as this chapter will show, these investments have reaped differentiated results, since rural citizens’ limited access to high-quality higher education means their degrees do not allow them to penetrate the urban labour market beyond the level of doing informal, white-collar labour.

In this chapter, I demonstrate that informal labour arrangements are not only prevalent among the less-educated (Cooke 2008; Park & Cai 2011), but that it is also the main form of employment among education migrants. This chapter shows that having a university degree from a university in the lower segment of the Chinese higher education system does not protect education migrants from difficult labour conditions, including long hours, low pay, and a lack of labour security. In reaction to those studies that ‘count years of schooling’ (e.g. Meng 2012), this chapter demonstrates that following the stratification of the Chinese education system, it has become increasingly important to differentiate between education credentials, since the position of graduates from one of China's key point universities really cannot be compared to those of zhuanke-graduates. Recognising this difference is important in order to not be blind-sighted by the false statistical equalities created by rural youths’ increased access to the lower segments of the Chinese higher education system. With its ethnographic approach, this chapter also makes another important contribution. In recent years, there have been many data-driven analyses that have measured the employment situation of Chinese youths, or ‘the labour market consequences of a supply-shock’, as the title of an article by Knight et al (2017) puts it in reference to the increased number of Chinese university graduates. These studies measure wages, access to ‘good jobs’ and ‘bad jobs’, and the percentage of people employed x years after graduation (Li et al 2008; Hartog et al 2010; Knight 2017) but give little information about what these job look like, and how youths actually experience their work. This chapter provides important insights into the workings of the burgeoning informal white-collar segment of the Chinese labour market that employs millions of Chinese education migrants. Moreover, the ethnographic approach enables us to contextualise youths’ choices and experiences, which reminds us that labour strategies are important beyond the need for money and survival. This chapter demonstrates that youths' engagement with the labour market should also be understood as a search for purpose as well as a way to achieve self-realisation and work towards the important goal of creating a new stability after having lived through many years of mobility.

In the first part of this chapter, I will explain how education migrants, and especially those with zhuanke-degrees, view and engage with the labour market. Then I will describe the workings of the sales sector, including recruitment practices, work culture, pay structures, labour relations, and dangers. Finally, I will demonstrate that education migrants’ strategies should be understood as embedded in a larger household strategy aimed at creating stability and security in a context of precarity and hyper-mobility.

**Zhuanke-graduates need not apply**

In job advertisements it is clear to see how the stratification of China’s higher education system translates to the job market, since vacancies refer to the different categories of Chinese universities to indicate who may apply. They state, for example, that only those with Bachelor degrees can apply, or that applicants are required to have a degree from a key point university. At labour fairs job posters sometimes specifically set the bar at a Masters or
Bachelor degree from a class one or class two university. Mainly zhuanke-graduates appeared to be limited to relatively unstable and low-earning jobs.

In conversation with Li Tang, who is Anna’s older cousin and a car salesman with a zhuanke-degree in his late twenties, it became clear that he would go as far as describe himself as ‘uneducated’ and ‘without a degree’. Having been raised by a single mother who derives her only income from farming a small plot of land, it cannot have been easy for Li Tang and his mother to put him through fifteen years of schooling. Yet both of them seemed very disappointed about the weight his zhuanke-degree turned out to carry. Li Tang explained:

A zhuanke degree doesn’t mean anything. With such a degree you can’t do much more than handing out flyers, that kind of work. And even for those kinds of jobs, there are many contenders. Employers offer those simple jobs with an attitude that says: “take it or leave it, if you don’t want it, someone else will” (Li Tang).

Li Tang’s mother was more worried about her son’s opportunities on the marriage market. She explained that him having a zhuanke-degree means girls with Bachelor degrees would never marry him. Anna, who was her niece and a girl with a Bachelor degree, confirmed that she was probably right: ‘I wouldn’t marry a guy with a zhuanke-degree’, she shrugged. Since it has become difficult to realise marriage for sons in rural China, where decades of the one-child policy and continued son preference has led to a shortage of women of marriageable age, getting a university degree has also become an important part of achieving marriage (Greenhalgh 2013).

Li Tang’s score in the university entrance exam was only high enough for him to enrol in a zhuanke-university. Looking back, he blamed himself for not studying harder and having been ‘too focused on having fun’. Looking forward, he could not imagine himself ever being able to get a job outside of car sales, let alone sales. Similar to the way the accountancy students in the previous chapter interpreted their enrolment in a zhuanke-university as ‘a failure’, Li Tang repeatedly emphasised the ‘lowness’ of his degree. In relation to me working on a PhD project he said:

Think about all the levels in between your degree and mine. I have a zhuanke-degree, then there is Bachelor, and that on level 3, level 2, and level 1, and then Master... and then... PhD, right? So, imagine what the difference is! We are so far away from that level, we don’t understand anything about that. (Li Tang)

Yet, Li Tang also pointed out that he did not consider his educational degree as the only factor that had determined his fate, since he also thought of his personality and (lack of) connections as important influences on his career development. He illustrated this point in his analysis of the job market from his own perspective:

Many young people work in sales now. Generally they are people without great qualifications or strong capabilities, but with a strong focus on making money. Sales is the way for them to accomplish this. Most people who work in sales did not do so well in school. Maybe they didn’t do well because they ‘like to play’ (ài wan). Those people often end up as sales people. The more traditional people who didn’t do well in school, might sooner work in factories. And the people who didn’t do well, but have good connections (guanxi), they work for the government. Oh, and those who are a bit smarter, but who do ‘like to play’, they are probably the managers of the sales teams. (Li Tang)

There was not a trace of cynicism in Li Tang’s voice as he explained his views on the labour market. To him, it all made sense. He and his colleagues had insignificant degrees, ‘liked to play’ (playing poker and drinking), and had neither connections nor special talents, so a career in sales was the best option for them.

Li Tang’s analysis gives an idea of what the labour market looks like to education migrants. There are jobs in sales, which I will further discuss below, as well as jobs with the government, for those with connections, and in factories, for the more traditional people. Then, there are those who did and did not do well in school, which influences where within these sectors they might find themselves. Of course, there are plenty of different conceptualisations of the labour market to go around. Anna, for example, often spoke about the gendered difference between more and less traditional ‘girls’, indicating that those who are more traditional opt for a stabler job closer to home, even if it offers a lower salary, while less traditional girls, sometimes also describes as ‘hero women’, are not afraid of jumping from one job to the next and experiencing the mobility associated with that. In general, the labour market from education migrants’ perspective seemed to consist of five segments, which I set out in Figure 5, including information about the way education migrants relate to each segment. The caveat for this simplified table is that it should be understood as an emic description of the labour market drawn up from the perspective of education migrants.
My research among middle and high school students shows that an awareness of the structure of this labour market does not start developing until after students have enrolled in higher education. Even then, their ideas about what they would be able to do after graduation remained rather vague. It is only after their graduation when they seriously start exploring their options that they really learn what is within the range of possibilities, and it takes some years of experimentation before education migrants expertly navigate their options.

Life in Sales
In this chapter I focus especially on the sales segment of the labour market, because this is the most important segment of the labour market for my interlocutors. Education migrants sometimes held jobs as office clerks or entrepreneurs (as shop or café owners), but they always either had a history in sales or contemplated a future in sales. The goods they sold ranged from second-hand goods to cars, from education to advertisements, and from aloe vera beauty products to figure-correcting underwear. Since the majority of education migrants worked in sales, sales jobs were considered the mainstream option, and those who did not work in sales often motivated their career choices in terms of having diverted from the mainstream. In the next section of this chapter, I discuss the sales sector to give insight into this growing segment of China’s informal labour market, showing that informalisation does not only affect the lives of labour migrants, but also the labour conditions of millions of rural university graduates. It also demonstrates how the structure of this particular sector is conducive to the constant hiring-and-firing of education migrants, since it has given rise to hiring practices that might be better described as speculation than as employment. Finally, this section shows that education migrants’ activities within the sales sector lead to experiences of stress and isolation, before discussing the reasons why education migrants still continue to seek out these jobs.

In recent years, online platforms have become the main portal for finding jobs. In the following vignette, I will tell the story of how one interlocutor lost her job working in the human resources department for a large real estate company and subsequently chose to find a job in the sales sector via an app called ‘no worries about the future’. I also describe some of the emotions that are part of these youths’ experiences of hyper-mobility, to show that their going in and out of jobs is part of a larger and sometimes painfully difficult project of trying to build up a stable life in the city, and to counter the ‘China’s little emperors narrative’ popular in Chinese and foreign media. According to the articles and books promoting this narrative, the ‘job hopping’ of China’s post-90s generation is a sign of these youths’ flimsiness of character, spoiled nature, and unwillingness to work.53

No worries About the Future
The following vignette is about Misty, the 23-year old accountancy graduate from a zhuanke university introduced in Chapter One of this dissertation, and somebody with extremely high job mobility. In Chapter One I described the relationship she had with an employer who had recently hired her. The job she had found that time was only one link in a long chain of jobs she had held since her graduation. Between her graduation in the summer of 2014 and the start of 2019, Misty worked in the office of a factory, a luxury car dealership, a health club, a yoga school, a real estate company, two different companies selling advertisements (one in buses, the other one in cinemas), and a restaurant. In each of these jobs, except for the one in the restaurant, Misty was truly invested, hoping that it would be the start of a long-term career. Misty’s constant job-hopping did not only require her to often make impactful practical life changes, including changing addresses, schedules, colleagues, and even cities, but also had her on a perpetual emotional rollercoaster.

One late evening in March 2016 Misty knocked on the door of my studio. She had just gotten fired from her job at the real estate company after having worked there for merely six weeks. That evening, as she had gotten ready to leave after a night of working late, her manager had sat her down to tell her that she did not need to return the next day. Misty sat on my bed in tears, going over the things her manager had told her. He had said he needed to hire somebody to do some things for him for which he did not consider her suited, and that that was why he had to let Misty go. He also said that she did not fit into the department well, and that he had noticed Misty was easily distracted and could not

---

focus well. Misty moped, ‘You put your heart into your job, and then you have to leave it after a conversation like that’. It was not an opportune moment for Misty to lose her job. Her roommate had just left their shared flat, and her rent payment was coming up in five days. This meant she has to either cover the cost of both rooms, or leave the flat almost immediately. She did not know what to do now that she did not know where she would be working. On top of that, her mother was counting on staying with Misty when she came to Wuhan the following week for a medical treatment in the hospital. ‘Can we stay with you for a while?’, she asked, eyeing my twenty square meter studio.

Only hours had passed before Misty started to pick herself up again. Trying to give herself the courage to face the difficulties ahead of her, she repeated encouraging messages to herself. ‘This will be for the best’, she said. ‘A better fate is waiting for me.’ And, talking about her housing issue, ‘Five days is a lot of time. And I don’t have anything else to do now anyway.’ Misty would prove to be right. In the life of an education migrant in Wuhan, five days is a lot of time, and she would manage to solve the housing crisis before the end of the fifth day. Only a few days after that, Misty would find herself a new career as well. When she had gotten fired, she had said, ‘I’ll take a short rest and start working again in two weeks.’ I had been surprised to hear that she was so confident about finding a new job so quickly. But in her head plans had started to materialise almost immediately. ‘I’ll get myself a sales job again’, she had decided within moments, ‘because the salary is higher. But this time I want to work in the alcohol or make-up branch.’ Misty said ‘again’ in reference to a sales job she had had the year before when she first moved to Wuhan. In that job she had sold Ferraris and Lamborghinis in a dealership for luxury cars. Misty had known nothing about the car industry. Her previously kooky, colourful clothing has been replaced by a suit jacket, a white blouse, and the silver necklace. She had tied up her hair into a tight bun and carefully applied subtle make-up to her face.

A week later we sat in a café scrolling through jobs on Misty’s phone. ‘Most people use one of four apps to find work’, she explained, ‘but I like qiancheng wuyou best’. She showed me the app with the name that translates to ‘no worries about the future’. Misty had uploaded her profile. It detailed her education and work experience and showed her picture. When she scrolled through jobs, a percentage displayed in the corner of her screen fluctuated, indicating to what degree her profile matched the job description she was looking at. Her fingers tapped the screen expertly, only pausing for jobs that were both well-paid (more than 8000 renminbi (1060 euro) per month) and in a central location. In addition, she looked out for the mention of shuangxiu, a two-day weekend. When Misty saw a job she liked, it only took one tap on the screen to apply. I was stunned by the speed of this job search and the casual attitude with which Misty sent out applications without even taking a close look at the job descriptions. She explained that it is quite useless to apply to jobs for which she had less than one hundred percent suitability, since employers only called back applicants from the top pool. ‘It’s easy to up my percentage, though’, she said, as she started to tinker with her profile, adding some sales experience. ‘I want a sales job now, so it’s best if I have some experience in sales, right? In my previous job I recruited people to do sales for that company, so I know how to profile myself to get that kind of job.’ She added her most recent job to her listed work experience. ‘Why wasn’t it on there yet?’, I asked. ‘Well, I only had that job for six weeks, right?’ she answered while she adjusted the dates to extend six weeks to six months and changed her job title from human resources to sales. ‘I did HR there, but I want to do sales now, so I have to put that on my CV. If I haven’t done sales before, nobody is going to want me, right?’ she explained, slightly impatient with my questions and with her eyes still fixed on the screen, scrolling through jobs and sending out more applications. Misty’s phone rang. It was her friend, asking, ‘Do you want to go out guangjie (shopping, roaming the street) tonight?’. Misty hesitated for a moment: should she go or stay for dinner with me? ‘I want to go out guangjie’, she apologised to me earnestly, ‘because I want to buy a thin, silver necklace. I think it’d look really chic and help me get a good job. Mind if I go?’

Observing Misty’s job search showed me the pervasiveness of the sales sector on the urban job market. Especially if Misty wanted to avoid jobs that would pay her barely enough for her to keep herself fed and warm in the city, approximately 2000-3000 renminbi (266-400 euro) per month, there were no other options but going into sales. Misty did not shy away from manipulating the truth to make herself seem a bit more attractive to employers. Yet, at the same time, this chapter will show that employers are also inclined to present their potential employees with exaggerated promises of future riches in order to invite their applications.

Misty’s First Sales Job

In reaction to the flurry of applications Misty had sent out in the café, she received a call with an invitation to interview with a company selling advertisement space in the subway system. During this interview, Misty was hired on the spot as a saleswoman. Misty was wild with enthusiasm: ‘I can learn so much in this company, I can really develop myself. I have to communicate with clients a lot, which is great for me. And big, big companies advertise in the subway system, you know, even KFC advertises there. If I sell these ad spaces, I can make a lot of money.’ Misty could not stop talking about her new job and had already gone out shopping to change her style into what she imagined suited the advertisement sales industry. Her previously kooky, colourful clothing has been replaced by a suit jacket, a white blouse, and the silver necklace. She had tied up her hair into a tight bun and carefully applied subtle make-up to her face.
Misty’s salary was not immediately as high as she had hoped. She started off with a base salary of 1800 renminbi per month (230 euro), which was only slightly over the 2016 Hubei province minimum wage of 1550 rmb (200 euro).\textsuperscript{54} Research into compliance with legal minimum wages in China shows that this kind of pay structure, a base salary at or just over minimum wage complemented by bonuses or pay for high productivity, is most common among workers in labour-intensive industries, where many of the less educated rural-urban labour migrants work (Ye, Gindling & Li 2015). Yet, my research shows that this pay structure and level was also very common among education migrants working in the sales sector, who accepted low base salaries for the opportunity to complement their salaries by making three percent commissions on their sales. Despite the salary being lower than what she had hoped for, Misty remained optimistic: ‘In the beginning it is difficult, because I have to develop a client base, but as soon as I’ve closed one sale, I’ll be fine. I’ll make more and more sales and my wages will go up and up every month.’

Despite Misty having hoped to find a job with a two-day weekend break when she was job searching, she soon found herself working seven days per week. Spurred on by her manager, who ensured her she would make back her investments in no time, Misty took out a personal loan with the bank to buy herself a laptop and make it easier for herself to continue working in the evenings and on the weekends. At home, she often received late night phone calls from her manager asking: ‘When are you going to make your next sale? How are you going to make it?’ Misty said that she felt thankful for these calls, since she interpreted her manager’s attention as caring and conducive to her future career development. Yet, sometimes she also admitted to feeling close to buckling under the pressure, especially since failing to meet her sales quota now equalled disappointing the manager who she now considered to have become one of her only and closest allies in the city.

Sales work has large ups and downs. When Misty closed her first deal after four months on the job, she felt incredibly excited and confident. She spoke relentlessly about the bright future in sales she now saw ahead of her:

\begin{quote}
After you’ve made your first sale, it’s easy. Then you just keep opening new accounts every month, and these accounts get bigger and bigger. It’s just that first one that’s hard. I’m good at this job, because I’m good at talking to people, you know. I am very open and listen to them. I’m very kind. People will talk to me and think: “that’s a good girl”, and take some time to listen to me, and then I’ll sell them my ad space. You’ll see! (Misty)
\end{quote}

But then, as time progressed without a new sale, Misty grew increasingly nervous. She was sometimes terrified by the prospect of having to go out and meet people, trying to sell them ad space. Being a beautiful young woman, Misty was at times confronted with clients’ sexual advances. She was clearly very uncomfortable with these situations, but tried hard to not let it bother her: ‘That’s okay, when they say those things, I just ignore them’. She tried instead to use her femininity to her advantage: ‘When they see me, they might think: Oh, what’s the harm in talking to a nice girl for a while?’ Contact between sellers and clients often became quite personal. Misty showered her clients with friendly greetings via weixin in a deliberate effort to build up a personal connection. In sales jobs, gender played an important role and a woman’s charm was considered a great and helpful force when trying to close a deal. Young, unmarried girls were therefore especially considered very suited to this line of work.

Misty’s first sales success was also her only one. Ironically, she sold some advertisement space to a zhuanke school that used the space to promise its graduates great career prospects. The school paid her company 100,000 renminbi (13,000 euro) for the advertisement, and Misty made a three percent commission: 3,000 renminbi (490 euro). From there on, Misty’s sales did not multiply and grow as she had hoped. After ten months on the job her second sale had still not materialised and Misty was let go. It did not take long before she found her next gig. This time, she was going to sell advertisement space in cinemas.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Decoration_on_Misty_s_office_wall.jpg}
\caption{Decoration on Misty’s office wall}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{3} Translation: ‘The road to success is not at all crowded, because not many people persist’

The Structure of Sales

The carrot-chasing characteristic that is so prevalent in Misty’s story is typical of sales jobs in which employers encourage their staff by promoting the idea that big, life-changing gains are just one deal away. Yet not all sales jobs are the same, as the sales sector also consists of different layers. Some sales jobs border on entrepreneurial undertakings, since they are more independent than sales jobs within companies. Generally, sales jobs within companies offer a base salary, which is low but gives employees at least some form of security, whereas independent sales adventures do not only lack this kind of stability, but sometimes also require personal investments to be made before business can start. I’ll provide some examples ranging from relatively independent sales jobs to sales jobs with more structure.

Education migrants often work within the relatively structured sales jobs that offer a base salary and require employees to have a degree.

Anna’s brother, and many of the other weixin-contacts I acquired during my research period, performed a way of doing sales called weishang, which could be translated as weixin-business. This meant that he acted as a middle-man for suppliers of everything ranging from flashlight to lucky phone numbers. He would promote these products via his social media networks and if he found a buyer, he struck up a commission. A step up from this kind of weixin-business were the girls who devoted a special weixin-account to the selling of (beauty) products. These initiatives required them to invest in their stock first and were often tied into a large pyramid-shaped structure, meaning that they bought from a supplier in a chain, and tried to recruit suppliers themselves, who would pay a commission directly to them. Then, there were those who started their own Taobao-store, which is a gigantic Chinese online marketplace. Anna, for example, sold ripped off English language courses on Taobao for some time, making some extra money to top up her Foxconn salary, until she got closed down. None of these forms of doing sales work require the seller to have any form of education. For jobs doing sales for larger companies, and especially while receiving a base salary, applicants were often required to have a zhuanke-degrees. Having access to these jobs was the only difference between education migrants and their labour migrant peers. Yet life in these sales jobs was challenging. I will now further describe these jobs’ exploitative pay structures, and stressful and isolating work environments.

Employment or Speculation?

The sales jobs that offer base salaries come with great pressure to perform. If a sales employee with a base salary did not make a sale quickly enough, they would soon be fired. An analysis of the pay structure shows that the managers who do the hiring-and-firing for these companies can be seen as speculators who invest in their employees hoping for a quick return, and cut them loose before they eat too much into the profits they have generated for the company. Misty’s situation in the subway advertisement business makes for a good example. She worked in the company for ten months, receiving 18,000 renminbi (10 times 1,800) in base salary. She also received one 3000 renminbi commission. Yet, she sold 100,000 renminbi worth of advertisement space, so when she lost her job after not having made a sale for six months, her employer was still up 79,000 renminbi on hiring her. If we understand this kind of employment as a form of speculation, managers’ constant phone calls asking about the state of a deal also make sense as the information they gain is crucial in their making of decisions regarding which employees to hold onto for another month, and which ones to let go.

Of course, for this to work it is important that employees are strongly motivated to sell. Team managers have wide-ranging strategies to push their staff, including sending out daily rankings of their employees’ sales performances, forcing employees to do overtime until certain sales goals are met, fining employees by docking their base salary, and firing under-selling employees. Sales teams were often pitched against each other in competition, and team managers were overseen by higher management layers that subjected them to similar tactics. Misty’s employer received an email from her company’s head office in Beijing every day in which her team’s performance was ranked against others. She talked about her job as if she could lose it any day. One of the most common tactics to put pressure on employees to sell was docking their salaries when sales lagged behind. Li Tang explained how this worked in the Hyundai garage where he used to work:

I recently quit my job, it was too terrible. I really didn’t want to do it anymore. Every day, I got up at 6.30 am to go to work and would not finish before 8.30 pm. We were only allowed to take one day per month off and I still didn’t make any money. You know, the car sales business is a really hard one. It’s very competitive. You’re not only fighting for a good salary for yourself, but you’re also competing against your own colleagues. That makes it a really hard job. You get targets to work with and if you don’t make them, you’ll get punished financially. For example, your bottom line is 12 cars per month. If you don’t make that, they cut your salary. The base salary is 1400 rmb. If you sell 9 cars, you get 0.9 of the base salary. If you sell 8, you get 0.8. Until you sell 5 cars, then you get 0.5. You never go under 0.5, but then you basically already don’t have a salary. Our garage was open until 6 pm, and then we’d call people who had been to the garage before, trying to make them come back. We’d be on the phone for at least another 2.5 hours. It was just a really bad period. I worked so hard and I didn’t make any money. One month I sold 12 cars and made 800 rmb. (Li Tang)
There had been months when Li Tang was fined so much that his salary was under sustenance level. He had had to ask his mother for loans, even though he spent very little money and lived above the showroom in a dorm-room with the other salesmen. In Shenzhen, he explained that he never left the industrial terrain in the city's suburbs. He generally did not take days off, he explained: 'I have no time. Never. And if you take a day off, your manager will look at you like: you've only sold six cars this month, and you want to take a day off?' The culture of making long days and working seven days per week was very common in the sales sector, and led to feelings of stress and isolation among its employees.

**Stress and Isolation**

Yao, a 22-year-old recent graduate, had recently quit her job after working for one year in a company selling used goods online. One of the hardest parts of this job, she said, had been that she never knew at what time her work day would end. If sales were up and her manager was happy, her team could leave on time. But when the manager was under pressure because of disappointing numbers, she would not let anybody go home until late at night, or would require her team to work through the weekend. Yao's unpredictable working hours made it hard for me to meet up with her as well. But soon after she quit Yao invited me to accompany her to a doctor's appointment where she was receiving treatment for stress-related health problems. Her plan had been to take a few weeks off and then try to find a job outside the sales sector.

Misty also suffered from stress and the hostile atmosphere bred by excessive competition in the office. As she worked in her sales jobs, tears flowed more and more often. Intense rivalry between colleagues had created an icy office atmosphere. People did not greet one another when they entered or left the office and largely ignored one another throughout the day. One day, when Misty's colleague had a contract disappear from her desk, she accused Misty of taking it in order to sabotage her sale. When Misty was informed about this accusation through a phone call from her boss one evening at 10pm, just as we sat down for dinner at the end of her workday, she was terribly upset. From there on, the relationship between Misty and her colleagues further deteriorated.

It was not surprising that employee turn-over was high in these companies and that the make-up of staff was always changing, further adding to the isolation its employees experienced. Misty's employer explained that recruiting new staff, which she mainly did via an app called 'Boss', was one of her main tasks. She said: 'This company is like the army. The barracks are always there, but the soldiers are not fixed inside, they flow through the barracks. The company is like that: the structure is always there, but the staff changes constantly.'

On the night of Misty's upsetting phone call, she reflected on her sales career thus far, which had at that point lasted for approximately twelve months (ten months in the first job, and two months in her new job), during which she had only made a single sale:

> I've shed so many tears just to make that one sale. In order to get that one account, I had to deal with so much rejection and disappointment. I'm sorry I'm crying, I didn't want to cry tonight. But I've cried so much, mostly just alone at home, at night. Even after I made that first sale, on the way back home, all I could do was cry. (Misty)

Carefully I asked her: 'Why? Were you not happy when you made that sale?' She answered:

> Yes, I was, of course. But it was only 100,000 rmb. And my commission is three percent, so I made 3000 rmb. And you know the hoops I had to jump through to get that? I could only cry on my way home because I thought of all I had gone through just to make 3000 rmb. (Misty)

These returns were especially meagre considering the investments employers had asked her to make in her career. In Misty's first sales job she was asked to take out a bank loan to buy a laptop, and in her second sales job she was made to participate in a sales training – at least once – organised by her own company in another city for which she had to dish out 4000 renminbi. On top of that, she was encouraged to leave her shared apartment and rent out an apartment next to the office instead, increasing her rent from 600 (80 euro) to 2400 renminbi (320 euro).
The experience of working in these sales jobs is at the core of living an urban life for many education migrants. In some ways, and especially in the early days, these jobs gave them the feeling of having arrived somewhere. Being able to go into an office located in a skyscraper in a commercial district, dressed up in office wear, and motivated by the belief that hard work will pay off, somewhat resembled the way the vague ideas they had about what this part of their lives would look like. Without anybody telling them differently and with little knowledge about labour laws or the workings of the labour market, education migrants regarded the pervasive informality in the sales sector as the standard way of doing things. When Misty started her sales job, I urged her to ask for a labour contract, taking into account that she had recently been fired without notice, and without receiving all of the salary she had been owed. Still, she laughed at my questions: ‘This is such a small company, people here really trust each other. We don’t need a contract.’ Yet, in reality, disputes arose all the time, and when they did education migrants always drew the short end of the stick. Their lack of contracts and connections made it impossible to fight employers’ decisions through official channels.

My interlocutors did not always willingly share details about labour agreements being broken. They seemed embarrassed to speak about exploitative labour relations and tended to turn to self-blame when conflict arose. I often heard about labour relations having gone sour through a third person. For example, Misty told me angrily about how her roommate had only received 800 renminbi (106 euro) after working for an investment company for one month, despite having been promised a salary of 3000 renminbi (399 euro). Yet, when she herself was caught up in a tricky situation with an employer she brushed it off to start right over. In an earlier chapter I already reflected on how rural-urban dynamics factor into these relationships, describing that employers in the sales sector are keen to hire ‘rural kids’, since they are considered driven by their family’s need for their support, and therefore more able to ‘eat bitterness’. Social isolation and embarrassment further weakened the position of education migrants in their relationship with employers. When conflict arose, youths stood all alone without friends or family to support them, let alone paperwork or the law to back them up. For some time, Julia recorded her struggles in the labour market in a diary. When she left her job in Shenzhen without getting paid, she wrote:

Who is going to compensate me for the time and energy I invested in that hopeless company of yours? (...) You see all the people in the world as losers for you to use as you please and you see me as a little girl in Shenzhen all by myself, without friends or family, who is an easy target for you to exploit. (Translated from Chinese by the author)

Julia’s words showed that she is perfectly aware of her weak position in Shenzhen, where she knew almost nobody and had no family to rely on. She was also aware of how she might be perceived by the labour market, and that this made her vulnerable for exploitation. Yet, after she had been in a number of jobs, Julia’s increasingly skeptical attitude helped her to recognise and leave unfruitful labour situations early on and was no longer easily placated by promises of future gains. Still, the cycle of starting new jobs full of great promise and leaving them feeling disappointed to start over again in a similar position seemed to be never ending. So, what are the reasons why education migrants keep going back to these jobs in the sales sector?

First, it is important for education migrants to be employed. Even though youths regularly emphasised the important difference between being employed and having a ‘good job’ – ‘It’s not hard to find a job, but it’s hard to find a good job’ (Morning Sunshine’s classmate), being employed in any job was still better than being unemployed. Universities, and especially those in the lower segments, often boast about their ‘employment rate’. For example, the website of Wuhan City PolytecUic, Morning Sunshine’s previous university, read: ‘The employment rate remains above 95 percent and the graduates have gained widespread social acclaims and abundant praises from employers, for their excellent work ethics, high comprehensive qualities, and solid professional skills’ (Website Wuhan City PolytecUic). These statistics give no information about what kind of employment graduates have found. In their communication with their family members education migrants employed a similar strategy. Even if they had not yet found themselves a good job, at least they could tell them that they were employed.

Second, despite the precarious labour conditions, there are some characteristics of the sales sector that appeal to education migrants. It allows them to live out parts of the urban fantasy that they have long cherished, including working in an office, participating in meetings, and dressing up in fancy wear to go to work. These conditions, in combination with the sales sector’s language of accounts, commissions, clients, and targets, in which youth quickly become fluent, have a certain appeal for education migrants since they create the impression that they are in a world completely different from the world of manual labour. The expectation that conditions will improve in the future makes education migrants willing to forego some of the elements that would constitute a good job for the time being, including good salaries, two-day weekends, social insurance, free evenings, better relationships with their peers, and the space to enjoy a life outside of the office.

55 Quote from this webpage of Wuhan City PolytecUic: https://www.whcvc.edu.cn/ywjj/list.psp
Third, and maybe most importantly, is the strong presence of hope in the sales sector. Sales sector employees are constantly on the receiving end of emails and (possibly exaggerated) updates about peers making fortunes by closing large sales. They also attend sales trainings and conferences, where the key message is that the sales sector is a world of riches readily available for those with the right amount of talent and dedication. As the text on Misty’s office wall illustrates, the core philosophy of the sales sector speaks to education migrants’ ability to persist and ‘eat bitterness’. For these youths, who have spent most of their young lives working hard within the education system, spurred on by the promise of social mobility, being able to hold on to hope for future improvement offers comfort and consolation. At the same time that they are trying to sell goods to their customers, they are also being sold something: the idea that these jobs will enable them to overcome the hurdles between them and a stable, urban, middle-class lifestyle.

For my Family

Education migrants remain deeply embedded in familial networks and fulfil an important role in their families. It is therefore important to understand their career strategies in relation to their family situations. In the previous section I referred to Li Tang and his mother, who raised her son single-handedly, and who really hoped that he would be able marry soon. For Li Tang to marry, he needed to buy a ‘marriage house’, which is private property meant for the new couple to live in, and which is hugely important for achieving marriage in contemporary China. Realising marriage for sons can be considered the greatest challenge faced by rural Chinese families these days. Overcoming this challenge therefore requires a collective effort of all family members, which means that not only the labour strategies of young men themselves should be understood in connection to this goal, but also those of his siblings and parents, who are all expected to contribute towards the realisation of his marriage.56

Chapter 3

White-Collar Hustling

Julia, who we met in the introduction as somebody who experienced great labour mobility, is a good example of a youth who is strongly driven by her wish to do well by her mother, who feels extremely anxious about her son’s opportunities for marriage. Julia’s mother also raised her children alone after her husband passed away when Julia, her youngest child, was seven years old. Julia feels deeply responsible for helping her family, since they put her through high school and university with great difficulty and at their own expense. Her brother has worked as a migrant worker in China’s southern megacities since he was sixteen years old. Her mother, who was herself an illiterate marriage migrant from the poorest region of western Hubei, ran a clothing business while her children were growing up, but started working as a labour migrant in a cupcake factory in Hunan province as soon as her children were off to work and school and the pressure to earn enough money for her son’s future marriage started to build. Julia’s deep desire in this moment was to enable her mother to retire from doing migrant labour, since she found it difficult to think about her mother being away from home and doing factory work all year long, but she knew that her mother would never retire before her brother’s marriage had been achieved.

Julia had been a very good student. When her university teacher was asked to recommend a student for a job at a famous Shanghai clothing brand, she did not have to think long: it had to be Julia. Julia got the job in Shanghai, but not a year had passed when she started to feel like she should be moving on. She explained:

I know it’s soon, and that this is a good job. But, when I think about my future, I am just desperate. It is hard to make a promotion here and my colleagues in higher positions never really make more than 10,000 renminbi (1250 euro) either. And they are mostly from rich families. They only need money to get by and have fun. In that case, 10,000 renminbi is more than enough. But it’s not enough for me. If I stay here and wait until I finally get a promotion in a couple of years, I know I’ll still only make 10,000 renminbi. It’s just not enough for me. I want to make some real money, so I can take care of my mother and my brother. At this point, all of us ‘work outside’ [are migrant labourers], but I hope that I can soon make enough money, so they don’t need to ‘go out’ [work as migrant labourers] anymore. (Julia)

Subsequently, Julia’s search for a well-paid job led her through all of China’s large southern metropoles, first from Shanghai to Shenzhen, then from Shenzhen to Guangzhou, and back to Shenzhen again. Holding a degree in clothing design from a class two university, she first worked for fashion brands and clothing manufacturers, but soon realised that she could not ‘afford’ to work in such low-earning careers, and decided that only the sales sector provided her with the chance to earn enough money to really speed up her brother’s marriage.

56 For a more complete discussion of families’ collective efforts to achieve sons’ marriages, please refer to Rescuing Masculinity: Giving Gender in the Wake of China’s Marriage Squeeze (2019; Driessen & Sier).
Anna, who was Julia’s best friend since they attended middle school together in Hougang town, also had an unmarried brother of marriageable age with insufficient funds to buy himself a marriage house. Anna chose a very different career path from Julia, opting for low risk and stability over high earnings as a Foxconn office employee. Yet she also felt a lot of pressure to help her parents achieve her brother’s marriage.

Anna has held the same job ever since 2015, which is remarkable considering the job mobility of her peers. But there was a period when she was also ready for rigorous change. This period came in reaction to a change in her family situation, which illustrates the importance of youths’ family context for making decisions regarding their labour. During her years of working at Foxconn Anna had always contributed some of her personal savings towards the purchase of her brother’s marriage house. Yet, with her salary after taxes, social insurance and the fee for her dorm room being just short of 3000 renminbi (400 euro) per month, she was not able to make substantial contributions.7 Her parents worked themselves to the bone for at least sixty hours per week in a cotton factory and in a rice warehouse to come up with the money necessary to realise her brother’s marriage, while her brother himself did not seem motivated to contribute much. Anna, like Julia, was eagerly awaiting the purchase of the marriage house, because she wanted her parents to stop working so hard. But just as she felt her family was edging closer towards achieving this goal, disaster struck.

In April 2017, Anna’s mother broke her hip when she was knocked over by a trolley in the factory where she worked. This accident marked the start of a very tumultuous period in Anna’s life. Worried about her mother and the future of her family, she started suffering from insomnia and dark moods. For months, she tossed and turned at night and spent her days in a tired daze. She felt like she could no longer ‘afford’ to stay in her low-stress but low-salary job and needed to move into the sales sector like so many of her peers. In June, two months after the accident, Anna started applying for sales jobs. One of the companies with which she discussed future employment was a company called Winning Star in China’s Zhejiang province, which offered her a two-month training course before wanting to send her to Dubai to work in a store selling goods for daily use, e.g. shampoos and laundry detergent. They offered her a salary of 3500 renminbi (450 euro) per month for the training period in China, and then 5000 renminbi (650 euro) plus commission for her first month abroad, going up to 6000 renminbi (780 euro) plus commission for her second month in Dubai. In the weeks that followed I could not help getting involved in heated discussions with Anna and her family members about whether she should go to Dubai to work for this company. Based on Anna’s communication with the company’s recruiter, who was very sparing with the information she provided, claiming that she could not share much about company procedures for privacy reasons, I felt worried about Anna’s safety and expressed this. Anna then sent me a flurry of weixin messages, showing the urgency she felt to make a sudden job change:

Yes... but I don’t know what to do. Only when I’m busy, I feel less anxious.

And I need money to support my family... in sales I can make money.

I wouldn’t do this if I had a rich family. Who wants to live far away from home for a long time?

I want to choose the right job, but don’t know which one is better. It is hard to make a choice, and not everything is perfect. When you gain, you also lose.

My present job isn’t bad. It’s very comfortable here. But I just don’t want to stay here anymore. The environment is lifeless, and I want to experience something different.

I don’t know, there are a lot of different jobs. I don’t know how to choose. I think I can learn a lot from a sales job, because you need to talk to different people. It will broaden my horizon and I can make money. I need money now.

(Messages sent by Anna on June 15th, 2017)

It was clear that Anna’s mother breaking her hip had made her acutely aware of her parents’ reliance on her and her inability in her current position to provide them with much support. Yet Anna did not end up going to Dubai. The pictures of the store that she received from the recruiter showed a windowless, uninviting space cluttered with trays and boxes. At the same time Anna was invited for a job interview at renren, a Chinese social media network, which offered her a comparable salary to the job in Dubai, making her think that maybe she did not need to go abroad for a salary hike. The job at renren, which was in customer service, paid between 5000 and 6000 renminbi (650-775 euro) per month, but required her to regularly do night shifts. In the end, Anna was not selected for this job. In August, she communicated with a company called the Chittagong Chemical Complex, part of the Bangladesh Chemical Corporation, for a position as a translator in Bangladesh where this company was running a chemical engineering project. This job offered a salary of 7000 renminbi (900 euro) per month. Yet this plan also did not materialise. Anna’s family and

7 Once a year Anna also received a 10,000 renminbi (1330 euro) bonus.
friends were worried about the legitimacy of the companies she communicated with, and despite her strong desire to improve her family's precarious position she was not very keen on going herself. To me, Anna's sudden and wild flurry of applications showed how strongly she felt the urge to make a sudden change in her life. As her family's only person with an education (her brother did not finish high school), she felt an enormous responsibility. With her mother's injury preventing her from going back to the factory and her lack of paperwork making it unsure how well she would be compensated, Anna suddenly felt as if her family was about to enter a level of precarity that was actually dangerous, and she needed to act fast to ensure their safety.

In the midst of all this, Anna and I met in the summer of 2017, a year after I had finished my previous fieldwork. Anna was still upset to the point of crying about her mother's accident and felt the strong urge to do something for her family. She had been talking to Julia, who strengthened her feelings of needing to take action:

I just don't know what I should be doing. Julia says that I'm not aggressive enough... She thinks that I should be more pro-active in making money and go out somewhere for a job. She's been working in education sales lately. Her job is very intense, they constantly send around those rankings and have very intense coaching. I don’t think that kind of work is for me. It doesn't suit my personality. I don't want my every social interaction to be about what I can sell to somebody. But then again, when Julia says that it's important for me to take action and that I should go and put myself out there, then I feel like I should, but at the same time I still feel like I don’t really want to. (Anna)

Education migrants, like Anna, often feel responsible for their families’ wellbeing. As the only highly-educated people in their family, they feel like the pressure to improve their families’ standing is on their shoulders. Youths want to enable their parents to retire. The funds their parents can claim as rural hukou-holders for their retirement are deeply insufficient, so they depend on their children's financial help if they want to stop working.\(^{58}\) In the case of Anna's parents, who worked in the city without labour contracts, it was quite unclear whether their employer would later contribute to their retirement fund. Achieving a son's or a brother's marriage especially makes up the key hurdle that needs to be overcome before retirement. This was also reflected in the questions asked after Anna's mother broke her hip: How will our son/brother now get married?

It is critical to understand the importance of marriage in relation to the idea of this generation of education migrants being uprooted. With them being the first or the second generation that has left behind the farmer's existence, they have experienced long periods of extreme mobility. Youths asked me 'who wants to float?' and often spoke about wanting to settle down. Parents also hoped for their children to find new stability in society after having experienced this multi-generational process of becoming increasingly uprooted. When I met Li Tang's mother during a stay in rural Jingmen, she explained this idea:

I don't have those kinds of typical motivations for wanting my son to marry. I don't care if he has a son, or even a child, and don't think about our family line. I would love and accept my son no matter the choices he makes, and whatever becomes of him. But, why I think it would be good for him to marry is that it would give him a home. He doesn't do a good job at taking care of himself when he is alone. If there were a woman in his life, he would have more of a home, and the quality of his life would just be a lot better. I don't want him to float around when he's older, having no steady base. I want him to have a home, and therefore it would be good for him to get married. He's such a good son. He's a nice guy. I feel pressure as well, because I want to help him buy a house, but it's hard for me to make the money. (Li Tang's mother)

Li Tang’s mother’s words were striking because they departed from the often heard explanation for the continued popularity of marriage in rural China being due to families’ strong wishes to continue the patrilinear family line. Li Tang’s mother’s concern proved to be much more practical in nature. Her son had also already lived a life of extreme mobility, first following an educational trajectory that led him through three different locations in Hubei province, and then on to work in Shenzhen in the south. If he would not be able to establish a home for himself through marriage, she was afraid that he would never have a home for himself at all. In that case, he would always live a migrant’s existence, sharing dorm rooms with his colleagues and living from pay check to pay check. Even though marriage would not resolve these issues completely, since Li Tang would still have to do migrant labour to make enough money, his mother hoped that being married would at least offer her son some sense of security and stability.

**Mobility for Stability**

The tension between the experience of mobility and the desire for stability forms the core of education migrants’ stories. Families with intense histories of mobility and feelings of uprootedness embrace the idea of marriage for additional reasons than those that have

---

\(^{58}\) Basic pension benefits amount to 660 renminbi (85 euro) per year (Shu 2018).
been often described, inspired by China’s Confucian tradition (e.g. Tang 1995). They view marriage not only as important for continuing the family line, but also as a strategy for bringing stability to mobile lives. The stark contradiction between this desire for stability and the perceived necessity for mobility to realise this desire puts youths in a perpetual state of postponement and of not yet having arrived. Even if youth wish to stay in one particular location or job, they often feel as if they cannot ‘afford’ to do so. Li Tang explained that he would love to move back to Jingmen city where he could be closer to his mother and his friends. Yet he felt like he was not able to live in Jingmen city, or even in Wuhan, until after he had saved enough money for marriage:

You know, it’s mostly the people whose families have some money who can stay at home. They do not really need to leave home to make that extra money. If they make a couple of thousand renminbi per month, just to feed themselves, they are okay. So, they can stay at home. It is the people who really need the money, who feel a great urgency to make more money, they are the ones who leave their homes to go “work outside”. (Li Tang)

Li Tang’s words were similar to Julia’s explanation of why she was not able to stay in her job in Shanghai. Anna, who generally felt bored but comfortable in her low-earning and low-pressure job, was also overcome by anxiety after her mother got hurt, and was convinced that she could no longer afford to stay in her Foxconn job. These stories illustrate that the narrative of China’s post-90 generation’s ‘job-hopping’ should not always be interpreted as a sign of the spoiled nature of these youths, but rather as a reaction to their being structurally weakly positioned in the urban labour market, and in society as a whole. Youths’ intense labour mobility should also not be understood as a sign of success. Especially within the development ideology with its urban bias, rural youths’ employment in China’s larger cities, especially in white-collar capacities, is often taken as a sign of the success of the ‘education for development’ strategy. Remember, for example, the middle school teacher from Chapter Two, who referred to his students’ job mobility as proof of ‘them doing so well’. The stories in this chapter have shown that youths’ spells of intense mobility are often rooted in feelings of insecurity and desires for stability. Moreover, when these choices are put in the context of the larger family strategy, it becomes clear that youths’ strategies are also sooner stories of self-sacrifice than an expression of the rapid ‘individualisation of Chinese society’, a development that has been the focus of studies of Chinese society in recent years (Yan 2009; Yan 2010; Halskov Hansen & Svarverud 2010; Kipnis 2012).

Conclusion

Since the state withdrew quickly from the urban labour market during the reform, Chinese citizens have had to compete for their jobs on a liberalised labour market. In this competition educational credentials have become more valuable. Yet it is important to differentiate between different kinds of university degrees, and integrate knowledge about the rural-urban divide in the Chinese higher education system into our analysis of the urban labour market. A study of education migrants’ engagement with the urban labour market shows that the explosive informal segment of this labour market does not only employ those lesser-educated rural labour migrants who work in labour-intensive industries, but has also expanded to include the white-collar sector, where education migrants are employed in the sales sector. This sector offers education migrants the white-collar working experience, with office jobs, meetings, and ‘clean work’, but with salaries and labour conditions similar to those of their lesser-educated peers. Still, despite disappointing returns, a lack of alternatives and the promise of a brighter future keep scores of education migrants permanently employed within this sector.

Youths hope to achieve stability through their work, but experience periods of hyper-mobility while working towards this goal. This chapter has demonstrated the importance of understanding education migrants’ strategies in light of their positions within their families. As the first people in their families to have gone to university, they feel responsible for contributing to the future wellbeing of their parents and siblings. Their parents’ rural backgrounds means they will only receive limited state pensions, and that they will be dependent on their children’s financial support for retirement. Additionally, they need support to realise their son’s marriages. Being a university graduate and having a white-collar job in the city heightens expectations regarding the support youths are able to offer. Being stuck between these expectations and the reality that confronts them on the urban labour market causes much stress and explains why education migrants often change jobs in the hope of improving their position in urban society.

Studying these youths’ strategies in the context of their families’ larger household strategies also demonstrates the importance of this group for the future wellbeing of China’s rural elderly. Now that a large and increasing number of rural Chinese families, who continue to have very little access to state social services, have one or more children who are university graduates, these graduates’ success is directly connected to their families’ future survival strategies. Some parents no longer have a ‘rural home’ to which they can return, and are dependent on their children for their future access to housing, food, and services in the (semi-)urban environments where they intend to live. Their knowledge of their success being
tied into the wellbeing of their family members drives education migrants to always keep trying to invent new ways to enable themselves to provide for their loved ones.

In the next and final empirical chapter, I will further analyse the importance of gender in education migrants’ labour and marriage strategies. Focusing on the experiences of young women, this chapter will show how female education migrants are simultaneously positioned on labour and marriage markets, which means that they constantly need to negotiate how their actions in one realm will affect their position in the other.
despite having been critiqued by scholars who argue that increased access to education and considering their relatively strong position on the marriage market due to the country’s skewed sex-ratio, the purchase of such a house has become imperative for young men looking to marry. One the one hand, one might say that this dynamic strengthens the position of rural women in society. But, at the same time, since most families still insist on having a son, the reality is that the great majority of young women have brothers. And when they do, all family capital including their own savings has to be directed towards realising the marriages of these brothers.

This chapter critiques the assumption that women’s education is a key solution to achieve gender equality. This assumption is quite prevalent in mainstream development agendas, despite having been critiqued by scholars who argue that increased access to education does not necessarily inspire a transformation of the inequitable gender relations girls face in society (e.g. Goldin 1992; Chisamya et al 2012). The cases presented in this chapter support this critique by demonstrating how women’s educational achievements can be integrated into patriarchal narratives that promote the family and the household as women’s natural and rightful place in society. These narratives are based upon ideas about ‘proper’ femininity and masculinity, which should be understood in relation to one another. With a core marker of Chinese masculinity being the ability to provide the security of a home, it makes sense that femininity entails needing to be provided for (Zhang 2010). Women’s independence and ability to provide infringes on the masculine territory and therefore these traits are considered to be unattractive to men. Women’s (educational) success is therefore a double-edged sword, for it can simultaneously enhance their chances on the job market, and be detrimental to their position on the marriage market.

Even though I do not focus solely on women in this dissertation, I will limit my discussion in this chapter to women’s experiences for both methodological and theoretical reasons. As a female ethnographic researcher it was easier for me to establish and maintain intimate and intensive relationships with women than with men, especially when it came to discussing love and emotions. At the same time, in light of China’s current imbalanced sex ratio which strengthens women’s position in marriage negotiations, it is an interesting moment to reflect on the social position of this generation of rural female university graduates.

First, I will return to Misty, who we have met as the accountancy graduate building up a career in sales, and describe how she once got close to marrying into her dream family, who owned both a house and a business in Wuhan.

**Misty’s Dream of Marriage**

When I see Misty sitting in the reception room of the yoga school where she teaches, I immediately notice something different about her. First of all, there is an open notebook in front of her on the table and she is reading with great concentration, behaviour very different from her usual demeanour of chatting relentlessly to everybody who will listen. On closer inspection, the notebook turns out to be filled with accountancy notes Misty took as a student. Misty had often told me that she was utterly uninterested in accountancy, so I am surprised to see her so enthralled by these notes.

For an example of ‘the mainstream development agenda’, see this World Bank webpage about girls’ education: https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/girlseducation

---

138

4

139
I sit down to hear what has happened exactly since I saw her a few days ago when she was still single. Without any further encouragement, and talking a mile a minute, Misty fills me in on all the details of this unexpected match:

I was introduced to a boy by a marriage agent, and he is originally from my village, our families have known each other for a long time, but his parents have a business in Wuhan, and I am going to marry him, oh, I'm sooo happy! I love him sooo much and my mother came down to meet his parents and everybody was so excited. I walked down the street with him and my mother said everybody looked at us in envy, because we make such a beautiful couple! Oh, I've never had a boyfriend before... Oh, I'm so excited! And so scared... His parents asked me for my date of birth today, because they want to consult an astrologer. Oh, I hope the result will be good, because I really don't want to break up! (Misty)

As Misty keeps talking, an older lady from Wuhan, who regularly practices yoga with us, sits down at our table to hear what the commotion is about. When she hears about Misty's marriage proposition, she immediately starts to fire questions at her. ‘What kind of family is this? What do they do? Where do they live?’ Misty explains the family’s circumstances: ‘They are originally from my hometown, but they now have a home in Wuhan!’ She looks at us meaningfully with her big, round eyes wide open before she continues to say: ‘They even have a business here, it’s a laundry business, and the best thing is: they need somebody to help with their accountancy!’ As Misty’s sudden interest in her accountancy notes starts to make sense to me, she explains why the prospect of marrying into this family excites her so much:

Their house is here in Wuhan, you know? That is so good! This family’s conditions are really quite good... and he, my boyfriend, is really good at negotiating contracts for the business... Okay, he’s not so handsome, my housemate already said that he’s not handsome enough for me, but he’s really nice... He has some pimples, but I think he’s okay, he’s quite tall. I think I'm really very suitable for this family... I can work in their company... Their son didn’t go to university, he only went to high school, but I think he's very skilled. (Misty)

Misty turns out not to be so lucky. Events unfold exactly as predicted by the older lady, who had said: ‘They will not tell you about the astrologer. If the result is good, you will notice, because they’ll invite you again. If it’s not good, they’ll just take distance from you.’ Within a few days, Misty starts noticing that her boyfriend stops responding to her text messages and no longer invites her out on dates. She is heartbroken and suffers from crying fits for weeks to follow. Without a clear explanation, Misty is thrust back into singlehood, feeling mistreated and disillusioned. She had experienced a few days in which she felt the ground under her feet solidify, looking at a stable future within a family that, despite not having urban registration, owned an apartment and business in Wuhan. This marriage would have ended her struggle of trying to make a living in Wuhan. But, this time luck is not on her side and she is left with only a palpable sense of loss.

Marrying into Stability
In Misty’s discussion of why this potential husband and family were ‘so good’, the importance of their sturdy base in the city was very clear. She emphasised again and again that this family had both a home and a business in Wuhan and that these facts trumped all other considerations. It did not matter to her that she did not find her potential husband very attractive. After refusing to show his picture for a few days, she finally scrolled through some images on her phone, showing me the boy’s pictures, while mumbling that he was ‘ugly’ and pointing out that those pictures in which he seemed okay were photoshopped by her: ‘He doesn't look like that in real life.’ She also did not mind that he was only high school educated. She did not even seem particularly impressed by or interested in his personality. She was terribly excited about the match, because it would improve her unstable life in the city. Misty was unemployed at the time when she was introduced to this potential husband after having been fired from her last job at a real estate company only two weeks before. In the eighteen months since her graduation, she had worked in a factory, a car dealership, a health club, a yoga school, and a real estate company. None of these jobs worked out the way she had hoped, and now her strong belief in a rosy, urban future was mainly predicated on her expectation of marrying into a family that would launch her straight into an urban middle-class lifestyle. Her last job, with the real estate company, had only lasted for six weeks. At the same time, Misty’s mother had long suffered from health problems for which she could not get proper treatment in their hometown and she therefore visited Misty every few weeks to see a doctor in the city. Misty was keen to not only put an end to her tiresome experiences on the labour market, but also to gain better access to urban medical services for her mother. Marrying into a family with a strong basis in Wuhan was therefore an attractive prospect to her.

---

60 In rural China, introduction by a marriage agent (meipo) is very common. Generally, the prospective groom’s family approaches a family with a single daughter through the agent. In the case of a successful match, the groom’s family pays the agent a matching fee. In Hubei province in 2016 a fee of approximately 2000 renminbi (250 euro) was the going rate.
Historically, Chinese marriages have always been an important way for families to establish alliances and exchange labour (Zhang 2000: 60). A daughter’s marriage was a unique opportunity for families to be economically rewarded for raising girls (Croll 1987), whereas a son’s marriage was crucial for continuing the family line and safeguarding the future security of the family as a whole (Tang 1995). Especially in rural China, where parents have relatively limited access to state-provided social security, marriage is still important for families’ status and stability today. It is also in rural China where the country’s imbalanced sex ratio, a consequence of nearly four decades of population planning and a persistent preference for sons, is most pronounced. Between 1980 and 2000, 22 million more men than women were born, and in Hubei province 110 to 113.5 boys were still born to every 100 girls in 2015 (Greenhalgh 2013; UNICEF 2015). The continued wish for sons in China’s countryside also explains why most women have brothers. At the same time, the lack of brides has given rise to exacerbated hypergamy, and young women and their family members now aspire to achieve stability and social upward mobility through marriage. Given that in recent decades many rural families have given up farming and engaged in rural-urban migration, a daughter’s marriage has also become an opportunity for improving the family’s connection with the city (May 2010).

The main symbol of urban stability is being a homeowner. Since the disassembly of the urban social housing system during the reform era, China has changed from a predominantly public housing regime to a country with one of the highest rates of private home ownership in the world, and the ability to purchase real estate has become an important marker of status and belonging (Fleischer 2007; Zhang 2010). Yet, homeownership is much more common among China’s urban than its rural population. At the time when many of China’s urban citizens were encouraged to buy their apartments from their work units as state-owned companies were broken up and privatised, rural communities returned to the family-sized plots system, which merely increased the control they had over still collectively-owned land. The subsequent urban ‘real estate boom’ further widened the rural-urban wealth gap, and made it increasingly difficult for rural-urban migrants to enter the urban real estate market at a later point. For youths like Misty, constantly landing low-paying jobs and without any family capital to back her up, it is therefore nearly impossible to buy property in Wuhan. Marrying into a family that has been able to do this and that can therefore offer her the rare opportunity to really build up a stable existence in Wuhan is thus a very attractive opportunity for her.

The central importance of real estate in marriage negotiations was also corroborated by other experiences in the field. When attending a wedding in rural Hubei, I was taken, together with the rest of the bridal party, to the ‘marriage house’, which is the apartment that was purchased as part of the wedding negotiations. We were informed of the house’s number of square metres, square metre price, and all the furniture and facilities that the house was equipped with, including air conditioning, a washing machine, and a flat-screen television. During and after the wedding, the details of the house were discussed at length in conversations about whether the bride had made a good match. It was said that the pre-wedding negotiations had gone on for two years. A year later, Morning Sunshine informed me via weixin, the popular Chinese social media application, that she had gotten engaged. She immediately followed her announcement with a text message that told me that her first date with her now fiancé had been a visit to the house he owned, and laid out the particulars of the house. Her message read:

‘It is 90 square meters, has two bedrooms, one living room, one bathroom, and it is located in Huangshi city, a smaller city close to Wuhan. It’s close to a big shopping centre’ (Morning Sunshine).

Morning Sunshine, the young woman who dropped out of her accountancy degree with a nervous breakdown, had originally intended to return to university after her recovery. Yet, when the time came, the university failed to let her back in, claiming that she would only be allowed to return if one of her parents would move to a location near the campus to support her in her studies. With this being impossible for her parents, who barely scraped by working as migrant labourers in Wuhan, Morning Sunshine dropped out indefinitely. During the two years that followed, she worked in a large number of jobs. She lived in a room in her sister’s rented apartment, and saved every penny to pay back the bank loans she had accumulated as a student. She first worked in a milk-tea shop, then, in real-life order: a restaurant, an English language training centre, a shop selling aloe vera beauty products, a beauty parlour, a ‘financial investment’ company, and an online gaming company. In the beauty parlour, Morning Sunshine was asked to leave with only a ‘consolation salary’ of 50 renminbi (6 euro) per day that she worked there. The ‘financial investment’ company had not offered her a base salary at all, only paying her commission per extra staff member she recruited into the company. In the eleven days she worked there, she had recruited one person, for which she received 600 renminbi (78 euro).

---


62 The number of square meters sold on the real estate market has increased from 27 million in 1991 to 55 million in 2006, and 157 million in 2016 (Zhang 2010: 1; statistics provided by NBSC). Link to statistics: http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/pressrelease/201701/t20170122_1456808.html

---
When we met in the summer of 2017 Morning Sunshine looked pale and tired. The night shifts at the online gaming company were hard for her, and she had been sad to see her dreams crumble in the last few years. She finished her long update of all the work she had done since we saw each other last, with a sad, ‘My heart is tired’. Knowing how hard these years had been for her, I was not surprised to receive the news that Morning Sunshine had decided to be married. The young man who would be her husband had been introduced to her family by the marriage agent in her home village. Morning Sunshine was completely unexcited. She had long been in love with another man, who she had dated on and off for some years, but who could neither afford the marriage house or the bride’s price. The potential groom to whom she was introduced was not only more suited because the families had vaguely known each other for a long time, his family also had their own business. Moreover, they had already bought a house for their son in a nearby small city, and were able to pay a bride’s price as well. In the knowledge that the man she had dated before could never meet these requirements, Morning Sunshine never told her mother about him, and quietly renounced herself to the fate of marrying the man to whom she was introduced. With an air of defeat she went through all the steps leading up to the wedding, meeting the family, taking the wedding pictures, making preparations. Without making her feelings known to her mother, she sometimes privately complained to me via text: ‘I’m just going to have to marry this man who loves himself a little too much’. Morning Sunshine, whose family recently lost their land to a land consolidation project, forcing her parents to become labour migrants for the first time in their lives in their mid-fifties, felt like she had no choice. Her year in university had been expensive and her experiences on the urban labour market had been dreadful, so she could not afford to marry the ‘wrong’ man.

The rapid ‘emaciation of the countryside’ (Yan 2008), discussed in Chapter One, has led Chinese youths to turn away from countryside living en masse. This change has greatly affected marriage practices among rural Chinese youths. Uprooted by rapid social change, rural female graduates do not want to spend a lifetime ‘floating’, the word often used to – disapprovingly – describe the lifestyle of the generations of labour migrants who have worked in the cities since the 1980s, characterised by a lack of stability and local rights – disapprovingly – describe the lifestyle of the generations of labour migrants who have worked in the cities since the 1980s, characterised by a lack of stability and local rights (Solinger 1999). These young women, having gone through long educational trajectories aimed at achieving urban, white-collar lifestyles, wish to ‘settle’ in the city. Misty and Morning Sunshine are both examples of education migrants who at one point were very ambitious and career-driven, but after having been disappointed with their success in the education system and on the urban labour market came to believe that ‘marrying well’ was essential for their future stability. For both of these young women, the extreme labour mobility they experienced in the years after graduation shifted their focus from their individual careers to marriage. Following the often-heard explanation ‘marrying well is more effective than doing well’, they hoped to achieve social mobility and, especially, stability in urban society through marriage. Their yearning for stability made them foreground pragmatic considerations when choosing a marriage partner, with a strong focus on the partners’ ability to provide a house.

Marriage and Love

The potent romantic ideal that puts forward that ‘real love’ is pure, blind, located completely in the realm of passion and affection, and devoid of interests other than the emotional, has quickly gained ground across the globe. Studies show that nowadays young people from Pakistan to China, and from Polynesia to Malawi, dream of being swept off their feet by a soul mate rather than entering an arranged marriage (Lindholm 2006: 5). Yet, for romantic love to be considered a good basis for marriage is a rather modern development, first noted in 19th century Europe.63 Earlier, in both non-Western and Western societies, such as the Greek and the Roman, marriage was considered vital for the survival of clans and families, and thus partners were chosen for their promise of advancing the collective economically and politically (Coontz 2006; Lindholm 2006: 11).

It is against this backdrop that I analyse the approaches to love and marriage taken by my informants, whose conflicting experiences of love highlight the ongoing currency of the age-old idea about the separation of love and marriage. Yet, this is, of course, not an either-or question. The fact that Misty and Morning Sunshine’s considerations were mainly pragmatic does not mean that their marriages will be loveless. There are many societies in which the expectation is that love will blossom after marriage (Hamon & Ingoldsby 2003). In fact, after Morning Sunshine’s wedding on October 1st, 2018, she wrote that she ‘now started to love and accept her husband’. At the same time, love is such an enigmatic and personal concept that can be interpreted in a great variety of ways, that it is impossible to measure and difficult to judge. During her short period of courtship, Misty talked endlessly about ‘being in love’, and her happiness about making these marriage choices in an era of ‘free love’, in contrast to her parents’ era of arranged marriage. Yet, in some cases the language of romantic love was evoked to describe a genuine excitement about bonds made for largely economic reasons, and as I will show in a later section, even in this period of ‘free love’ parents remain heavily involved in marriage choices.

63 Of course, the human ability to be passionately in love has a much longer history and has never been unique to Euro-American culture, despite the widespread and euro-centric belief that romantic love is a Western invention (Jankowiak & Fischer 1992). A great body of literary evidence studied by Yehudi Cohen (1969) shows that the practice and ideology of romantic love was well developed in many pre-modern non-Western societies, including Japan, China, India, and the Middle East (Lindholm 2006).
Anna also spoke a lot about the dilemma of love and marriage. Before seriously dating anybody, she had been convinced that it was important to keep feelings of affection and ‘reality’ separate, saying: ‘these are two different things’. She reflected on previous infatuations, explaining that she had had passionate feelings for men before, but had not considered them important. ‘You also have to think about reality, and consider whether the person is suited for you. This is very important for your future. So I wouldn’t let such an important decision, about marrying somebody, be directed just by my feelings. You have to think about reality.’ When she talked about ‘reality’, Anna meant the day-to-day situation of having to get by, needing a place to live, and being able to afford everything that is needed for having one’s own family. Anna has lived on the Foxconn factory ground ever since she started working there and naturally hoped that her marriage would improve her living conditions in the city. Interestingly, Anna’s dating practices did not completely align with her tough words. When she sometimes went on dates she seemed as interested in the young men’s personalities, interests, and even horoscopes, as in their financial situation. In her considerations of her partners, she surely applied a bottom line – the men had to be at least as educated as her, prove to be hard-working, and have a ‘promising future’.

Anna fell in love with Tang, a young man introduced to her by a colleague. Anna and Tang both grew up in Hubei province in families with a rural background, and with parents who worked as migrant labourers, but whereas Anna had a Bachelor’s degree from a Hubei university, Tang had a Master’s degree from a Beijing university, which is considered more prestigious. After having established that the match was suitable, they started communicating on the Chinese messaging app and talking on the phone. Having intensively communicated for two months, Anna was certain that Tang was her ‘Mr Right’. It was not just his education and his current internship with Petrochina in Shandong province, but also their open communication and shared interests that she liked. ‘They brightened up each other’s days by sending each other gifts. After two months of talking, Tang made use of a short break at work to take the overnight train to Wuhan to meet Anna. Escaping Wuhan’s summer heat, the couple spent the day in a mall, having snacks and watching a movie. At night Tang slept at his brother’s house in Wuhan, before returning to Shandong province the next day.

EtUographies of love, intimate relationships, and marriage show that passion and romantic feelings are universal human experiences, and that they are expressed and given meaning in a variety of ways much too great to be discussed within the scope of this chapter. The etUographies tackling questions about the intricacies of love range, among others, from studies among sex workers in the United States and Europe (Bernstein 2010) to Philippine ‘mail-order’ brides marrying into the United States (Constable 2003), changing marriage practices in a transnational South Indian Muslim community (Osella 2012), and love-letter writing among youth in Nepal (Ahearn 2001). One the one hand these etUographies provide evidence that the ‘discourse on romantic courtship and companionate marriage, expressed in the idiom of love, has become a prominent marker of the modern around the world’ (Donner 2012: 2). Yet, at the same time, the more pragmatic considerations that were previously mostly associated with ‘traditional’ and arranged marriages certainly continue to play a role, even if they are, in the words of Nicole Constable, ‘often denied, mystified, mediated, transformed, or disguised’ (2009: 58).

To better understand the cases of the young, Chinese female graduates discussed in this chapter it is very important to contextualise their experiences of love. Although marriage rates in China are dropping and people in the big cities are marrying later and later, marriage is still considered of utmost importance by rural graduates and their parents. It is important to know that for young women like Misty, Morning Sunshine, and Anna, it would be very difficult to leave behind this time of precarious contracts and dorm-living without marriage. At the same time, their lives do not allow for much dating. Anna, for example, has lived on the Foxconn company terrain on the far-away outskirts of Wuhan since 2015 where she is mainly surrounded by female office workers. Misty currently works in a restaurant in a smaller city, and lives upstairs from it in a dorm room. Both of these young women are dating young men who work in far-away cities and maintain their relationships through exchanging presents and talking on the phone. Anna especially uses very romantic language to discuss her relationship, yet she is not afraid of pointing out her boyfriend’s good qualifications and ‘promising future’ as important reasons for loving him. In a similar way, Misty referred to the advantageous positioning of her former fiancé’s family when she talked about how deeply in love she was. The ways in which they experience romance and express their feelings blurs the binary lines between relationships that are ‘traditional’, pragmatic, and kinship-driven and those that are modern, romantic, individualistic, and based on ‘free love’. In fact, these observations challenge the way in which studies on love tend to juxtapose practical considerations and feelings of affection, creating the illusion of material and emotional interests existing in realms completely separated from one another. Think, for example, about Misty, who felt strong emotions of love and excitement exactly because of the promise of security the proposed marriage candidate embodied.

Rural and Highly Educated Women
To understand why it is difficult for female graduates to achieve social mobility and stability in the cities it is important to consider their stories within an intersectional theoretical framework that allows for a multiple-axis analysis. As it stands, female rural graduates are not only confronted by obstacles as a result of their gender, but also face discrimination.
on the labour and marriage markets as a result of their rural status. Intersectionality, a theoretical concept coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1991, challenges essentialism in identity politics and enables scholars to consider the ‘crossing’ of multiple layers of oppression simultaneously. For young women like Misty, Anna, and Morning Sunshine, this means that their educational and career trajectories have been curbed by their rural backgrounds as well as their gender.

In the previous chapters of this dissertation, I have argued that even though ‘being rural’ means little to these graduates, who have often spent very little of their lives in the actual countryside, their background as well as their ‘rural’ registration has an effect on their life trajectories because it puts them at a disadvantage within the education system, as well as on the labour and marriage markets. When it comes to marriage, rural and urban youth rarely cross paths. Research on inter-hukou marriages indicates that real rural-urban marriages are still very rare and that when rural women marry urban men (the other way around is extremely uncommon), marriage partners do not relate to each other as social equals (Fan & Huang 1998; Lu 2004; Lui 2016).

Concerning gender relations, it is mostly the studies focusing on urban China that argue that China’s one-child policy and the subsequent gender imbalance have contributed to the empowerment of young Chinese women. In the cities, the one-child policy was much more strictly enforced and in lieu of sons, parents invested more seriously in their daughters’ education (Fong 2002; Lee 2012). Scholars researching ‘gendered educational expectation’ in rural areas report mixed results (Li & Tsang 2003; Hannum, Kong & Zhang 2009). More importantly, my research shows that the increased participation of women in education should not immediately be understood as the strengthening of the position of young women in Chinese society without considering the meaning that is attributed to their education as well as parents’ motivations behind educational investments. During my fieldwork I found that the meaning of young women’s education was often contested by their parents as well as their peers. Helena Obendiek, who conducted research among rural graduates in Gansu province (2016), argues that parents invest in their daughters’ education with the explicit aim of improving their position on the marriage market and overcoming the rural-urban divide. Similar to Obendiek’s findings, my research shows that women’s educational capital is often exchanged on the marriage market for what Obendiek calls ‘a geographical advantage’ (1266), by which she refers to the opportunity to move to a geographical area that is wealthier or relatively more urbanised. Subsequently, and in contrast to young men, whose dedication to their careers made them good husbands and fathers, women are expected to show their dedication to their families by sacrificing their careers. One young male graduate expressed this idea in the following manner:

Women educate themselves for marriage. If they only finish high school, not many people want to marry them. Educated people think differently, so it is important for a couple to have a similar level of education. It’ll help them get along and they’ll have things to talk about. And... what’s even more important... an educated girl will will raise her kids differently. To have an educated woman as a mother is very important for the next generation. (Xiao)

Xiao made these claims in the presence of his sister and Anna, both one year his senior. The young women, both graduates and office workers, acknowledged his point earnestly. Anna sighed: ‘For women, family will always be more important than career anyway.’ Xiao’s sister added: ‘Yes, and it’s important to make the right marriage choice for women... especially when they’re educated’.

That women’s education does not necessarily help to diminish social gender stratification has long been discussed by scholars in the United States. The book Educated in Romance by Holland and Eisenhart (1990) argues, based on a ten year study in two universities in the southern United States, that a ‘culture of romance’ has caused talented women to scale down their career aspirations in order to marry, accepting job positions economically inferior to those of their husbands. Additionally, Goldin (1992) referred to those degrees obtained with the aim of becoming a better wife and mother as the ‘Mrs. degree’. Moreover, around the world, in areas ranging from Egypt to China and the United States, it has been observed that a relatively large share of female university graduates remain unmarried (Solomon 1985; Cookingham 1985; Liu 2015; Fincher 2016). In China, highly educated single women are regularly disparagingly referred to as ‘left-over women’ in the media and popular speech (Fincher 2016).

Female graduates are keenly aware of the fact that their ambition could hurt their chances on the marriage market. The current trend of hypergamic marriage practices makes it difficult for successful women to find marriage partners; the higher they climb on the ladder of success, the fewer potential suitors. Women’s success on the labour market has therefore become a double-edged sword, since it can implicate their downfall on the marriage market. An often raised example of these dynamics in Chinese popular culture is Andi, a character in the popular TV series ‘Ode to Joy’ about five women living in a Shanghai high rise.64 The scenes that portray Andi in the series move between showing her as a brilliant, wealthy and beautiful career woman, and a lonely and sad figure working away in the evenings.

---

64 The popular tv-series is called huanlesong in Mandarin and is available on www.iqiyi.com
behind her laptop to the sound of dramatic music. Andi, who was interestingly given this typically male name, was both admired for her intelligence and pitied for her loneliness by fans of the show.

This dynamic of women’s success diminishing their prospects on the marriage market is nothing new. Beverly Hooper (1984) drew on survey results published in the Beijing Review in 1983 to illustrate that Chinese male university graduates were reluctant to marry female graduates: ‘The 1983 survey of ten higher learning institutions in Beijing found that only 28% of male students wanted their future spouse to have a university degree. (In contrast, 79.5% of female students said they would prefer to marry university graduates.)’ (1984: 33). Moreover, the same survey showed that 50 percent of the male students agreed with the Confucian statement: ‘A woman without talent is virtuous.’ The analysts of this survey therefore concluded that men wanted their future wives to be devoted wives and mothers and that they were afraid of a lengthy educational trajectory making them lose their ‘traditional feminine virtues of gentleness and devotion’ (quoted in Hooper 1984 from the Beijing Review, no 37, 1983: 26-27). The contemporary debates on China’s urban ‘left-over women’ (Fincher 2016; Liu 2015) illustrate that these ideas should not yet be considered outdated and even note a resurgence of patriarchal traditions (Fincher 2016; Ji 2015).

In today’s China, the tension between ‘doing well’ and ‘marrying well’ is well-captured by the popular concept of the hero woman (nuqiangren), which describes a female go-getter; a strong, adventurous and successful woman who is ambitious and independent minded.65 During my fieldwork women often used this term to explain what they were not. The mention of hero women tends to evoke strong reactions: ‘I am definitely not a hero woman’ or, disapprovingly, ‘I don’t want to be that kind of woman’. These reactions should be understood in relation to new masculine ideals in post-reform China. Since masculinity is increasingly defined by a man’s economic status, his entrepreneurial ability and the power to provide and consume (Zhang 2010: 186), femininity has come to entail outdated and even note a resurgence of patriarchal traditions (Fincher 2016; Ji 2015).

These ideas all came together in the often-heard statement: ‘for women, marrying well is more effective than doing well’. This claim was supported with stories about, for example, a female high school classmate who had not attended university but rather moved directly to Shenzhen, one of China’s southern megacities. In Shenzhen, this young woman first worked in a manufacturing job, but soon after her arrival met a rich man whom she married and now she was better off than most of her high school classmates who went to university. ‘You see? A girl can do well in school or in her job, but it’s never as good as marrying a rich man’, Xiao said. His sister followed up with a story about a 30-year-old single, female friend who had warned her against waiting too long for marriage: ‘Don’t wait too long, because as soon as you go beyond 26 or 27 years old, suddenly nobody will want to marry you anymore’, was her advice. This friend felt like she had waited too long to marry, while she enjoyed working in a good job in Shenzhen, and now regretted ‘wasting her time’ and missing out on marriage opportunities.

The notion that for women marriage should be prioritised over education and career can give rise to tension between mothers and daughters. In the case of Morning Sunshine, her mother’s lack of belief in the value of her education was detrimental to her ability to stay motivated while studying for her accountancy degree. When she was trying to return to university after her medical leave, she was met with a lot of resistance from her mother, who made clear that she considered further investment in Morning Sunshine’s education completely useless and wanted her to get married urgently. In the evenings, when Morning Sunshine and her mother sat together in their bedroom in the bare village home, conversations often turned heated when the topic of her education came up. Morning Sunshine’s mother argued vehemently against the idea of her return to school the following September: ‘What’s the use of that? It’s a shit school and you’ll be 24 years old when you graduate! Everybody’s already married!’ Clearly suffering from these attacks, Morning Sunshine would stare at the wall in front of her, quietly repeating, if talking to herself, that she would go back to school, no matter what. Yet, as time went on, and her previous university gave her a hard time re-enrolling, while the jobs she was holding in the meantime

65 The Chinese word nuqiangren translates literally to woman-strength-person, but the hero woman translation is commonly used.
always demanded too much for too little, Morning Sunshine saw no other option than to go ahead with the marriage after all.

**Julia: a Trailblazer**

As we stumble down the stairs of Julia’s home carrying the bags and suitcases she brings back with her to Shanghai after the New Year celebrations, her mother keeps saying: ‘Make sure to bring a boyfriend home next year! Don’t you be coming home alone!’ Julia is at that time still employed at the Shanghai fashion brand. As we continue our way to the bus stop, she whispers to me, annoyed: ‘Hear that, my whole life she’s been at me, forbidding me to date anybody in high school and university, because I had to concentrate on my education, and now she just expects me to find some husband like this.’ We wait for the bus with her mother, her brother, and Anna, who is Julia’s best friend. Little do we know that Julia, instead of thinking about getting married soon, is making plans to leave her 6000 rmb (750 euro) per month (double the amount of most of her peers in Wuhan) job to pursue a completely different career in Shenzhen. In the months that follow, Julia experiences a tumultuous phase in her career, rapidly going in and out of jobs. Throughout this period, her mother, from whom Julia inherited her fiery character, phones her regularly, saying: ‘Make sure to bring a boyfriend home next year!’ She argues that her family relies on Julia, instead of thinking about getting married soon, is making plans to leave her 6000 rmb (750 euro) per month (double the amount of most of her peers in Wuhan) job to pursue a completely different career in Shenzhen. In the months that follow, Julia experiences a tumultuous phase in her career, rapidly going in and out of jobs. Throughout this period, her mother, from whom Julia inherited her fiery character, phones her regularly, saying: ‘Make sure to bring a boyfriend home next year!’ She argues that her family relies on Julia marrying soon, since her marriage is expected to provide her mother with the funds for her brother’s marriage. When I visit Julia in Shenzhen after she has been there for only a few weeks, she tells me despondently:

> My mother doesn’t talk to me anymore. She is mad, because I stopped dating a guy who she thought was great. He was tall, had a stable income, a good job, and a house and a car. Even a PhD degree. I met him at a speed-dating event. There were seven girls at the event, and only one guy, but he asked me to go out with him again. I should never have told my mum, but I just wanted her off my back for a while, and I knew it’d make her happy. Me and this guy... we didn’t get along, he thought I was too forward and opinionated for a girl, so we stopped seeing each other, and now my mother is furious that I didn’t bend over backwards to make him marry me. (Julia)

Two months later, Julia has a new boyfriend, a 25-year-old intern at Tencent, one of China’s biggest internet companies, named Liang, who had been her flatmate in Shenzhen. Again, her mother gets deeply involved in the relationship. After finding out that the young couple has the habit of splitting bills, Julia’s mother is terribly alarmed and convinced that this man has no serious intentions with her daughter. ‘Don’t you know that you can measure how much a man loves you by how much he spends on you?’ she yells through the phone.

Eventually, these constant phone fights with her mother lead Julia to ask Liang directly whether his spending are reflective of his intentions. To her surprise, having been genuinely in love with him, this conversation results in an explosive break-up, during which Liang admits to not having taken Julia very seriously as a girlfriend. ‘The status differences between them in terms of backgrounds, education, and occupation, had made him feel like she was ‘not good enough’ for him. Julia is left heartbroken, especially since this break-up means her mother will pick up her campaigning again.

Julia’s mother kept urging her daughter to marry, saying that she urgently needed to receive a bride’s price to pay towards her brother’s wedding. For her brother to marry, he must own a house and a car, and pay a bride’s price, which was at least 10,000 renminbi (1264 euro) in rural Hubei in 2016. With Julia’s father having passed away, there was a sense of urgency in the family. In recent years, they have all been separated, working in different cities in the south of China. Julia’s mother believes that it is very important for the future wellbeing of the family that Julia marries a rich man while she is still young enough. Yet, despite sharing this deep need for stability with her mother, Julia sees things differently. For her, nothing is more important than being able to depend on herself. She explains that not being able to help when her father was ill shaped her greatly, and has given her this determination to take care of herself and her family. She said, ‘I have seen what happens when a situation like that hits you. I have seen how you can only depend on yourself in that kind of situation, how nobody can support you. I want to be ready when something happens to me or my family again. I want to be able to support them.’ Julia’s brother has been a migrant worker since he was 16 years old and has ‘picked up bad habits’ like smoking, drinking and gambling, according to Julia and her mother. Living form hand to mouth, he has not been able to be of much support to the family. On the one hand, Julia resents him for skirting his responsibilities, but on the other hand she feels guilty in the knowledge that she is the one who was able to continue her education, whereas her mother would never have been able to afford education fees for two.

In September 2018 Julia surprises me with a message: ‘I just bought a house’. With her mother’s help, she managed to put down 270,000 renminbi (34,000 euro) for a yet to be built apartment in Jingmen, a smaller city in central Hubei province. It had taken her about one year of working extremely hard in a sales job to save up 190,000 renminbi (24,000 euro). After having purchased the apartment, Julia immediately indicated that she would probably ‘give’ the apartment to her brother. She also wrote that her mother had now told her that she finally realised that she has a fabulous girl. Julia’s impressive perseverance demonstrated her desire to gain control over her own life. She moved from one city to the next, in and out of countless jobs, always fighting courageously to prove to her mother that she did not need...
to get married in order to take care of her family. Julia was not principally opposed to the idea of marriage, but strongly disliked the feeling of being dependent on others. Now that she had achieved the greatest hurdle for many rural families by acquiring a house for her brother, who was therefore able to marry, she hoped that she would be rewarded with some freedom regarding her future decisions. Yet, after a few weeks of relative peace, Julia’s was deeply saddened when her mother started yet another campaign for her to marry. By telling her daughter that she would always be too embarrassed to retire from her migrant labour work as long as her daughter remained unmarried, she put Julia in an impossible position in which her resistance to marry became directly connected to her mother’s inability to retire. Having heard these words, Julia felt disappointed in the knowledge that no matter what she achieved, she could never make her mother proud as long as she remained unmarried.

Even though Julia had first been pushed to marry as soon as possible because this would help with the purchase of her brother’s house, the pressure did not subside after she almost single-handedly made this purchase. Her mother now argued that it was not only for her brother’s sake that she wanted Julia to marry, but also for her own sake, saying she could never retire as long as her daughter remained unmarried. Julia’s best friend Anna found herself in the almost opposite situation. Her family had struggled for years to get the money together for her brother’s wedding, a process her brother only slowed by buying a 120,000 renminbi (15,650 euro) car on a loan that he could not pay for, further increasing the financial stress his parents were already under. When I accompanied Anna on her visit home during the Chinese New Year’s celebrations of 2016, she gave her parents 10,000 renminbi, which was the equivalent of three months’ worth of salary, and almost half of what she had earned since her graduation. In 2019, when Anna was home for Chinese New Year again, her family members made clear to her that they did not consider it appropriate for her to marry before her brother had tied the knot, since it would be harder for her to make contributions towards her brother’s marriage as a married woman. Anna, feeling desperately unhappy with being asked to make sacrifices for her brother over and over again, fought with her mother and brother, and returned to Wuhan early.

Having to hand over their savings to be invested in their brother’s futures undermines these young women’s potential to build up their own lives in the city. Despite their hard work, Julia and Anna are not able to build up any capital of their own. Unable to hold on to their own savings and with their parents’ financial support all being direct away from them, it is no surprise that young women feel like they have no choice but to rely on marriage for their own future wellbeing. It is important to know that these family arrangements have far-reaching consequences for the position of women in Chinese society, especially in light of the fact that women generally cannot claim ownership of the marriage house.66

Conclusion

The stories in this chapter illustrate the difficulties faced by rural female university graduates in China as a result of limitations imposed on them because of their gender as well as their rural status. It is of utmost importance to understand these young women’s strategies in the context of their family situation. First of all, this chapter demonstrates that rural women’s weak position on China’s urban labour markets, as rural citizens and as migrants, makes them dependent on marriage for stabilising their lives. Second, in families with both sons and daughters, sisters contribute financially to their brothers’ futures. A young man’s marriage is an enormous expense for a rural family. Achieving a son’s marriage shapes rural household strategies for decades, directing the work and migration decisions of parents and siblings. Needing to support brothers has a profound effect on the position of young, rural women in Chinese society, who are left economically dependent on their future husbands after having handed over their personal savings and with no family capital left to be invested in their futures. This context is of great importance when we try to understand the impact of rural Chinese women’s increased participation in higher education on gender relations. This chapter shows that women’s education does not necessarily promote gender equality when deeply-rooted and age-old gender ideologies remain unchallenged, and that challenging dominant narratives and existing power relations is especially difficult when people are simultaneously subjected to multiple modes of repression. The cases in this chapter also illustrate how these female rural graduates are always balancing on the line between doing well and marrying well. Afraid of being very successful and being branded a ‘hero woman’ and diminishing their chances of finding a husband, women temper their ambitions and present themselves as ‘proper’ women who care more about family than career. Those ‘trailblazers’ who throw caution to the wind and give it their all to prove that they can be successful independently are met with a great deal of resistance from their family and friends.

66 Deborah Davis (2014) wrote about marriage and house ownership rights in China. Importantly, in 2001 a new law that strengthened individual property rights within marriage was introduced, which especially protected parental investments. First it was stated that parental investments in property made before the marriage should be seen as a gift to their child alone, but in 2011 an addition was made that stated that parents’ investments made in ‘immovable property’ after marriage are also protected (2014: 559).
CONCLUSION
We are all running very hard. We are all dream chasers.

(Xi Jinping, New Year’s speech 2019)

In 2018, more than eight million Chinese youth graduated from university, an enormous increase from one million graduates in 1998, the year in which the Chinese state started the rapid expansion of the country’s higher education system. Much of this rise was due to the increased enrolment of rural Chinese students into the higher education system, now making up more than half of the country’s university student population. This increase in student numbers, especially in the number of rural students, is often celebrated as a sign of development. In China, this rapid and immense educational expansion, also referred to as an ‘educational miracle’, is viewed as a great step towards further economic growth and alleviating social inequalities, particularly those between the country’s rural and urban populations. In this dissertation I have investigated what enrolment in higher education actually means in the lives of rural Chinese youth, and whether it enables them to challenge deeply ingrained rural-urban hierarchies as well as push the boundaries of the categories that make up these hierarchies. I have shown that these youth, who I refer to as ‘education migrants’, simultaneously experience success and failure as they become the first of their families to go to university, but tend to get stuck in the bottom segment of China’s stratified higher education system. Subsequently, these youths’ limited access to the higher education system leads to their being precariously positioned in the urban labour market and ultimately channels the translation of rural-urban inequalities into rural and urban youths’ differentiated access to urban jobs and capital. Educational expansion, while exacerbating rural-urban inequalities, makes these inequalities more invisible. After this expansion, rural students enrol in higher education in large numbers, which is considered to be a sign of inclusion and development within the education for development ideology promoted by the Chinese state as well as by international development agencies. Additionally, within this vision of development that views the rural and the urban as representing two opposite ends of a development spectrum, with the rural being the backward segment in need of development and the urban signifying the future and the goal of development, rural youths’ limited success within the education system is interpreted as proof of these students’ ‘low quality’ and the need for more development and educational expansion. Ethnographic research is important for looking behind these ‘ideological screens’ that promote education as an unequivocal force for growth, equality, and progress. It allows us to study what education migrants’ access to higher education, which is both increased and limited to the lower segment of the higher education system, really means for this group, taking into account those factors that determine the meaning of their education in the social and economic context in which they try to build their lives.

In this thesis, I have shown that there are crucial differences between different kinds of Chinese universities that strongly influence graduates’ opportunities in the urban labour market. In combination with the large body of research that demonstrates the segregation of rural and urban youth within the Chinese higher education system, with the majority of rural youth attending schools in the system’s bottom segment, this finding allows me to argue that the Chinese higher education system perpetuates rural-urban inequalities and translates them to an urban context. Yet the question remains: if education does not deliver on its promise of social mobility for rural Chinese youth, then why do they continue to study in such great numbers? To answer this question, it is important to think beyond the human capital approach, which measures the success of an educational trajectory by outcomes on the labour market alone. My research, alternatively, highlights the prices these students pay as well as other functions of higher education, including its function as a vehicle for rural-urban mobility and as a shield against the continued stigmatisation of rural citizens in Chinese cities.

In the introduction of this dissertation, I mentioned ‘the alarmists’ and ‘the enthusiasts’ as two camps with a vision of the position of education migrants in China. I explained that whereas the alarmists decry high unemployment among university graduates, the enthusiasts celebrate the successes of rapid educational expansion. In this concluding statement it will become clear that my research does not support either of these two visions. Whereas the alarmists focus strongly on the school-to-work transition and report high unemployment, I have shown that education migrants’ higher education is important for them in multiple ways and that they are rarely unemployed, yet are often employed under conditions of informality that might not be picked up by statistics-based research. The enthusiasts’ research, on the other hand, does not pick up on other important facets, including rural-urban inequalities and the possible downside of educational expansion.

The ethnographic approach of this research project has demonstrated that it is important to think beyond the human capital interpretation of education, and to instead consider what education means to youths themselves, in the context of their life trajectories and family histories. It shows that expanded educational opportunities for rural Chinese youth give rise to particular kinds of dreams and ambitions, aimed in particular at making stable lives for themselves in an urban environment. Yet, at the same time, structural inequalities within an education system considered to be fair and meritocratic also inspire feelings of

---

67 These numbers are based on statistics provided by the Chinese National Bureau of Statistics via: www.stats.gov.cn.
unworthiness and failure, with important consequences for the ways in which these youths view their own position in urban society.

This research has introduced education migrants as an emergent rural-urban migrant population that moves along the rural-urban spectrum through China's (higher) education system. It has shown that these youth are driven by new educational policies and a rural-urban developmentalist ideology. Important characteristics of this ideology are the idea that Chinese society is moving away from its agricultural past towards a predominantly urban (read: modern) future and the belief in the power of education to advance individuals within society, as well as society as a whole, on its path towards modernity. Education migrants are very important players in this narrative because they personify urbanisation with their newly acquired urban tastes, ideas, and visions for the future. Not only do they advance on the geographical rural-urban spectrum, but also, as the first in their families to attend university, they break with their family histories of agriculture and labour migration to join the ranks of university graduates. Does their education enable these youths to create a new stability and slow down the hyper-mobility experienced by themselves and their family members as a result of China's rapid rural-urban transition? And does the growing number of rural university students signal a breakthrough in historically hierarchical Chinese rural-urban relations?

This dissertation has focused on the connections between rural-urban migration and educational expansion, two processes that are both expressions of the development vision with an urban bias that has shaped Chinese society since the start of the reform era. Educational expansion drives rural-urban migration, as students move step by step from villages to towns and cities, where universities are located, throughout their educational trajectories. This means that rural-urban migratory patterns change as growing numbers of Chinese youth move to the city as students, and not as labour migrants, with important implications for the future of rural-urban relations in Chinese society. I have used the term ‘education migrants’ to emphasise these youths’ dual identity as an emerging type of rural-urban migrant and as the first generation of rural Chinese university students. This project has shown that it is important to study China’s educational expansion within the framework of the country’s greater rural-urban transformation, because it highlights the central role of mobility in educational trajectories. For education migrants, going to university is not only about ‘developing themselves’ and improving their position in the job market, but it is also a way of moving to the city and ‘becoming urban’. For the Chinese state, educational expansion provides the benefit of driving economic growth or lowering youth unemployment and is also a way to stimulate the rural-urban migration necessary to achieve ambitious urbanisation goals.68

There are several conclusions that can be drawn from this dissertation’s empirical chapters, which contribute to debates on rural-urban relations and educational expansion in China, as well as to broader discussions on education and equality, and education and mobility. In the following pages I will expand on these conclusions and how they contribute to existing debates.

Education Migrants

It is increasingly important to study education migrants as a separate group from labour migrants. Differentiating between these two migrant categories highlights important changes in Chinese rural-urban migration and reveals that in addition to the well-known drivers of Chinese rural-urban migration, which include rural-urban inequalities, technological developments in the agrarian sector, labour opportunities in urban areas, and relaxed mobility policies, China’s higher education system has now become a key facilitator of rural-urban migration. The fact that education migrants do not fit very well in conceptual frameworks used in existing studies – are they migrants? or are they students? – has made this study both exciting and sometimes confusing. One might ask whether these youths should be called ‘migrants’ at all. I have chosen to use this term because they are mobile actors who are made vulnerable by their lack of local networks and knowledge, as well as by their limited access to local rights and state services. Referring to this group as ‘migrants’ is meant to remind the reader of the precariousness of their position in urban society. Of course, these are not migrants who move directly from point a to point b. Education migrants do not necessarily have a ‘home’ from which they departed, and they do not always consider themselves to have arrived in a new destination. They live in a state of constant mobility, moved around first by the education system, and subsequently, with increased but still limited agency, in response to the whims of urban labour markets.

Existing studies have studied rural university graduates as ‘new generation migrants’ (Cheng 2014; He & Wang 2016), ‘intelligent migrants’ (Han 2010), and ‘the ant tribe’ (Si 2009; Chan & Lu 2011; Gu & Sheng 2012; He & Mai 2015; Brengnbæk 2016), describing these youths as a growing subsection of China’s labour migrants and as the inhabitants of urban ‘ant colonies’ that house the growing number of precariously positioned university graduates in Chinese cities. In contrast, this research views the emergence of this new migrant population as the outcome of Chinese educational policies aimed at promoting

---

68 The state’s urbanisation goals are described in the New-Type Urbanisation Plan (2014-2020).
urbanisation. As they move through the education system, education migrants become strongly oriented towards the city, envisioning themselves as future, urban white-collar workers. Their educational trajectories do not only inspire a desire for reaching across the rural-urban divide, which is the deepest divide within Chinese society, but also pushes the boundaries of the categories that make up this division. I have demonstrated that referring to education migrants as ‘rural youths’ is problematic, since their lives have become far removed from things generally associated with ‘the rural’, e.g. countryside living and agrarian work. The education migrants described in this dissertation who were not already born in towns in the first place often started boarding for the first time in primary school, and then continued living on school grounds in towns and small cities throughout middle and high school, as well as university. It is this continuous mobility rather than rurality that has been the key characteristic of their young lives. Yet, despite these youths’ weak connection to the countryside, their rural identities on paper as administered by the Chinese hukou-system, as well as their symbolic rural identities in the perception of their urban counterparts, including employers and classmates, continue to limit their opportunities in the city.

This research has demonstrated that youths’ educational experience inspires more permanent designs on urban life. After families have invested greatly in their children’s education, and youths have long lived away from home as they moved from one educational institute to the next, a return to the countryside after graduation has become unthinkable. In the villages, successful students’ achievements are celebrated with enrolment banquets and picture expositions on village squares that indicate the urban jobs they currently hold. It is clear that their graduation from university has launched them into a different category of citizen for whom it is unimaginable and even shameful to live in the village again. Of course, education migrants’ inability to return should also be understood in light of the rapid rural transformations happening in China, especially in relation to rural citizens’ access to land. As farmers either lose access to their land to land consolidation projects or are increasingly important, but not as visible in research on Chinese society. This research has highlighted the importance of the division between those with hukou-systems in studies of China’s rural-urban divide in recent years (e.g. Zhan 2011; Cheng 2014; Lan 2014; Jakimow & Barabantseva 2016). In fact, in 2017 Chinese second-tier cities started to allow education migrants to gain local hukou-registration, in an effort to attract talented youth, who are considered to bring economic growth, to settle in these cities. Education migrants thus have the opportunity to become administratively urban, yet they do not immediately jump on this opportunity. A similar lack of enthusiasm has previously been noted among labour migrants who were given the opportunity for hukou-conversion in some medium- and smaller-sized cities (e.g. Zhan 2011, Chen & Fan 2016). I have drawn three arguments from this observation. First, in addition to studying the effects of the hukou-system, it is important to note other mechanisms of exclusion that maintain the rural-urban divide, including the workings of the education system, the urban real estate market with its sky-rocketing prices, and identity-based forms of exclusion resulting from the stigmatisation of rural people in Chinese society. Education migrants have referred to their inability to overcome such hurdles to justify their lack of interest in acquiring urban hukou-status. Second, there are social divisions other than the rural-urban divide that are built upon the back of the hukou-system and which are increasingly important, but not as visible in research on Chinese society. This research has highlighted the importance of the division between those with hukou-registrations in first- and second-tier cities, following interlocutors’ explanations about the benefits attached to a Wuhan hukou-registration being incomparable to a hukou-registration in any of China’s first-tier cities, namely Beijing, Shanghai, or Guangzhou. Whereas a second-tier city’s hukou-registration is not considered very valuable, hukou-registration in a first-tier city is still considered a ‘golden ticket’, giving access to the country’s best medical and educational resources, as well as good pensions and an advantage in China’s most competitive real estate markets. Third, my research findings show that the variety in interest in the hukou-system between citizens differently positioned in Chinese society should be understood in relation to the ways people are already positioned in the existing social class structure and their expectations of social mobility in the future. For example, whereas youths who feel confident about purchasing urban real estate in the future, because they know they can count on family financial support and networks that give access to high-paying jobs, are interested in hukou-conversion for its ability to improve their access to this real estate market, it is harder to see the point of conversion for those who know they will never be able to make
such a purchase in the first place. Finally, it is also important to consider what kind of rural hukou-registration people are expected to give up, since some rural hukou-holders wish to hold on to their rights if they expect great compensation pay-outs when developers wish to build on their land, and it is not possible to reverse a hukou-conversion.

Education migrants’ lack of enthusiasm for hukou-conversion is not indicative of their longer-term plans for their futures. These youths plan to stay in the city permanently. Yet it is important that the permanence of their city lives is not mistaken for stability. In fact, achieving stability and slowing down the hyper-mobility that they have experienced throughout their lives is what most education migrants describe as their greatest desire. Expressing their feelings of fatigue regarding constantly moving from one place to the next, youths often wonder: ‘who wants to keep floating?’ Even when education migrants stay in one place their lives are marked by constant changes, as they go in and out of jobs, and frequently change residence. The trouble with education migrants’ connections to both rural and urban parts of China is that they fall in between several narratives and conceptualisations of belonging in Chinese society. Different to the rural-urban labour migrants who were seen as temporarily coming to the city to increase their rural household incomes, but continuing to have important roots in their home community, education migrants do not have that kind of safe haven to return to. They spent most of their young lives on school campuses in multiple locations, only visiting family members occasionally, and do not have a place in which they feel strongly rooted. Education migrants are often born into mobility. Their families have either already lived the migrants’ existence for decades or still farm in a place they call home, but have felt strongly determined to mobilise their children to ‘find a way out’ ever since they were born, realising that they might be the last generation to farm on family-sized plots. Education migrants’ rootlessness and inability to return is an important factor that contributes to their experience of precarity in the city.

In China’s intensely mobile society it has become a privilege to have ‘roots’, as in a place of familiarity, history, and embeddedness in local networks. Having these kinds of ‘roots’ gives legitimacy to claims of entitlement to resources in that particular environment, as illustrated in the debates about access to educational resources in the third empirical chapter of this dissertation. Education migrants’ subtle understanding of the advantages of being local over being ‘an outsider’, which is the most common word used colloquially to refer to migrants in Chinese cities, inspires them to employ a relatively flexible concept of ‘home’ as an act of defiance against the ‘outsider label’. Having grown up in various parts of Hubei province, the education migrants in this dissertation view Wuhan as a part of their extended home, and speak about staying within the provincial borders as ‘staying home’. Some youth identify as ‘Southerners’, and extend their idea of home to the south of China, including the megacities Guangzhou and Shenzhen, where many education migrants end up going to look for better jobs. These areas are considered closer to home and less different from Hubei province than, for example, Beijing, which is located a similar physical distance to the north. Their self-identification as southerners makes this orientation feel more natural, giving the impression that moving south is easier and closer to home. A closer look at these differently scaled imaginations of home and belonging reveals that education migrants cope with their feelings of uprootedness by broadening their idea of home. Of course, and as illustrated throughout this work, this one-sided claim does not protect them from being seen and treated as ‘ruralites’ and ‘outsiders’ by others, who might be equally aware of the advantage of being local and wish to protect their privileged position.

Even though education migrants wish to reduce the mobility they experience, this is not always an option, since not everybody can ‘afford’ to stay put. Men who are expected to make great investments for marriage unwillingly especially undergo bouts of hyper-mobility, during which they work in the southern megacities with the aim of ‘going home’. These undertakings often prove counterproductive when they extend into long periods of hustling in the economic margins of these cities, which offer even less opportunity for achieving stability. Moreover, when these young men managed to marry and buy marriage homes, more mobility was often required to earn the money necessary for covering mortgage expenses, leaving homes empty and newly-weds separated. Still, marriage and the purchase of real estate are the two most important strategies for education migrants to ‘settle down’. Owning real estate has become one of the most important markers of status and belonging in Chinese cities, and is considered even more important than a local hukou-registration. The importance of marriage for these education migrants is certainly heightened by their mobile lifestyle and desire to create a new stability.

Moving to the city as a student instead of as a labour migrant and entering the urban labour market as a university graduate is also meant to improve youths’ position in urban society and help create a new stability. Yet this proves difficult due to the low value of education migrants’ university degrees, leading to my argument regarding higher education systems’ potential to intensify inequalities in societies.

**Education and Equality**

The rapid expansion of the Chinese higher education system has gone hand in hand with the system’s stratification, making it very important to differentiate between types of universities when researching higher education systems. Moreover, research projects conducted in many corners of the world have shown that when highly stratified higher education systems intersect with existing inequalities, higher education systems exacerbate these inequalities...
In the case of China, there is a large body of research that shows that for students from rural backgrounds, access to higher education is mainly restricted to the bottom segment of the country’s higher education system. This research shows that the number of students from rural backgrounds in universities decreases as the institutional rank rises (e.g. Liu 2007, Qiao 2010, Hua 2015, Li et al 2015, Loyalka et al 2017). I have described how the Chinese higher education system consists of multiple layers that range from high-profile key point universities, which are well-financed institutes operating under the wing of the national Ministry of Education, to a range of provincial universities that operate with significantly less funding. For all Chinese youth decisions regarding university enrolment are crucial, since the status of the institute they are able to attend has a great effect on the kinds of labour opportunities available to them after graduation. Education migrants entering the urban labour market with sub-standard university degrees perpetuates the historic rural-urban division in this labour market and in Chinese society at large.

Ever since the state’s withdrawal from the urban labour market, educational credentials have become very important for achieving social mobility in urban Chinese society. In particular, acquiring degrees from China’s famous key point universities, which give access to top-level jobs in China’s liberalised labour market, has become an important strategy for elite and middle-class families to safeguard their children’s strong position in society (Fong 2004). Rural families’ ‘educational desire’ has not gone unnoticed as rural families have started to make great investments in their children’s educational trajectories, viewing the educational pathway as ‘the only way out’ of poverty and rural life (Kipnis 2011; Obendick 2016). I have shown that this educational pathway indeed facilitates the physical movement of great numbers of students from rural to urban areas, but that educational credentials often fail to promote the social mobility students had hoped for. China’s urban labour market exists in a dynamic relationship with the higher education system. Following the rapid expansion and stratification of the higher education system, vacancies now specify exactly which kind of university candidates must have attended in order to be taken into consideration. Many vacancies specify that only graduates from China’s key point universities may apply, but there are also employers who are more interested in graduates coming out of the lower end of the education system. In contrast to the media reports and academic research that claim a spike in youth unemployment following the rapid rise of the number of yearly Chinese university graduates (e.g. Bai 2006; Chan & Lu 2011; Bregnbaek 2016), my etiographic research shows that education migrants are rarely without work, a discrepancy that can be explained by a large informal labour market and untrustworthy statistics. In fact, in response to the increased number of university graduates, a white-collar segment of the informal labour market has come into existence. This segment consists of sales jobs that offer very little security, with salaries just over minimum wage, and the promise of three percent commissions on sales. In these jobs, youths work without labour contracts and regularly get fired without notice. The management regimes they work under cause stress and competition between colleagues, leaving education migrants feeling even more isolated. Having few people to rely on, education migrants feel close to their employers, sometimes to the point of idolising them. Sales jobs often lead to disappointing results, but are popular with education migrants because they are easy to find and offer both a white-collar working environment and the promise of future riches.

In the Chinese labour market, youths’ rural identities play an important role. In the informal job market where youth work under tough labour conditions, their ‘being rural’ makes them capable of ‘eating bitterness’ in the eyes of employers. Some employers seek out these youth purposefully, because their unfamiliarity with the law and lack of networks make them easily exploitable. From these employers’ recruitment practices it is clear that they work with an understanding of the connections between various layers of the higher education system and the rural-urban divide. The categories ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ can work as euphemisms to mask class relations in a society with a recent and violent political history of class eradication. The developmentalist ideology that has shaped Chinese state policy since the start of the reform era rather looks at the rural and the urban as two different ‘stages of development’, with the first clearly trailing behind the other. Bourdieu argued that especially in those places where the hereditary transmission of power and privilege is a social taboo, school systems work to conceal the reproduction of class relations (Bourdieu 1973; in Harker 1990: 95). The school system offers an ‘ideological screen’ that masks the economic calculations behind social and cultural practices and changes the face of the higher education system from a site where the in- and exclusion of social groups is organised to a land of opportunity, where inequalities are diminished and weak social groups find emancipation. This explains the disconnection between education migrants’ self-representation as ‘university graduates’, and their employers’ persistence in referring to them as ‘rural kids’. Both parties interpret the meaning of these university degrees obtained in the lower segment of the higher education system differently, one as proof of their successful completion of their studies, and the other as a certificate of rurality.

I ideological screens’ ability to mask dynamics leading to inequality has an effect on the ways education migrants perceive of themselves. It hides the ways in which these youths’ access to higher education is structurally limited and stands in the way of them evaluating their experience with any other language than the language of meritocracy and self-responsibility, fostering feelings of worthlessness and self-blame. Education migrants therefore often come out of the higher education system feeling that they got what they deserved and that the
obstacles and hardships they might meet in the future can be traced back to their self-inflicted educational failures.

Family and Gender

In this thesis, I have argued that it is crucial to study education migrants as part of a family unit, since it is otherwise impossible to understand their motivations and greater goals. These youths’ educational trajectories would have never been possible without the support of their families, making their university graduation a family achievement. Being the first person in their family to attend university can also create high expectations of what they will be able to achieve. Education migrants’ contradictory position of being considered a success story in their families, but at the same time finding themselves very weakly positioned on the urban labour market, causes them to feel pressured and frustrated as they struggle to live up to the expectations of their loved ones. Yet, the stakes are much greater than the desire to make one’s parents proud or feelings of indebtedness (Obendiek 2016). Despite many education migrants having spent long periods of time living apart from their families, they feel greatly attached to and responsible for their family members. Family members feel connected through their shared state of mobility, and the familial bond is a rare source offering a sense of security and purpose. The feeling of ‘only having each other to rely on’ motivates youth and parents alike to try hard in life. Rural families in Hubei province face two major challenges in today’s China. First of all, the rural pensions provided by the state are still almost non-existent at 660 renminbi (85 euro) per year. Education migrants’ parents have often not lived in the countryside for a long time themselves, and a ‘return’ is therefore not practical. In some cases, parents lost their land to a land consolidation project, and in other cases, they never had much land to start with. If parents wish to retire in, for example, Jingmen city, they will have to pay for renting an apartment, food, and medical fees in case of illness, and will therefore need their children’s financial support. Second, following decades of son preference and the one-child policy, the low number of marriageable women in rural Hubei province makes it very difficult for families to achieve marriage for their sons. Marriage costs are high, especially now that families will only agree to their daughters’ marriages after a (semi)-urban apartment has been bought for the new couple to live in and a generous bride’s price has been paid. A parent’s wish to see their child married goes beyond notions of family honour and continuation. In particular, those families that have already lived through long histories of mobility want to see their children settle down. They do not want their sons to ‘keep floating’ from city to city, and job to job, never able to start a family or have a home to call his own. These two family goals are interrelated. Parents do not want to retire before their children are settled. And when elderly, and sometimes sickly, parents continue to practice labour migration themselves, working in labour-intensive industries, education migrants feel pressured to achieve the success that will enable themselves or their brothers to marry, and therefore their parents to retire.

The cases presented in this dissertation show that female graduates in particular are being pulled in multiple directions. If they want to do well by their family, they might have to give up their personal ambitions. Even if they are successful in their careers, they might still disappoint their parents by remaining unmarried. Young women are simultaneously positioned on the labour and the marriage market. Navigating both markets while supporting their families sometimes resembles a real balancing act. Not only are they expected to marry themselves, but they are also asked to help finance their brothers’ marriages. Due to son preference most young women have brothers, which means that their parents face the almost impossible task of realising a son’s marriage, for which they require their daughter’s help. Young women contribute their savings towards this goal. Sometimes they are encouraged to marry early in order for their family to receive the bride’s price. Other times they are asked to marry late, so that they can financially contribute towards their brother’s marriage for as long as possible. Whichever strategy a household may choose, it is clear that a son’s future is always considered of greater importance than a daughter’s future, and that all family members are expected to contribute however much they can to a son’s future marriage. These dynamics leave daughters not only without personal savings, but also without the hope of any family capital ever being invested in their own future development, increasing young women’s dependence on their husbands for financial security as well as housing, a situation further worsened by women’s inability to claim ownership rights on the marriage house. In discussions about education and gender equality, scholars often count girls’ improved access to education as a measure of women’s emancipation (e.g. Tsui & Rich 2002; Tuwor & Sossou 2008; Zeng et al 2014).69 My research shows that it is important for scholars to take the meaning that is ascribed to women’s education into consideration. Women’s education can easily be woven into patriarchal narratives that view educated women as better mothers and wives, and educational capital as an important form of marriage capital. In the Chinese context, for women to be career-oriented is considered to be damaging for their position on the marriage market, as illustrated by the concept of the ‘hero woman’. Of course, there are young women who are determined to defy all expectations and follow their own path. Yet, these ‘trailblazers’, who I have described in Chapter Four, have to deal with pressure and judgements from family members as well as society at large, causing great emotional suffering.

69 For an overview of the literature on ‘women’s development’ and education, please see LeVine, LeVine & Schnell (2001).
Education and Displacement

Education is often considered a positive force promoting economic growth, equality, and empowerment. The explosive manner in which China has ‘revamped’ its education system is celebrated as exemplary for other countries (Yeravdekar & Tiwari 2014), and regarded as proof of China’s emergence as a new world power (Li et al 2008; OECD 2009). In Chinese newspapers, articles about the ongoing ‘educational revolution’ and its benefits for China’s economy are ubiquitous. Scholars have long voiced critiques about the Chinese education system’s tendency to exacerbate inequalities and push through an agenda of development (Wan 2006; Ross & Wang 2010; Wu 2016). Moreover, numerous academic studies and international news reports claim a crisis of youth employment following a spike in the number of Chinese university graduates. This study has argued against these claims about high unemployment, but has also demonstrated that education migrants often work under dire circumstances. Observing university graduates’ difficulties on the labour market and reading about intensifying inequalities makes one wonder: Why does the Chinese state continue to grow its higher education system at record speed? Is there more to educational expansion than the proclaimed desire to achieve economic growth and promote equality? Are there alternative goals to which this expansion contributes?

This dissertation has described China’s educational expansion as part of the process of rural-urban transformation, which has led to the argument that educational expansion can also be looked upon as a strategy for displacement. My research has shown that China’s land system is rapidly changing, especially in Hubei province with its plains suitable for larger scale agriculture. Families lose access to their family-sized plots when land consolidation projects and ‘dragon head enterprises’ are introduced (Zhang, Oya & Ye 2015; ScÜeider 2017). These changes are of great consequence for the rural-urban divide in Chinese society. Since the 1980s, the country has seen significant rural-urban mobility, but during the last two decades the Chinese state has started to facilitate the movement of rural youth to the city via the country’s education system that is shaped in such a way that each step forward within the education system is a step towards the city. Village primary schools lead to town middle school, and then to city high schools and universities. Since the first nine years of Chinese students’ education have become compulsory in 1986, it could be said that rural-urban migration can no longer be avoided by Chinese youths. Recent policy statements indicate that the Chinese national government aims to expand its compulsory education, making high school attendance universal in coming years (Yue et al 2018), which will intensify this dynamic.

Scholars who have studied China’s ‘agricultural modernisation’, which is the term used by the Chinese government to describe the country’s rural transformation, point out that busting the myth of the Chinese peasant economy is long overdue (Zhang, Oya & Ye 2015). As capital has entered Chinese agriculture, small-scale farming has become less and less viable. China’s National Strategic Plan for Rural Vitalisation (2018-2022) also emphasises the importance of land consolidation and moving away from small-scale farming to increase efficiency (Long, Zhang & Tu 2019). The Chinese state makes no secret of its ambitious urbanisation goals. The connection between promoting rural-urban movement and changes in the agrarian sector is clear: in order to move onto large-scale, industrial farming, rural landholding families need to give up their access to land. Of course, the push for education within the framework of ‘education for development’ goes hand in hand with youths’ departure from the countryside, creating possibilities for rural development. This alternative perspective on the motives behind educational expansion goes against official narratives about education for development and equality, and raises a different set of questions. It shows that in addition to questions about rural-urban inequalities in the education system and the connection between education and employment, it is also important to note how the displacement of rural Chinese youths is inherent to the emergence of education migrants. Educated rural youths do not only feel less attached to the countryside, but also lack agrarian skills and knowledge, and have a desire for urban living, making their rights to land usage connected to their rural status relatively unimportant to them. Yet, it is important to ask questions about what the futures of these youths will look like if they lose their access to land and continue to face social and economic marginalisation in urban society.

One might ask the question: how important is ‘education’ really in this story, as a social institution with the aim of providing youths with knowledge and information that will help them get ahead in life? Think again about the fact that in 1977 only three percent of the 5.4 million university entrance exam-takers enrolled in universities, whereas in 2015 all of the 9.42 million students who took the exam qualified for enrolment. Should this development be studied in terms of educational expansion? Or does a focus on education prevent us from seeing behind the ideological screen masking the displacement of the next generation of China’s rural citizens? With my research, I hope to inspire further critical investigations into educational expansion as the driver of development agendas with particular visions of the future. In China, this is an urban future, with cities that continue to boom economically due to the influx of new people and capital. Education migrants play an important role in these cities’ futures. President Xi said in his New Year’s speech that everybody is running very hard, being dream chasers. This dissertation has stressed the...
importance of standing still to think about the shape of those dreams and the aim of the running. Why is it important for everybody to be educated? What makes an educational trajectory worthwhile? And what kind of framework is most helpful for discussing these kinds of questions?

The education migrants whose stories formed the basis for this dissertation would surely give me a mixed response to these questions. Some of them look back on their university experience with great satisfaction, while others have fallen into depression. There are those who continue to feel hopeful about the future and those who are outright angry and disappointed. One thing education migrants have in common is that they have never really had a choice in the first place. Their only alternative to becoming a student was becoming a migrant worker, which they knew would entail plenty of challenges. Now, after graduation, there is not much else to do but to make the most of what still remains of those dreams they once set out to chase.

List of References


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>


Thesis Summary
Everybody Educated?
Education Migrants and Rural-Urban Relations in Hubei Province, China

This dissertation tells the stories of China’s ‘education migrants’, the growing number of Chinese rural youth who migrate to the city via the country’s higher education system. These youths’ increased enrolment in Chinese universities has driven the rapid expansion of the Chinese higher education system since 1998. Despite being the first in their families to go to university, education migrants struggle in the city as a result of their substandard degrees and the continued stigmatisation of rural people in urban China.

The rapid growth of China’s education system is celebrated as an ‘educational miracle’ that promises economic growth and development as well as the mitigation of rural-urban inequalities in Chinese society. This dissertation critically investigates how rural youth’s access to China’s higher education is organised and negotiated. It shows that rural-urban inequalities in China’s higher education system perpetuate China’s rural-urban divide in the urban labour market, where the majority of education migrants work under precarious conditions in the informal, white-collar labour market.

This dissertation shows that Chinese rural youth’s education and labour strategies should be studied as part of families’ larger household strategies, which – in their turn – should be understood in the context of the country’s rapid rural-urban transition. It demonstrates that educational expansion is also a state strategy for furthering urbanisation goals.

On the level of the family, this dissertation argues that marriage continues to be crucial as a stabilising factor for rural families with long histories of mobility. China’s current unbalanced sex ratio has increased the pressure felt by rural daughters who wish to help their parents achieve marriage for their brothers in a competitive marriage market. These young women find themselves pulled in all directions, as they try to be successful in their careers without hurting their chances on the marriage market where career-oriented women can be quickly dismissed as ‘hero women’ unsuited for marriage.

Nederlandse Samenvatting
Onderwijs voor iedereen?
Onderwijsmigranten en ruraal-urbane relaties in de provincie Hubei, China

Deze dissertatie, over Chinese onderwijsmigranten, onderzoekt wat de toegang tot hoger onderwijs precies betekent in de levens van rurale, Chinese jongeren. De toestroom van deze jongeren naar Chinese universiteiten is een drijvende kracht achter de snelle expansie van China’s hoger onderwijsstelsel. Hoewel onderwijsmigranten vaak als eersten in hun gezin een universitair diploma behalen, is hun positie op de urbane arbeidsmarkt zwak en ontkomen zij niet aan de gevolgen van de stigmatisering van rurale burgers in China.


Deze dissertatie toont aan dat de arbeids- en onderwijsstrategieën van Chinese jongeren moeten worden bestudeerd in samenhang met de bredere strategieën van Chinese families, die op hun beurt weer gevormd worden door China’s snelle ruraal-urbane transitie. Daarom benadert dit onderzoek de expansie van het Chinese hoger onderwijsstelsel als een manier waarop de Chinese staat urbanisatie bevordert.

Deze dissertatie beargumenteert dat het huwelijk heel belangrijk is als een stabiliserende factor voor rurale Chinese families met lange geschiedenissen van mobiliteit. Het relatieve tekort aan vrouwen op huwbare leeftijd op het Chinese platteland doet de druk op rurale dochters toenemen, omdat zij nu vaak worden geacht actief bij te dragen aan het bewerkstelligen van een huwelijk voor hun broers in een competitieve huwelijksmarkt. Vrouwelijke onderwijsmigranten bevinden zich dan ook in een moeilijke positie. Zij jagen succes na om meer voor hun families te kunnen betekenen, maar zijn ook bang voor het stempel ‘heldenvrouw’, dat deze vrouwen markeert als ongeschikt voor het huwelijk.