Everybody educated?

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

Sier, W.M.

Citation for published version (APA):
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
Everybody Educated?
Education Migrants and Rural-Urban Relations in Hubei Province, China

Willy Sier


Copyright © 2019 Willy Sier
All rights reserved. No part of this thesis may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any way or by any means without the prior permission of the author, or when applicable, of the publishers of the scientific papers.

Cover design by Eva Huijts
Layout and design by Eva Huijts, persoonlijkproefschrift.nl
Illustrations by Daniel O’Connor
Photos by Willy Sier
Printing: Ridderprint BV | www.ridderprint.nl
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, Husain Amer, Junni Ogborne, Edwin Lam, and Li Wei. Ever since my 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 / Shengnű**
  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 ‘to 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.

- **Taocao**
  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