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Everybody educated?

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

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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 youth, 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?



Photo 1: Youth hanging out at a mall at Wuhan's Optics Valley Square

This introduction has two parts. In Part One, I will introduce the debates in which my study is embedded and set out the historical context readers need to know to put the chapters of this dissertation into perspective. Then, in Part Two, I will describe the area in which I carried out my research and provide information about the methodological choices I have made.

¹ The 1998 statistic is based on statistics from the Chinese Ministry of Education in Yuzhuo Cai's 2013 article. The 2017 statistics are from the website of the Chinese Ministry of Education directly, via this link: http://en.moe.gov.cn/Resources/Statistics/edu_stat2017/national/201808/t20180808_344698.html

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).²

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; Bregnbæk 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 eticographic perspective in this dissertation, which is very different from many of these statistics-based studies, counters 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

3 Some examples of articles can be found under the following links: The Guardian, December 4th 2008: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/dec/04/china-higher-education-graduate-jobs>; The New York Times, December 11th, 2010: <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/12/world/asia/12beijing.html>; HKFP, July 21st, 2016: <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2016/07/21/china-university-degree-isnt-always-golden-ticket-employment/>; Asia Society, June 8th, 2017: <https://asiasociety.org/blog/asia/how-asian-financial-crisis-led-china%E2%80%99s-massive-graduate-unemployment>

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'.⁴ The Wall Street Journal called Si Lian's book 'one of the most influential books to come out in China in 2009' and in 2011 a sequel was published in which Si expanded his research beyond Beijing.⁵ Yet, in this dissertation, I will move on from the ant tribe literature by introducing the term 'education migrants'. As an anthropologist, I find it important to theorise from the bottom up and present ideas that are strongly rooted in my empirical observations. The deterministic quality of the ant tribe concept hampers this kind of analysis and promotes the generalisation of a large group which I know to be very heterogeneous. Moreover, there is a sensationalist quality to the ant tribe literature that I do not wish to perpetuate. For example, Si refers to graduates' living spaces as 'ant colonies', to indicate that these youths share cheap living spaces in the cities' peripheries. This kind of framing creates a phenomenon out of the very common occurrence of recent graduates sharing living spaces, as many students and workers do in China and beyond, and feeds into a language of exclusion that this precariously positioned group already deals with as 'rural youths' in an urban environment. It is therefore no surprise that none of my interlocutors wished to be associated with this term.

In this dissertation, I do not only discuss the experiences of education migrants in relation to discussions on educational expansion and the school-to-work transition of Chinese youths. I also focus on these youths' experience of migration, connecting them to debates on mobility and 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 (Hazen & Alberts 2006) and have argued against the idea of this type of migration as merely temporary and therefore a less significant form of migration (Hazen & Alberts 2006; Matznetter 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 migranhood. 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

4 The names of these musicians are Li Ligu 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/](http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2010/12/21/eight-questions-lian-si-author-of-ant-tribe/)

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/Resources/Statistics/edu_stat2017/national/201808/t20180808_344698.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_137077465.htm

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 1949.⁷ 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.⁸ 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; JoŪson 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 reinstation 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).⁹ 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 2017.¹⁰ Additionally, 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 uselessly, not knowing how to help, 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'.

⁹ Link to statistics of labour force division between 2007 and 2017: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/270327/distribution-of-the-workforce-across-economic-sectors-in-china/>.

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 reports 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

It is important to mention that ‘urbanisation’ can be understood in several ways. First of all, some scholars have pointed out that the English language term does not properly translate the Chinese word *chengzhenhua*, which does not only refer to the phenomenon of cities growing at the cost of rural communities, but also describes the in-place transformation of rural villages and townships (Guldin 2001). Secondly, if we understand ‘urbanisation’ as a deliberate government strategy for development, it is important to incorporate ideas about what kind of citizen is considered desirable within that vision for the future. In China, ideas about the desirable citizen have been expressed through the *suzhi*-campaign, which is a term generally translated as ‘human quality’. Ideas about ‘raising the quality of the Chinese population’ show that urbanisation policies are not only aimed at changing environments and encouraging people’s movement from rural to urban areas, but also involve changing rural citizens into urban citizens beyond changing their geographical locations, namely in terms of their education, lifestyles, and desires. The ‘human quality’ discourse generally paints rural citizens as ‘poor’, ‘dirty’ and ‘backwards’, while urbanites are celebrated for being ‘civilised’. This discourse views education as crucial for ‘improving the quality of the population’, an important condition for achieving the end goal: further economic growth (Yan 2003).

Education for Development

In this dissertation, I will critique the idea of education as a unequivocally positive force that has the potential to alleviate social problems ranging from poverty to gender inequality, and show that the blind pursuit of low-quality education can make for a wasteful journey with disappointing results. In the beginning of this introduction I explained how ‘the enthusiasts’ celebrate China’s educational expansion as a sign of the country’s development and propagate the ‘education for development’ logic to promote further expansion. In this section, I will explain how this viewpoint connects with visions of development with an urban bias in China and beyond.

In the Chinese context, education is viewed as improving citizens’ *suzhi*/quality, but as Wu Jinting explains, what this *suzhi* looks like depends on the time and context, which is why she describes it as a ‘moving target’ (2012). For example, during the Maoist time a person’s ‘quality’ was mainly determined by her or his political ideas. The education of that time reflected this idea as it was strongly focused on teaching political ideology (Giles et al 2008). Currently, Wu Jinting writes, the qualities that make for ideal Chinese personhood include ‘creativity, lifelong learning, problem solving, scientific spirit, and well-roundedness’ (2012: 658), since these are the ingredients currently considered necessary for safeguarding China’s future economic prosperity.

11 Numbers published by the World Bank: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS?end=2016&locations=CN&start=1960>

12 The content of the plan can be downloaded here: 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 fast 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.¹⁵ 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 Technology (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

Score Lines		
	Liberal Arts	Science
Class one	510	521
Class two	448	477
Class three	360	415
<i>Zhuanke</i>	200	200

Source: <http://www.qlwb.com.cn/2015/0623/405967.shtml>.

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 *yiben*, *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.¹⁷

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 centre 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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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 2010.²⁰

On government websites as well as in popular speech, Hubei province is often referred to as a 'big education province'.²¹ 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.

18 Information published in the China Daily on February 7th, 2017: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2017-02/07/content_28126256.htm

19 Information published in a report by the Netherlands Business Support Office Wuhan: <https://www.rvo.nl/sites/default/files/2016/08/Economic-overview-Hubei-province-China.pdf>

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/overviw/201305/t20130521_449976.shtml

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!'²² 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.²³ 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

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.



Photo 2: Impression of Wuchang district, Wuhan



Photo 3: View from my studio window on a polluted day, near Yuejiazui

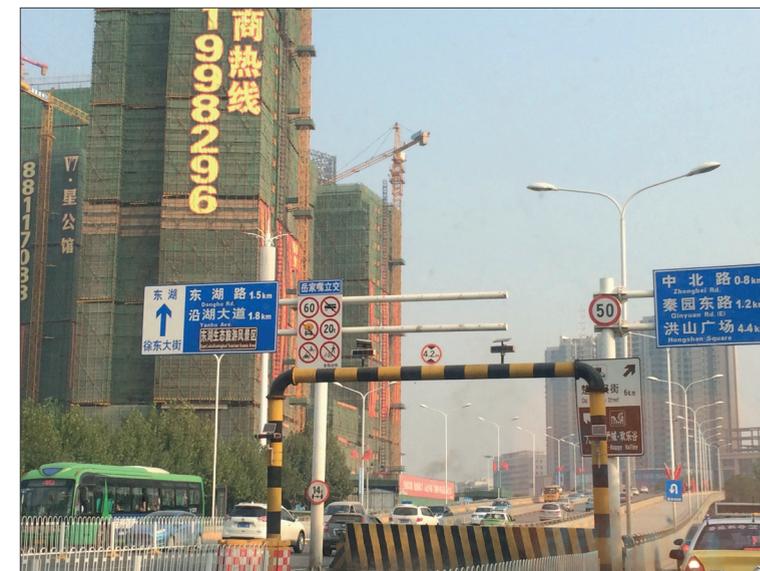


Photo 4: Intricate infrastructures and newly-built buildings for sale

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 of 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.²⁴ 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>

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.²⁵ 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

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

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.²⁶ 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 Jintong'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 Jintong'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 redivision 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 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/zdzt/cszkhhb/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 travelling back to the areas where my interlocutors had grown up, I also had the opportunity to travel forward with them, when their studies or work took them beyond Wuhan after graduation. If I were to use the categories outlined by Marcus, I would say that I mixed following biographies with following people, while paying special attention to experiences

within the education system and including the perspectives and stories of the people we met along the way.

There are both losses and gains to be made when using this kind of mobile or multi-sited approach. On the one hand, I had the opportunity to see my interlocutors in many different settings, which helped me to develop a well-rounded understanding of them. Additionally, the challenging 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

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 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 conducted relatively formal interviews.

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 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 to 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.