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Everybody educated?

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

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CHAPTER

Beyond
Rural-Urban



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

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

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

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

Thus far, discussions about rural-urban relations have mainly focused on labour migrants. Education migrants are interesting because they personify China's rural-urban transition. They have already walked the path laid out by the state, a path imagined to improve the quality of their personhood to such a degree that they would be able to become valued members of urban society. Yet this dissertation will show that a university education does not necessarily protect these youths from being essentialised and stigmatised for their

‘ruralness’. This is especially striking because – as was also argued about the ‘new generation migrants’ (Cheng 2014; He & Wang 2016) – ‘being rural’ does not mean much to these youths themselves, who often grew up in small towns rather than in the countryside, or, for those whose parents lived in the countryside, spent most of their lives in boarding schools. Another reason why it is interesting to include the perspective of education migrants in discussions on rural-urban relations is that it is easier for them than for labour migrants to gain an urban *hukou*-registration in China's second-tier cities, including Wuhan. Yet similar to what studies among labour migrants in smaller Chinese cities have shown (Zhan 2011), this opportunity for *hukou*-conversion is not always seized upon. Through a discussion about education migrants' motivations for wanting or not wanting rural-urban *hukou*-conversion, I will contribute to discussions about the importance of the *hukou*-system in debates on Chinese rural-urban relations started by scholars in recent years (Zhan 2011; Cheng 2014; Lan 2014; Jakimow & Barabantseva 2016).

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

The Power of Symbols

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

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

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

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

Only weeks after Misty, a 23-year old accountancy graduate who grew up in Hubei's countryside and who is one of the main characters in this dissertation, was hired by Mrs Xu, we shared a hot pot lunch among the three of us. Mrs Xu was a 44-year old Wuhan

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

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

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

²⁷ 'Eating bitterness' is the translation for the Chinese expression *chiku*, which means bearing hardship.

²⁸ 'From outside' is a popular way of referring to migrants or 'rural' people. In Chinese 'outside' is used as an adjective: *waidi*.

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

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

Mrs Xu's comments echo the developmentalist rhetoric propagated by the Chinese state since the start of the reform period that has pegged 'the rural' as 'the underdeveloped', and 'the urban' as 'the future'. She uses the concept of 'quality' to explain what separates rural and urban youths, regardless of their educational achievements. How does this kind of narrative serve somebody like Mrs Xu? In broad strokes, the idea of 'the rural' as a substandard segment of the Chinese population places the country's more powerful, urban class in a dominant and comfortable position, with access to abundant cheap labour. Their hiring of rural youths cannot only be explained as an act of benevolence, but also improves the control they have over their employees, who often have only a few social connections in the city.

There are two discourses about the rural that can be detected in Chinese media and pop culture and which are often used interchangeably depending on the need. On the one hand, rural people are described as innocent, naive and 'unspoiled by markets', making them honest workers and deserving of opportunities. On the other hand, they are also portrayed as dangerous, suspicious and underdeveloped (Yan 2008). Bodman (1991) described how the famous TV series *Heshang* argued that China's backwardness was linked with its agrarian roots and the peasant mentality of its population. In cities, calling somebody a farmer has become a crude remark. Youths like Misty understand intuitively how these ideas affect

them and navigate these ideological waters expertly. With the help of the 'rural traits' Misty knows are perceived positively, she tries to find her way in the urban labour market.

Misty was educated in a *zhuanke* university, which put her in a weak position in the urban labour market. Yet, as the following section will illustrate, those rural youths who manage to enter Wuhan's key point universities also struggle with prejudices connected to their rural background. One concept that I came across repeatedly, and which illustrates this point very clearly, is the term 'phoenix boy'.²⁹ I was first introduced to this term while spending time with the classmates of one of my very successful interlocutors who was enrolled in a Master's programme in one of Wuhan's key point universities. As I understood the way in which the term was used, I realised it illustrated the impossibility for rural youths to shed their rural background in the eyes of urban peers. Phoenix boy refers to young men who have 'risen from the ashes' like a phoenix, which means that they grew up poor in the countryside and have grown up to be successful in the city. Yet stories told about phoenix boys indicate that the term's function is rather to remind the listener of the ashes that the phoenix has risen from, rather than the heights to which it has flown. The students who first told me about this term used it to refer to one of their classmates, who was a very good student from a rural background. As part of our conversation about rural-urban relations in the classroom, they tried to explain the difficulties of a phoenix boy dating an urban girl by telling me a story about their classmate:

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

²⁹ The Chinese term is *Fenghuangnan*. This term is usually used in the male variant.

³⁰ LV = Louis Vuitton.

The term ‘phoenix boy’ has a strong enough discursive power to identify and marginalise successful young men from rural backgrounds. The term is highly effective as a segregating device, highlighting differences between rural and urban people. On the internet a proliferation of fetishising articles exists, in addition to blog posts with advice for and warnings against dating these men, with titles like: ‘Pay attention to these three points when dating a phoenix boy!’ and ‘Absolutely never date a phoenix boy!’³¹ The aspect that gets the most attention in these posts is the same point that Mrs Xu made before: people from rural backgrounds have dependents they need to take care of. Now, whereas this might increase these youths’ appeal for some employers, it is considered a burden for those who want to date them. According to one Baidu blogpost it is important for girls to know that the urban lifestyle they consider normal is ‘almost a sort of heaven’ for phoenix boys. She further claims that getting involved with a phoenix boy means becoming part of his lifelong struggle to repay his family for the opportunity to study: ‘If you choose a phoenix boy, it is not enough to only accept his past. You have to spend a lifetime repaying his family together with him, because without his family, today’s successful version of him would not exist’ (Baidu Blogpost, August 9th, 2017). Another recurring theme in these texts is the idea that phoenix boys are troubled psychologically. Their background of poverty is said to cause these young men to perceive of the people surrounding them as their enemies, and the authors of the blogs claim that their sense of inferiority and guilt is so deep-rooted that it can never be overcome.

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

An Administrative Divide

In the introduction of this dissertation I described the workings and the history of the *hukou*-system. This relatively unique system that administratively divides the Chinese population into rural and urban, or agrarian and non-agrarian, has long been central to studies of rural-urban migration. Many of these studies describe this residency registration system as a discriminatory system that undermines the position of rural migrants in Chinese

cities (Solinger 1999; Alexander & Chan 2006; Chan & Buckingham 2008; Fan 2008). Chan and Buckingham, for example, write that the *hukou*-system is ‘perhaps the most crucial foundation of China’s social and spatial stratification, and arguably contributes to the country’s most prevalent human rights violations’ (2008: 583). Alexander and Chan argue that it can be described as ‘a quasi-apartheid pass system’ (2006). Yet, without denying the continued importance of the *hukou*-system today, some scholars have recently suggested that the *hukou* system is given too much weight in studies of rural-urban relations in China, supporting their claims with studies demonstrating how the rural-urban divide in urban Chinese society is upheld by the *hukou*-system as well as identity-based forms of social exclusion (Zhan 2011; Jakimow & Barabantseva 2016).

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

As it turns out, in recent years China’s second-tier cities have become eager to see university graduates settle in their cities. These youths’ education is considered an indication of their future spending behaviours as well as of their ‘human quality’. In an effort to make their cities attractive, they have started to offer benefits, including *hukou*-registrations, for graduates interested in settling there. ‘A grabbing war’, were the words a Chinese friend used to describe these cities’ behaviours, referring to the way cities are in competition with one another in making themselves attractive to these graduates. I first heard about these

31 Links to these articles: <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1575223467631301&wfr=spider&for=pchttps://www.douban.com/note/441710898/>

developments in a meeting with Dr. Tang, a representative of Wuhan's Education Bureau in March 2016, who explained to me that only twenty percent of Wuhan's graduates remained in the city. She said:

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

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

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

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

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

32 Links to these websites are: <http://wh.bendibao.com/live/20171012/89076.shtml>; <https://jingyan.baidu.com/article/60ccbcebb4dc1064cbb19758.html>; <http://wh.bendibao.com/live/20151027/75170.shtml>

33 These are links to the media reports: <https://www.chinadaily.com/articles/12/155/228/1532580405870.html>; https://news.cgtn.com/news/354d444f306b7a6333566d54/share_p.html; http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/interface/zaker/1143609/2017-08-28/cd_31227779.html

I would suggest that it is likely that this spike in registrations is caused by students from cities surrounding Wuhan, both in- and outside of Hubei province, who do have enough capital to buy into the Wuhan real estate market and are well enough positioned on the Wuhan labour market to find good employment.

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

This finding was further corroborated during a visit to a post-university entrance exam meeting for the highest scorers at a famous key point high school in Jingmen city, which I will describe in detail in the following chapter. Whereas I had never heard *hukou* being mentioned at other education fairs or in conversations about which university to go to, in this meeting *hukou*-policy came up multiple times. When talking to students about the decision they were about to make, they talked as much about the city in which their university would be located as the university they would attend itself. Most of these students had scored high enough to apply for universities in Beijing and Shanghai, something that was extremely rare in the 'normal' high schools education migrants generally attend. One student explained to me earnestly that in addition to the university she would attend, she also had to think about the city it was located in, since this would be the place in which she would develop her network and therefore be likely to have her professional future. She said, 'We don't want to spend our whole lives in Hubei province, we don't want to live here later, so we care about this decision. We think about a city's labour market, climate, and its distance from home..' Another student added, 'We also think about where we can get

a *hukou*. Beijing might be a good city to develop your future in, but you can't get a *hukou* until you're 45 or 50 years old.' When I asked why the *hukou*-question was so important to them, a female student answered: 'In China, a *hukou* is a lifeline. It's connected to all your social rights: education for your children, health care, your insurances... and if you want to marry somebody, the family will care about whether you have a local *hukou* or not.'

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

In the same way that differences between different kinds of urban *hukou*-registrations are important, rural *hukou*-registrations were also valued for a variety of reasons. In some cases, and especially for those *hukou*-holders in areas surrounding cities, a rural *hukou*-registration can be of great value when those who are registered qualify for government compensation in the case of city expansion. The chance of this happening makes many rural-*hukou* holders unwilling to change their status.

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

The Experience of ‘Being Rural’

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

A ‘Rural Background’

Before university, Anna attended high school in Jingmen City, roughly 300 kilometres east of the provincial capital. Her parents and brother had been living in Jingmen city for the past seven years. Prior to moving there, the family lived 80 kilometres further south in a small town called Hougang, which is also part of the Jingmen prefecture, where the parents ran a shop and Anna and her brother attended primary and middle school. Anna’s parents moved to Hougang town three years after their wedding in 1989, when their son was only two years old and their daughter had not yet been born. At the time, there was a job opportunity in an alcohol distribution centre, and since the family had experienced difficulty getting by with the small-sized plot of land available to them, they decided to go. This family’s trajectory and network spans from the villages where the parents were born and raised to the local town and city, as well as the provincial capital where Anna attended

university and is currently working. On paper, Anna’s family belongs to the hundreds of millions Chinese families that have practiced rural-urban migration since the 1980s. Yet, having always lived within the area of one prefectural city, albeit on several different points of the rural-urban spectrum within that area, they consider themselves as ‘having never gone out’, with ‘going out’ being a popular way of referring to rural-urban migration.

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

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

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

Anna talked about her lack of familiarity with the rural environment and her perspective on rural education:

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

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

In Wuhan

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

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

It's winter, so I like to spend a lot of time under the blankets. I normally just stay inside. Sometimes I come out here to eat something, but then I go back to the dorm right after. Also, I only come here if I'm with other people, because it can be pretty dangerous. It's not safe to walk around here alone at night, I've heard horrible stories... about girls getting raped and that sort of thing. It's pretty dangerous here. The conditions are more like the countryside. Or, well, the countryside is very safe... This area is like the countryside, but with the dangers of the city. (Anna)



Photo 5 Entrance to the Foxconn factory grounds

At this moment in time, Anna does not yet possess the urban lifestyle that she dreams about having in the future, when she hopes to be married and be living in her own apartment in the city. For both men and women, the years between graduation and marriage are considered as a liminal phase; everything is fluid, until marriage – and especially the purchase of real estate – will fix them in a certain location, community, and class. During this period, many education migrants live similar lifestyles to Anna, with their experience in the city for the large part restricted to the company terrain on which they work and live. This attitude of isolating oneself in one's dorm room was referred to with the popular internet term *zhai*, which was explained to me as meaning not often wanting to go outside, being shy, keeping to oneself. Graduates who considered themselves to be *zhai* named a variety of factors that contribute to their unwillingness to leave their place of work, including inconvenience – ‘roads are always jammed, buses are always full’ (Xi) – work pressure, safety, and the lack of money, friends, and local knowledge. Anna, who is more outgoing and adventurous than most of the education migrants I met, sometimes left the Foxconn grounds for short outings to the mall or other popular hang-out spots for young people. But for the most part, she also stays inside.

The first time I saw Anna was when she was on such an outing to a café on *Tanhuailin*, a hip Wuhan shopping street lined with artisan boutiques and cute coffee shops. On this Saturday afternoon, Anna looked glamorous wearing a silky white sleeveless shirt and tight jeans. Her nails were painted red and her hair was pulled back tightly. She sat alone, sipping on an overpriced cup of black coffee, a beverage I later learned she found horribly bitter. We did not know one another, but when I asked her if I could talk to her, she agreed enthusiastically. Anna insisted on speaking English to me, despite sometimes finding it difficult to express herself. As the afternoon progressed, she talked about her recent graduation and her office job at Foxconn, the world's largest electronics manufacturer. She was excited to have found her first job on such ‘a big stage’ and spoke confidently about how this job would benefit her ‘development’. Being on a big stage, explained Anna, was her whole reason for wanting to come to Wuhan. This city and all its opportunities would offer her a bright future, she mused.

It took many months of getting to know each other to learn how such a café visit related to the rest of Anna's urban experience. It was in those moments of getting away from the Foxconn campus that fractions of scenes that had made up her urban dream could be lived out, even though the invisible line between her and the city made it difficult to transcend the role of the onlooker through activities like window shopping, visiting the campuses of elite schools, and seeing famous sites. Anna and other education migrants lived rather isolated lives. With family far away and classmates from high school and university spread

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

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

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

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

She now realised that her university degree would not open as many doors for her as she might have hoped. In the confines of a factory dormitory she tried to find creative ways to embellish this time spent in the in-between. For a while, she ran an online shop selling ripped off language courses to make some extra money. Additionally, she was always busy trying to 'improve herself' through reading, studying English and learning to play the piano. One day, after she had arranged a private room for herself, she got herself an electric keyboard on which she taught herself to play classical piano music. In this way, she turned her lonesome evenings into moments of 'self-development' and creative expression, which boosted her confidence and sense of self-worth and brightened up a daily life that she generally described as rather dull.

Conclusion

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

Yet education migrants, like labour migrants, do not jump at the opportunity to gain an urban *hukou*-registration because they remain unconvinced of the benefits it will bring, pointing out its inability to help them overcome obstacles resulting from other mechanisms of exclusion, including the urban real estate market and the labour market. Finally, this

chapter answers the question of what being rural really means if it is no longer about living in the countryside or doing agrarian work. It shows that the idea of 'being rural' has been adopted as a euphemism for everything 'lesser than' and 'not local' that feeds into the emerging class system in Chinese urban society. In China, the idea of a rural-urban divide thus functions as an 'ideological screen' that hides class and inequality in a society that is uncomfortable with these concepts due to its recent political history. Education migrants therefore continue to struggle in the margins of urban society after graduation, finding it difficult to achieve the urban lifestyles they dreamed about while growing up in the education system.

In the next chapter, I will focus on the education system and show how access to educational resources has become one of the main factors separating the outsiders from the locals and the rural from the urban.