Everybody educated?

_Education migrants and rural-urban relations in Hubei Province, China_

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We know that we can’t really work as accountants anyhow. We know this degree is worthless. Maybe we can find a job in a shop of some sorts.

(A zhuanke-university accountancy student)

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

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

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

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

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

In the Zhuanke-university

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

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

I felt a lot of pressure. My parents wanted me to study accountancy, but I don’t like accountancy at all. My parents asked my cousin, who has a Master’s degree, for advice, and after talking to her I didn’t have the self-confidence anymore to pursue my dreams. I had already taken my final year in high school a second time, but still I didn’t have a very high score. I could only really go to a zhuanke, and my cousin said that if I’d study education there, I would only be able to work in a kindergarten, because my degree wouldn’t be enough to work as a teacher in a middle or high school. Also, if I’d study English in a zhuanke, I wouldn’t be able to compete with students who had studied English at Bachelor level. So, I’d better study accounting. On top of that, studying the other majors was much more expensive. I was really interested in this major called ‘international travel’, but it cost 17,000 rmb per year, while accounting was only 5,000. I’m still trying now to also get other certificates while I’m studying, so that I still have the choice to not work as an accountant when I graduate (Morning Sunshine).37

After Morning Sunshine enrolled in a zhuanke-university, called Wuhan City Polytechnic, to study accountancy, she was disappointed by the dullness of the programme and the dim prospects she learned her degree would offer in the urban labour market. For some time, she hoped to study for both her accountancy degree and a separate certificate that would enable her to work as a teacher, but this proved too much to take on. The pressure of combining programmes while working — and with debt slowly amassing — became too much and a mental breakdown forced Morning Sunshine to quit.38

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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39 The website of Jingmen city stating this information: http://jys.jingmen.gov.cn/c21web/content-139443.html
to pay additional fees. For youths from rural areas, who are assigned to middle schools in small towns, this means that the student quota for key point high schools will make it very difficult for them to enrol in these schools. After having entered ‘normal high school’, only a small percentage of students still manage to defy expectations and obtain test results that get them into a key point university. A comparison between the test results of 2015 reported by Longquan High School and the more average scoring Duodaoshi High School, both located in Jingmen city, quickly makes clear how different the perspectives of the students of these two schools are. In that year in Longquan High School, 144 out of 1100 students scored more than 600 points on the university entrance exam, a score that is high enough to be accepted by one of China’s key point universities. In the same year, in Jingmen’s Duodaoshi High School, two out of 933 students crossed that 600 point line. Additionally, out of the 933 students who took part in the exam in Duodaoshi High School in 2015, 148 students, or 16 percent, scored high enough to enter a non-key point class one university, the highest quality universities after key point universities.40 In Longquan High School almost 95 percent of the exam-takers, 1038 out of 1100 students, scored high enough for admission to these universities.41

A key point high school is to high schools what a key point university is to universities. In the introduction I explained that China’s key point universities are on the receiving ends of the 985- and 211-projects through which billions of renminbi are invested in rapidly improving the quality of the country’s higher education. Key point high schools have a similar history. They are the outcome of a development strategy based upon Deng Xiaoping’s ‘trickle-down theory’: first invest heavily in a small number of areas or institutes to make them economically successful, and then use these economic or educational strongholds to ‘pull up’ those who had been ‘left behind’ (Hua 2015). However, even though it is true that in Jingmen city, for example, high school education in general has become more widely accessible and students from its surrounding rural areas now enrol in larger numbers than ever before, the separation between the key point and other high schools facilitates the continued segregation of urban and rural students within this expansion.42 It could be said that the second phase of Deng Xiaoping’s idea never materialised. First, the trickle-down theory was used to support very focused investments mainly benefitting the country’s urban population, and then the ‘pulling up’ was never seriously taken up. With

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

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

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

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

Observing this event was not only interesting because the options these students and their parents considered were so select and different from students in other high schools who reckoned themselves lucky if they could attend a lower-class university. I remembered a student who I had observed the previous day at another university fair, walking from stand to stand, who asked only one question: ‘Do you have any programs I can apply to with 335 points?’ At the Longquan High School fair, the dynamic between students and representatives of HUST and Wuhan University, figuring out to which programmes their child’s score would gain them admission UCAS was less popular for having a very high minimum score of 670 points, a level very few students had reached. Two dads explained to me how they viewed the quality division between different kinds of universities. One said:

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

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

How I chose my university? I just looked at my score. I mean, I did not have that many options. There was only one class two university in Wuhan that accepted my score: the Hubei University of Education. For my major... I honestly had no idea what it meant. Most people don’t know what they get into before they start. Parents don’t know either. They have never studied at
In light of these previous sections, some questions may arise. If there are these blatant inequalities, then how do rural youths deal with them and why do rural families keep pushing their children to educate themselves? In this section I will show how China’s educational expansion has decreased rural students’ chances of going to China’s key point universities, and that rural-urban inequalities have also become more invisible now the question is no longer whether students can go to university, but rather to what kind of university they can go. The murkiness of these differences thicken the veil of meritocracy that hides structural rural-urban inequalities within the system from view.

Scholars have written about both Chinese urban and rural families’ commitment to their children’s education (Tomba 2004; Fong 2004, 2011; Murphy 2014, Kipnis 2001, 2011). This commitment is reflected in the great investments families make in education. A study conducted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) reflects that education expenses are the largest expenditure for Chinese households, trumping both pensions and housing expenditures (Li et al 2011: 524). In conversation with rural parents they often explained their belief in education as being ‘the only way out’ and the key to their children’s ‘better life’. Taking into account the centrality of the city in China’s vision of development, it is no surprise that people who have spent the last few decades in the Chinese countryside, watching their country change and prosper from the sidelines, have started to feel as if they are stuck in the past and wish for their children to play a part in their country’s future. Education is seen as a pathway to this future. These ideas were put to me by the aforementioned retired middle school teacher in the following way:

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

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

The Chinese university entrance exam – a crucial vehicle for producing rural-urban inequalities – has the general reputation in Chinese society as an institute promoting equality by giving a fair opportunity to all. Yet this reputation does not correspond with the views of scholars who have long pointed out the exam’s potential to exacerbate inequality. Kwong, for example, already argued in 1983 that the popular phrase ‘Everybody is equal before the system of grades’ is false. She found that parents’ social position and privileged access to educational resources had a profound effect on children’s educational achievement and access to higher education (Ross & Wang 2010). More recently, Zachary Howlett studied the exam as an important tool in the ‘fabrication of fairness’ (Howlett 2017). Yet, despite the existence of these critical views, and as also shown by these studies, people in Chinese society still view the exam as a cornerstone of meritocracy. For example, speaking with parents waiting in front of a Jingmen High School while their children were taking the university entrance exam outside, it was clear that they viewed this test as a moment of ‘fairness’. After their children had walked through the school gates, the parents stood silently, holding up their umbrellas to protect themselves from the drizzle that descended upon them, their eyes filled with a mix of hope and fear. They saw the test as decisive, not only of their children’s futures, but also of their future as a family, and a rare moment when it did not matter who you were and where you came from, as long as you filled in the right answers. In conversation with the retired middle school teacher, he also echoed
Chapter 2

This sentiment: ‘In China there’s a lot of corruption, but at least the exam is fair’, he said. In the Chinese media the exam is even said to be especially important for rural students, since for them, in contrast to urban students who are seen as having multiple ways of achieving success, it is considered their only opportunity to effect real change in their lives (for example, Qu Bowen in the China Daily, November 23, 2012).

There are different university entrance exams that students can take. Students take the exam that corresponds with the high school track they have followed, being science, liberal arts or arts. The structure of the exam is often described as 3 + X. The three stands for the required subjects: Chinese, Mathematics and English, and the ‘X’ for the elective components: for example, biology, chemistry and physics for science students, and geography, history and politics for liberal arts students. In 2016 it was no longer possible to objectively ‘fail’ the university entrance exam. Some zhuanke institutes had very low score lines that were almost impossible to go under, so on paper everybody who takes the exam should be able to find a school that accepts them. Of course, students often set an aim; for example, passing the score line for class one universities, and they can fail to achieve their goal. The complexities that have arisen from students being able to pass the exam to different degrees, instead of just passing or failing, requires a more sophisticated understanding of the Chinese education system to interpret exam results, making the structural exclusion of rural students from high-quality education harder to see. Additionally, the veil of meritocracy over this education system held up by the focus on ‘objective’ exams and test scores takes the focus away from structural differences, and puts forward a reading of youths’ ‘failures’ as a result of their personal shortcomings.

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

The student Quota System and the Area Protection Policy

In Hubei province, the university application process worked as follows in 2016. After students receive their exam scores, they submit a ranked list of the nine universities they wish to apply for online. For each university they include in their ranking, they need to fill in six majors of interest, again ranked from first to sixth choice. There is a real science to making these decisions. Students have to think beyond their personal desires, and calculate their chances of being admitted to universities based on their knowledge of previous years’ student quotas and score lines. Next, every year in late July, all universities in China receive a student quota from the central government’s Ministry of Education that specifies four points: 44

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

I argue in this dissertation that the interaction between this student quota system and a policy called the ‘area protection policy’, which is not discussed in the literature, now forms the foundation of rural-urban inequalities in the Chinese higher education system. This is because this interaction creates the difference between the student quotas of the key point universities and all other universities — including class one, class two, class three and zhuanke universities. 45 This policy determines that all non-key point universities, which

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

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

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

Why Should They Eat From Our Bowls?
In June 2016 parents in Wuhan took to the streets in an outrage. They protested in reaction to an announcement by the Ministry of Education about a reshuffling in the division of educational resources. Parents feared that the announced future greater allocation of resources to students from western China’s poorer autonomous regions would result in reduced access to quality education for their own children. In reaction, they gathered in droves in front of the Hubei provincial bureau, where they chanted: ‘Head of the bureau, come outside!’ and ‘Fairness in education!’ In the days that followed pictures and videos of this protest, as well as others like it that had happened around the country, circulated on weixin, a very popular Chinese social media application. The videos featured protesting parents as well as officials pleading with angry crowds. There were even videos showing violent clashes between parents and police, with parents being dragged away into police vans. Within a few days’ time, the protest against the redivision of educational resources spread to two dozen Chinese cities, and soon after a counter-protest was also organised where parents from poorer regions demanded ‘equal love’, or better access to education, for their children. In essence, the original protesters and the counter-protesters wanted the same thing: better access to high-quality education for their children, and both parties resorted to developmentalist ideologies to defend the legitimacy of their claims. Whereas parents from poorer areas argued that it was time for wealthier regions to ‘share their wealth’, parents in Wuhan claimed it was unfair that they had to share so much while citizens in China’s wealthiest cities, Beijing and Shanghai, shared so little. The chants and arguments protesters used illustrate that ideas about fairness in access to education are based on ideas about belonging and deservedness, and that the higher education system is a site where citizens’ inclusion into and exclusion from particular segments of society is negotiated. Moreover, the fact that so many parents protested, despite the threat of police violence, shows that the division of educational resources is a hot political issue in China.46

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

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

47 These protests were reported on in the New York Times on June 11th, 2016: www.nytimes.com/2016/06/12/world/asia/china-higher-education-for-the-poor-protests.html
The arguments parents used in their protest against this redivision of educational resources illustrated that their ideas about fairness in terms of access to education were intertwined with ideas about local citizenship and entitlement to resources. The way the student quotas work, identifying how many students should be recruited per province, inspires people to think about educational resources as belonging to the province. Even though, for example, key point universities are mainly funded by the national government through the 985 and the 211 programme, these universities still have a strong provincial and city identity. As a result, Wuhanese parents feel that their children should be the ones given privileged access to the key point institutes in their city. In the discussion about the changes in student quotas in the Chinese media, there was a strong focus on the perceived threat of reduced access for urban locals into these universities. And, in statements made by the local government, much emphasis was put on the promise that key point institutes would not be affected by these changes.49 Interestingly, whereas these parents felt very threatened by the influx of students from outside of Hubei province into the Hubei higher education system, they were not at all concerned about the growing number of students from rural Hubei province. The reason for this is simple: score lines are maintained at the level of the province. This means that whereas students from outside of Hubei province can be accepted into Hubei universities with scores ‘lower’ than local students, rural and urban students in Hubei province have to cross the same lines.49 Since people generally know that rural students are grossly disadvantaged in this competition, and are thus easily outcompeted in the race for the most desired positions by their urban counterparts, they are not considered a threat to the success of urban students. Even those students who were born in rural-urban migrant families in the cities do not threaten urban dominance in the education system, since they can only take part in the university entrance exam in their area of hukou-registration, which means that they have no choice but to attend a high school in the ‘home area’. The students from outside of the province who compete for enrolment in universities in Hubei province have to be very high scorers in their own province in order to stand a chance, which means that the majority of these students will have attended the better, urban high schools in their own provinces. And, even though the strongest reaction to these changes came from parents in Wuhan, it is likely that these outer-province students will also worsen the access to higher education for Hubei province’s rural students.

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


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

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

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

**External and Internal Exclusion**

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

**Xi’s departure**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Feelings of Failure**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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