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

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Publication date
2020

Document Version
Other version

License
Other

Citation for published version (APA):

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Zhuanke-graduates need not apply

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Li Tang’s analysis gives an idea of what the labour market looks like to education migrants. There are jobs in sales, which I will further discuss below, as well as jobs with the government, for those with connections, and in factories, for the more traditional people. Then, there are those who did and did not do well in school, which influences where within these sectors they might find themselves. Of course, there are plenty of different conceptualisations of the labour market to go around. Anna, for example, often spoke about the gendered difference between more and less traditional ‘girls’, indicating that those who are more traditional opt for a stabler job closer to home, even if it offers a lower salary, while less traditional girls, sometimes also describes as ‘hero women’, are not afraid of jumping from one job to the next and experiencing the mobility associated with that. In general, the labour market from education migrants’ perspective seemed to consist of five segments, which I set out in Figure 5, including information about the way education migrants relate to each segment. The caveat for this simplified table is that it should be understood as an emic description of the labour market drawn up from the perspective of education migrants.
Figure 5 Structure of the labour market from the perspective of education migrants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Segment</th>
<th>Relation to education migrants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government / civil servant</td>
<td>Inaccessible. Only accessible for those with connections, or those who can pass the civil servant’s exam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales</td>
<td>Always accessible. Fall-back option and the only hope for making money.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big company / factory</td>
<td>Accessible to some (mostly to those with Bachelor degrees). Offer low wages, but are more stable, and considered suitable for women.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurs</td>
<td>Accessible to some with start-up capital.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manual labour / service industry</td>
<td>Always accessible, but try to avoid. Considered suitable for ‘workers’, not for graduates. Sometimes needs to be used as an emergency option, but then always experienced as ‘temporary’.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My research among middle and high school students shows that an awareness of the structure of this labour market does not start developing until after students have enrolled in higher education. Even then, their ideas about what they would be able to do after graduation remained rather vague. It is only after their graduation when they seriously start exploring their options that they really learn what is within the range of possibilities, and it takes some years of experimentation before education migrants expertly navigate their options.

Life in Sales

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

Finally, this section shows that education migrants’ activities within the sales sector lead to experiences of stress and isolation, before discussing the reasons why education migrants still continue to seek out these jobs.

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

No worries About the Future

The following vignette is about Misty, the 23-year old accountancy graduate from a zhuanke university introduced in Chapter One of this dissertation, and somebody with extremely high job mobility. In Chapter One I described the relationship she had with an employer who had recently hired her. The job she had found that time was only one link in a long chain of jobs she had held since her graduation. Between her graduation in the summer of 2014 and the start of 2019, Misty worked in the office of a factory, a luxury car dealership, a health club, a yoga school, a real estate company, two different companies selling advertisements (one in buses, the other one in cinemas), and a restaurant. In each of these jobs, except for the one in the restaurant, Misty was truly invested, hoping that it would be the start of a long-term career. Misty’s constant job-hopping did not only require her to often make impactful practical life changes, including changing addresses, schedules, colleagues, and even cities, but also had her on a perpetual emotional rollercoaster.

One late evening in March 2016 Misty knocked on the door of my studio. She had just gotten fired from her job at the real estate company after having worked there for merely six weeks. That evening, as she had gotten ready to leave after a night of working late, her manager had sat her down to tell her that she did not need to return the next day. Misty sat on my bed in tears, going over the things her manager had told her. He had said he needed to hire somebody to do some things for him for which he did not consider her suited, and that that was why he had to let Misty go. He also said that she did not fit into the department well, and that he had noticed Misty was easily distracted and could not...
focus well. Misty moped, ‘You put your heart into your job, and then you have to leave it after a conversation like that.’ It was not an opportune moment for Misty to lose her job. Her roommate had just left their shared flat, and her rent payment was coming up in five days. This meant she has to either cover the cost of both rooms, or leave the flat almost immediately. She did not know what to do now that she did not know where she would be working. On top of that, her mother was counting on staying with Misty when she came to Wuhan the following week for a medical treatment in the hospital. ‘Can we stay with you for a while?’ she asked, eyeing my twenty square meter studio.

Only hours had passed before Misty started to pick herself up again. Trying to give herself the courage to face the difficulties ahead of her, she repeated encouraging messages to herself. ‘This will be for the best’, she said. ‘A better fate is waiting for me.’ And, talking about her housing issue, ‘Five days is a lot of time. And I don’t have anything else to do now anyway.’ Misty would prove to be right. In the life of an education migrant in Wuhan, five days is a lot of time, and she would manage to solve the housing crisis before the end of the fifth day. Only a few days after that, Misty would find herself a new career as well. When she had gotten fired, she had said, ‘I’ll take a short rest and start working again in two weeks.’

I had been surprised to hear that she was so confident about finding a new job so quickly. But in her head plans had started to materialise almost immediately. ‘I’ll get myself a sales job again’, she had decided within moments, ‘because the salary is higher. But this time I want to work in the alcohol or make-up branch.’ Misty said ‘again’ in reference to a sales job she had had the year before when she first moved to Wuhan. In that job she had sold Ferraris and Lamborghinis in a dealership for luxury cars. Misty had known nothing about cars and had not sold a single car in this dealership before she was let go. But, writing up that failure to inexperience, she believed that this time things would be different.

A week later we sat in a café scrolling through jobs on Misty’s phone. ‘Most people use one of four apps to find work’, she explained, ‘but I like qiancheng wuyou best’. She showed me the app with the name that translates to ‘no worries about the future’. Misty had uploaded her profile. It detailed her education and work experience and showed her picture. When she scrolled through jobs, a percentage displayed in the corner of her screen fluctuated, indicating to what degree her profile matched the job description she was looking at. Her fingers tapped the screen expertly, only pausing for jobs that were both well-paid (more than 8000 renminbi (1060 euro) per month) and in a central location. In addition, she looked out for the mention of shuangxiu, a two-day weekend. When Misty saw a job she liked, it only took one tap on the screen to apply. I was stunned by the speed of this job search and the casual attitude with which Misty sent out applications without even taking a close look at the job descriptions. She explained that it is quite useless to apply to jobs for which she had less than one hundred percent suitability, since employers only called back applicants from the top pool. ‘It’s easy to up my percentage, though’, she said, as she started to tinker with her profile, adding some sales experience. ‘I want a sales job now, so it’s best if I have some experience in sales, right? In my previous job I recruited people to do sales for that company, so I know how to profile myself to get that kind of job.’ She added her most recent job to her listed work experience. ‘Why wasn’t it on there yet?’, I asked.

‘Well, I only had that job for six weeks, right?’ she answered while she adjusted the dates to extend six weeks to six months and changed her job title from human resources to sales. ‘I did HR there, but I want to do sales now, so I have to put that on my CV. If I haven’t done sales before, nobody is going to want me, right?’ she explained, slightly impatient with my questions and with her eyes still fixed on the screen, scrolling through jobs and sending out more applications. Misty’s phone rang. It was her friend, asking, ‘Do you want to go out guangjie (shopping, roaming the street) tonight?’. Misty hesitated for a moment: should she go or stay for dinner with me? ‘I want to go out guangjie’, she apologised to me earnestly, ‘because I want to buy a thin, silver necklace. I think it’d look really chic and help me get a good job. Mind if I go?’

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

**Misty’s First Sales Job**

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Structure of Sales

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

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

Employment or Speculation?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

My interlocutors did not always willingly share details about labour agreements being broken. They seemed embarrassed to speak about exploitative labour relations and tended to turn to self-blame when conflict arose. I often heard about labour relations having gone sour through a third person. For example, Misty told me angrily about how her roommate had only received 800 renminbi (106 euro) after working for an investment company for one month, despite having been promised a salary of 3000 renminbi (399 euro). Yet, when she herself was caught up in a tricky situation with an employer she brushed it off to start right over. In an earlier chapter I already reflected on how rural-urban dynamics factor into these relationships, describing that employers in the sales sector are keen to hire ‘rural kids’, since they are considered driven by their family’s need for their support, and therefore more able to ‘eat bitterness’. Social isolation and embarrassment further weakened the position of education migrants in their relationship with employers. When conflict arose, youths stood alone without friends or family to support them, let alone paperwork or the law to back them up. For some time, Julia recorded her struggles in the labour market in a diary. Julia’s words showed that she is perfectly aware of her weak position in Shenzhen, where she knew almost nobody and had no family to rely on. She was also aware of how she might be perceived by the labour market, and that this made her vulnerable for exploitation. Yet, after she had been in a number of jobs, Julia’s increasingly skeptical attitude helped her to recognise and leave unfruitful labour situations early on and was no longer easily placated by promises of future gains. Still, the cycle of starting new jobs full of great promise and leaving them feeling disappointed to start over again in a similar position seemed to be never ending. So, what are the reasons why education migrants keep going back to these jobs in the sales sector?

First, it is important for education migrants to be employed. Even though youths regularly emphasised the important difference between being employed and having a ‘good job’ – ‘It’s not hard to find a job, but it’s hard to find a good job’ (Morning Sunshine’s classmate), being employed in any job was still better than being unemployed. Universities, and especially those in the lower segments, often boast about their ‘employment rate’. For example, the website of Wuhan City PolytechUic, Morning Sunshine’s previous university, read: ‘The employment rate remains above 95 percent and the graduates have gained widespread social acclaims and abundant praises from employers, for their excellent work ethics, high comprehensive qualities, and solid professional skills’ (Website Wuhan City PolytechUic).55 These statistics give no information about what kind of employment graduates have found. In their communication with their family members education migrants employed a similar strategy. Even if they had not yet found themselves a good job, at least they could tell them that they were employed.

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

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

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

Finally, the sales sector offers education migrants, who may find themselves socially isolated and precariously positioned after graduation, a home and a community. These all-consuming jobs mean that employees always have somewhere to be and something to do. They have a clear purpose, and are embedded within a social structure that helps them achieve their goals. This community and this sense of purpose can give education migrants some much needed direction during the searching years after graduation.

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

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

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

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

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

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56 For a more complete discussion of families’ collective efforts to achieve sons’ marriages, please refer to Rescuing Masculinity: Giving Gender in the Wake of China’s Marriage Squeeze (2019: Driessen & Ster).
Chapter 3

Once year Anna also received a 10,000 renminbi (1330 euro) bonus.

Anna, who was Julia’s best friend since they attended middle school together in Hougang town, also had an unmarried brother of marriageable age with insufficient funds to buy himself a marriage house. Anna chose a very different career path from Julia, opting for low risk and stability over high earnings as a Foxconn office employee. Yet she also felt a lot of pressure to help her parents achieve her brother’s marriage.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was clear that Anna’s mother breaking her hip had made her acutely aware of her parents’ reliance on her and her inability in her current position to provide them with much support. Yet Anna did not end up going to Dubai. The pictures of the store that she received from the recruiter showed a windowless, uninviting space cluttered with trays and boxes. At the same time Anna was invited for a job interview at renren, a Chinese social media network, which offered her a comparable salary to the job in Dubai, making her think that maybe she did not need to go abroad for a salary hike. The job at renren, which was in customer service, paid between 5000 and 6000 renminbi (650-775 euro) per month, but required her to regularly do night shifts. In the end, Anna was not selected for this job. In August, she communicated with a company called the Chittagong Chemical Complex, part of the Bangladesh Chemical Corporation, for a position as a translator in Bangladesh where this company was running a chemical engineering project. This job offered a salary of 7000 renminbi (900 euro) per month. Yet this plan also did not materialise. Anna’s family and...
friends were worried about the legitimacy of the companies she communicated with, and despite her strong desire to improve her family’s precarious position she was not very keen on going herself. To me, Anna’s sudden and wild flurry of applications showed how strongly she felt the urge to make a sudden change in her life. As her family’s only person with an education (her brother did not finish high school), she felt an enormous responsibility. With her mother’s injury preventing her from going back to the factory and her lack of paperwork making it unsure how well she would be compensated, Anna suddenly felt as if her family was about to enter a level of precarity that was actually dangerous, and she needed to act fast to ensure their safety.

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

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

Education migrants, like Anna, often feel responsible for their families’ wellbeing. As the only highly-educated people in their family, they feel like the pressure to improve their families’ standing is on their shoulders. Youths want to enable their parents to retire. The funds their parents can claim as rural hukou-holders for their retirement are deeply insufficient, so they depend on their children’s financial help if they want to stop working. In the case of Anna’s parents, who worked in the city without labour contracts, it was quite unclear whether their employer would later contribute to their retirement fund. Achieving a pension is quite uncertain, so they depend on their children’s financial help if they want to stop working.

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

When I met Li Tang’s mother during a stay in rural Jingmen, she explained this idea:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

In the next and final empirical chapter, I will further analyse the importance of gender in education migrants’ labour and marriage strategies. Focusing on the experiences of young women, this chapter will show how female education migrants are simultaneously positioned on labour and marriage markets, which means that they constantly need to negotiate how their actions in one realm will affect their position in the other.