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Everybody educated?

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

Sier, W.M.

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Thesis Summary

Everybody Educated?

Education Migrants and Rural-Urban Relations in Hubei Province, China

This dissertation tells the stories of China's 'education migrants', the growing number of Chinese rural youth who migrate to the city via the country's higher education system. These youths' increased enrolment in Chinese universities has driven the rapid expansion of the Chinese higher education system since 1998. Despite being the first in their families to go to university, education migrants struggle in the city as a result of their substandard degrees and the continued stigmatisation of rural people in urban China.

The rapid growth of China's education system is celebrated as an 'educational miracle' that promises economic growth and development as well as the mitigation of rural-urban inequalities in Chinese society. This dissertation critically investigates how rural youth's access to China's higher education is organised and negotiated. It shows that rural-urban inequalities in China's higher education system perpetuate China's rural-urban divide in the urban labour market, where the majority of education migrants work under precarious conditions in the informal, white-collar labour market.

This dissertation shows that Chinese rural youth's education and labour strategies should be studied as part of families' larger household strategies, which – in their turn – should be understood in the context of the country's rapid rural-urban transition. It demonstrates that educational expansion is also a state strategy for furthering urbanisation goals.

On the level of the family, this dissertation argues that marriage continues to be crucial as a stabilising factor for rural families with long histories of mobility. China's current unbalanced sex ratio has increased the pressure felt by rural daughters who wish to help their parents achieve marriage for their brothers in a competitive marriage market. These young women find themselves pulled in all directions, as they try to be successful in their careers without hurting their chances on the marriage market where career-oriented women can be quickly dismissed as 'hero women' unsuited for marriage.

Nederlandse Samenvatting

Onderwijs voor iedereen?

Onderwijsmigranten en ruraal-urbane relaties in de provincie Hubei, China

Deze dissertatie, over Chinese onderwijsmigranten, onderzoekt wat de toegang tot hoger onderwijs precies betekent in de levens van rurale, Chinese jongeren. De toestroom van deze jongeren naar Chinese universiteiten is een drijvende kracht achter de snelle expansie van China's hoger onderwijsstelsel. Hoewel onderwijsmigranten vaak als eersten in hun gezin een universitair diploma behalen, is hun positie op de urbane arbeidsmarkt zwak en ontkomen zij niet aan de gevolgen van de stigmatisering van rurale burgers in China.

De snelle groei van het Chinese onderwijsstelsel wordt vaak gevierd als een 'wonder' dat economische groei en ontwikkeling belooft, en dat ruraal-urbane ongelijkheid in de Chinese maatschappij zou verminderen. Dit proefschrift werpt een kritische blik op de mobiliteit van Chinese rurale jeugd in China's hoger onderwijsstelsel. Het toont aan dat ruraal-urbane ongelijkheid in China's hoger onderwijsstelsel zich vertaalt naar ongelijkheid op de urbane arbeidsmarkt, waar veel onderwijsmigranten onder precarie omstandigheden werken.

Deze dissertatie toont aan dat de arbeids- en onderwijsstrategieën van Chinese jongeren moeten worden bestudeerd in samenhang met de bredere strategieën van Chinese families, die op hun beurt weer gevormd worden door China's snelle ruraal-urbane transitie. Daarom benadert dit onderzoek de expansie van het Chinese hoger onderwijsstelsel als een manier waarop de Chinese staat urbanisatie bevordert.

Deze dissertatie beargumenteert dat het huwelijk heel belangrijk is als een stabiliserende factor voor rurale Chinese families met lange geschiedenissen van mobiliteit. Het relatieve tekort aan vrouwen op huwbare leeftijd op het Chinese platteland doet de druk op rurale dochters toenemen, omdat zij nu vaak worden geacht actief bij te dragen aan het bewerkstelligen van een huwelijk voor hun broers in een competitieve huwelijksmarkt. Vrouwelijke onderwijsmigranten bevinden zich dan ook in een moeilijke positie. Zij jagen succes na om meer voor hun families te kunnen betekenen, maar zijn ook bang voor het stempel 'heldenvrouw', dat deze vrouwen markeert als ongeschikt voor het huwelijk.