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.