

The Broken Ladder: Why Education Provides No Upward Mobility for Migrant Children in China*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explain why education fails to facilitate upward mobility for migrant children in China. By comparing a public school and a private migrant school in Shanghai, two mechanisms are found to underpin the reproduction of the class system: the ceiling effect, which is at work in public schools, and the counter-school culture, which prevails in private migrant schools. Both mechanisms might be understood as adaptations to the external circumstances of – and institutional discrimination against – migrants rather than as resistance to the prevailing institutional systems. Thus, the functioning of these mechanisms further strengthens the inequality embodied in the system.

Keywords: class reproduction; social mobility; institutional discrimination; ceiling effect; migrant education; China; counter-school culture

China's sixth census revealed that its floating urban population (*liudong renkou* 流动人口) exceeded 221 million in 2010. It also showed that an increasing number of migrants have chosen to keep their children by their sides over the last decade, giving rise to an estimated 20 million migrant children (under 18 years old) by 2010. A total of 58.4 per cent of these children are aged between 6 and 14 and so should be in school. Although officially dubbed the floating population, a large proportion of these children have in fact resided in the city since they were young, and some were even born there.¹ In contrast to their parents, migrant children have no farming experience and thus cannot consider land in the countryside as “social insurance.” Although they are described as “rural” (*nongcun ren*

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¹ Qiu 2010.

45 农村人) in the household register, they are more at home in the city and identify
46 little with rural life.²

47 Under the current urban–rural dual structure, the most daunting challenge
48 facing migrant children is education, which is tightly controlled by the household
49 registration system.³ For example, if a migrant child wants to enrol in a public
50 school, his family must pay an additional charge to the school, a temporary
51 studying fee, which is only applicable to migrant children. In addition, prior to
52 2005, because of the limited number of places made available to migrant children
53 in public schools, most migrant children were forced to attend privately run, fee-
54 funded, and profit-driven migrant schools, which offered poor facilities and infer-
55 ior teaching.

56 To improve migrant students' rights to education in urban centres, in 2002 the
57 Ministry of Education suggested that "both the government and the public
58 schools of receiving cities should play a key role in safeguarding the education
59 of migrant children" (*liangweizhu zhengce* 两为主政策). Following this directive,
60 public schools in Shanghai have gradually opened their doors to migrant chil-
61 dren. By mid-2008, 379,980 migrant students in Shanghai – including 297,000
62 primary school-aged children and 83,000 junior high school-aged adolescents –
63 had enrolled in either public or locally approved private schools. These students
64 accounted for 57.2 per cent of the school-aged migrant population. The rest of
65 the migrant students attended private migrant schools.⁴ The greatest difference
66 between private migrant schools and public schools in terms of governance is
67 that private migrant schools come under the jurisdiction of the education author-
68 ity of the migrant students' original domicile, whereas public schools are man-
69 aged and monitored directly by the local education authority. From the students'
70 perspective, private migrant schools are seen as inferior to public schools because
71 they are generally housed in dilapidated buildings, have low hygiene standards
72 and poor teaching standards.⁵ In general, students from private migrant schools
73 do not mix with the local school-aged students and young people in their
74 neighbourhood.

75 With regard to education's influence on social mobility, opinions differ
76 between those who emphasize education's contribution to upward social mobility
77 and those who focus on its contribution to social reproduction.⁶ The former
78 believe that education is an important way for an individual to gain social mobil-
79 ity that can promote social equality to a high degree.⁷ According to this view,
80 schools not only provide a knowledge base and the human capital essential for
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84 2 Chan 1994; Cheng, Tie-jun, and Selden 1994; Solinger 1999; Chan and Zhang 1999; Guang and Zheng
2005; Fang et al. 2011.

85 3 Fang et al. 2011; Wang, Lu 2006, 2008; Wang, Lihua, and Holland 2011; Chen and Feng 2013.

86 4 Xiong 2010.

87 5 Wang, Lu 2006; Ling 2012; Lan 2014.

88 6 Breen and Jonsson 2005.

7 Lenski 1966; Breen and Jonsson 2005.

a modern technical division of labour⁸ but also function as institutional pillars that guarantee meritocratic access to valued occupational positions and other resources.⁹ The second school of thought, however, sees schools as centres of power for producing and reproducing social and institutional inequality.¹⁰ Education is viewed as a tool used by social elites to monopolize the better professions and exclude other social classes. Bourdieu's social reproduction thesis emphasizes the role of cultural capital in the links between family social class, teachers, schools and students' educational outcomes. Cultural capital is assumed to be one of the central family-based endowments whereby social class value has an unequal impact on intergenerational educational probabilities.¹¹ Thus, according to this view, in settings in which policies fail to ensure equal access to educational resources, education functions as a conduit for social reproduction and reinforces previously existing inequalities of social structure and cultural order.¹² However, with respect to migrant children in the milieu of Chinese urban cities, it remains unclear which model best explains the dynamics at work.

To address this issue, this article focuses on a specific social group, Chinese migrant children who live in Shanghai, and explores the role of education in migrant children's socio-economic development. I posit that it is better to scrutinize the meaning of schooling to a particular group situated in a specific social context than to generalize this meaning. I look at what schools mean to migrant children who form part of the lower classes in the city, and explore whether schools provide a ladder for achieving upward social mobility or are vehicles for class reproduction. I also discuss whether opening public schools to migrant children will provide them with more opportunities for social mobility.

Previous studies on this topic are either ethnographic studies of migrant schools or quantitative studies based on large-sample surveys.¹³ Some ethnographic studies provide rich and meticulous descriptions but lack a comparative perspective and are thus unable to reveal differences in schools. Other ethnographic research, such as studies by Lu Wang and Charlotte Goodburn, shows that migrant children are unable to enrol at public schools as a result of institutional exclusion, which in turn restricts their social mobility.¹⁴ However, the present article demonstrates that access to a school is not sufficient in itself: migrant children find it difficult to achieve upward social mobility even if they do attend public schools. Examining what occurs inside different types of schools facilitates movement beyond an "access paradigm" in the analysis of the role of education

8 Meyer 1977.

9 Papagiannis, Bickel and Fuller 1983.

10 Bernstein 1975; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Willis 1981; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990.

11 The term cultural capital refers to non-financial social assets that promote social mobility beyond economic means. Examples can include education, intellect, style of speech, dress, or physical appearance. See DiMaggio 1982; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Lareau 2003; Tzanakis 2011.

12 Shavit and Blossfeld 1993; Collins 2009; McLaren 2006; van der Werfhorst and Mijs 2010.

13 Guo 2007; Ming 2009; Cheng, Henan 2010; Feng 2010; Yi 2011; Chen and Feng 2013.

14 Wang, Lu 2006, 2008; Wang, Lihua, and Holland 2011; Goodburn 2009.

133 in the socio-economic opportunities of migrant children.¹⁵ Studies that are based
 134 on large-sample data are able to reflect overall status and are helpful in determin-
 135 ing the relationship between variables. For instance, large-sample surveys con-
 136 ducted by Chen and Feng reveal the enormous impact that school type has on
 137 migrant children’s academic achievements.¹⁶ However, these surveys do not
 138 investigate the manner and mechanisms through which schools affect students.
 139 In this article, I combine qualitative and quantitative methods in an attempt to
 140 reveal the micro-level mechanism involved in class reproduction in two types
 141 of educational environments: the public schools and the private migrant chil-
 142 dren’s schools.

145 The Dual Education System and Class Reproduction in China

146 It needs to be noted that a dual education system is being operated in Chinese
 147 cities. This system consists of an official education system composed mainly of
 148 public and private schools approved by the local governments, and an unofficial
 149 education system of private migrant schools without school licences. The
 150 so-called official education system can be further divided into two layers. In
 151 the top layer are elite schools in both the public and private sectors. Public
 152 elite schools at the primary and junior high school levels offer quality education
 153 free of charge and recruit mainly outstanding local students, most of whom
 154 graduate to enter leading universities in China or else leave China to further
 155 their studies overseas. Private elite schools, characterized by exorbitant tuition
 156 fees, cater mainly to children of high-income parents who are the “nouveau
 157 riche” of China. Although both types of schools are high quality, the latter is
 158 less examination-orientated. In private elite schools, English and arts education
 159 are stressed, and students are prepared for study abroad. Schools at the lower
 160 end of the educational hierarchy attend “public ordinary schools.” Although
 161 such schools are also funded by the government, they are only capable of provid-
 162 ing mediocre education, and their entrance requirements are accordingly not as
 163 strict as those of public elite schools. In recent years, such public ordinary schools
 164 have begun to institute quotas for migrant students.

165 Private migrant schools are part of the unofficial education system; unlike
 166 “public ordinary schools,” they are not funded by the government. A rapidly
 167 growing number of such schools has been established since the early 1990s,
 168 when a large number of migrant workers flooded into Shanghai for employment
 169 but were prohibited from sending their children to public schools. Although pri-
 170 vate elite schools accept students with non-local *hukou* 户口, their expensive
 171 tuition fees are far beyond the means of most migrant families. Official statistics
 172 show that out of 519 private migrant schools operating in Shanghai in 2001, only
 173 124 had received official approval from the local education authorities. The
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175 ¹⁵ Ross 2007.

176 ¹⁶ Chen and Feng 2013.

Figure 1: The Basic Education System in Urban China

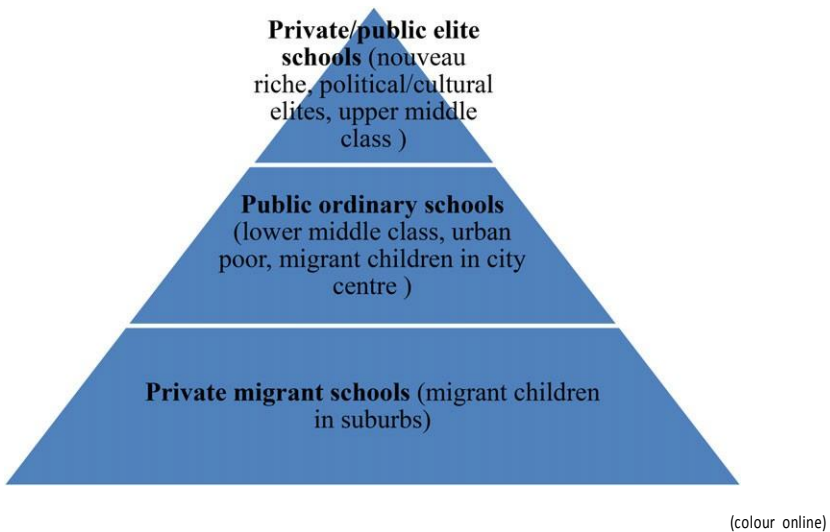


Fig. 1 - Colour online, B/W in print

others had no legal status, lacked teaching resources and operated with outdated facilities. However, because private migrant schools charged low tuition fees (600–800 yuan per term), many parents chose to send their children there. Between the 1990s and 2005, many migrant schools were operating without the proper licences and leasing at-risk buildings, which led to health and safety issues such as fires and food poisoning. Consequently, the municipal government began to examine these schools more closely and, as a result, students in such schools were required to transfer to public schools to continue their education.

Methodology and Data

Fieldwork for this article was conducted mainly in Yangpu 杨浦 district of Shanghai. Although my study focuses on one place, past studies suggest that there is a high degree of similarity among migrant children in Beijing, Shanghai, Kunming, Xiamen and other cities.¹⁷ Nonetheless, compared with other major metropolises (such as Beijing and Guangzhou), Shanghai is relatively receptive to migrant workers. The Shanghai municipal government closed the migrant schools in the city centre and allowed migrant children access to public schools. The government even retained and provided funding to improve schools for migrant children in the suburbs. However, there is no substantive difference between Shanghai and other cities in terms of core systems such as the household registration system and the college entrance examination system. Migrant children in Shanghai face the same bottlenecks as migrant children in other cities after completing junior secondary education.

¹⁷ Guo 2007; Ming 2009; Cheng, Henan 2010; Feng 2010; Yi 2011.

221 The data for this study was gathered by collecting as much information as possible on the group's living, learning, values and behaviour patterns. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analysed. In September and October 2007, I accepted a temporary teaching position at Jinxiu School, the largest private migrant school in Yangpu district.¹⁸ Through my short teaching experience at the school, I was able to gain a preliminary understanding of the students and their relationships with teachers, in addition to the internal administrative workings of a private migrant school. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with eight migrant children and their parents; three government officials; the principal and three teachers at a public school; the principal and four teachers at a private migrant school; the leaders of three NGOs; and seven volunteers.

222 Between April and May 2008, I conducted a small-scale survey of migrant children currently enrolled at school. Given the relative homogeneity of the migrant cohort in terms of financial conditions, social status and living environment, I decided to use cluster sampling; i.e. the children were sampled by class. A private migrant school (Jinxiu School) and a public school of a similar scale (Hucheng Secondary School) were selected for comparison following the suggestion from King, Keohane and Verba to avoid random selection when aiming for a small sample size and instead select in accordance with the independent variable.¹⁹

230 The pool used for random selections was comprised of students in grades 5, 6 and 9 at the private migrant school and grades 7 and 8 at the public school. Of the 252 questionnaires distributed, 251 were completed and returned. The sample consisted of 224 migrant children, 155 of whom were attending the private migrant school and 69 of whom were attending the public school. The average age of the migrant children was approximately 14, and their average age when they first arrived in Shanghai was approximately seven, which indicated that the average amount of time each migrant child had spent in Shanghai was seven years. Twenty-seven local children also participated in the survey (all in grade 6). The questionnaire distributed among the local children was identical to that used for the migrant correspondents, except that two questions that were designed specifically for migrant children were eliminated.

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254 Micro-level Mechanisms for Reproduction: Comparing Public Schools 255 with Private Migrant Schools

256 This study sought to understand the value systems of migrant children by using questionnaires that examine the value that migrant children place on money (topic 1), equality (topics 2–4), fairness (topics 5–6), collectivism (topics 7–10), knowledge (topic 11) and politics (topics 12–14).²⁰ A total of 14 topics were

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261 ¹⁸ I use pseudonyms for the schools throughout to protect their anonymity.

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¹⁹ King, Keohane and Verba 1996.

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²⁰ Some of the 14 topics that I chose are directly connected to social mobility, whereas others are indirectly connected. To a significant extent, an individual's value system is determined by his socialization. The higher the level of the individual's acceptance of mainstream values, the less likely it is that he will

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designed to elicit interviewees' opinions. The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from "completely agree" to "completely disagree." Each point on the scale was assigned a value from 1 to 5. A reference value was selected to represent the mainstream value, i.e. the value espoused by the government. The closer the "level of agreement" was with the reference value, the more consistently the value correlated with the mainstream value. The questionnaire conveyed the relationship between the values expressed by the three sample groups and the mainstream values in terms of the proximity of the values the sample groups expressed to the mainstream values, i.e. "near," "middle" or "far." The results are presented in [Table 2](#).

Regarding the 14 topics, 11 of the values held by the local children are very close to the mainstream values, whereas one is very far from the mainstream value (in part because of the ambiguity of the official stance). By contrast, although migrant children in public schools strongly espouse three of the 14 mainstream values, the values of migrant students in private migrant schools strongly diverge from the mainstream values, and nine of the 14 are far from the mainstream values. In other words, our survey questionnaire is more inclined to support the argument that migrant children in public schools uphold values that are closer to those officially upheld by the government than do migrant children in migrant schools, which may be owing to the existence of well-developed systems of symbols in public schools that foster the methodical imparting of values.

Because migrant children in public schools are more willing to accept mainstream values, they tend to believe that their life opportunities can be affected by knowledge. As such, they are more willing to study hard and achieve better results.²¹ In fact, the academic performance of migrant children in public schools is better than that of migrant children in private migrant schools. Based on a survey and standardized test given to 2,131 students from 20 elementary schools in Shanghai in 2010, Chen and Feng find that migrant students who are unable to enrol in public schools perform significantly worse than their more fortunate counterparts in both Chinese language and mathematics. The effect of school type on test scores is significant and overwhelms many important student and family effects: if all migrant students in migrant schools were reassigned to public schools, the overall test score gap between migrant students and Shanghai

footnote continued

engage in extreme or deviant behaviour. Conversely, the individual may have low self-esteem to the extent of engaging in self-abandonment or even becoming anti-social. Personal diligence and knowledge – traits that are capable of changing a student's fate – constitute two mainstream values. Thus, the greater extent to which migrant children accept mainstream values, the more likely it is that they will assimilate into urban society and thus achieve upward social mobility. See Simpson 1962.

21 Coleman (1966) argues that the education system is able to promote equality for students from disadvantaged backgrounds only if these students can attend schools with a socio-economically mixed student body. The schooling experiences of Chinese migrant children are consistent with his statement.

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Table 1: Interviewees’ Basic Information

Students	Migrant Children						Local Children			
	Gender		Class responsibility		School		Gender		Class responsibility	
No. of Students	Boy	Girl	Student leader	Non-student leader	Public	Private migrant	Boy	Girl	Student leader	Non-student leader
	102	105	59	163	155	69	18	9	10	17
%	45.5	46.9	26.6	73.4	69.2	30.8	66.7	33.3	37	63

Source:

“Survey questionnaire on migrant children’s social psychology and political awareness,” conducted by the author (April–May 2008). Unless otherwise stated, all statistical tables are based on this survey questionnaire.

Table 2: Level of Agreement of Three Sample Groups on All 14 Topics and Proximity of their Values to Mainstream Values

Value	Students in private migrant schools (N =155)	Migrant children in public schools (N =69)	Local children (N = 27)	Reference value (mainstream value)
1. Money is everything; one can move mountains with money.	3.67	3.50	3.74	5 (strongly object)
2. Everyone is born equal; there is no such thing as distinction in social standing.	Middle 1.64	Far 1.46	Near 1.15	1 (completely agree)
2. One must put forth extraordinary effort to be above others; everyone needs to work hard.	Far 2.05	Middle 2.09	Near 1.67	3 (non-committal)
4. Manual labour is on the lowest rung of society.	Middle 3.98	Near 4.08	Far 4.07	5 (strongly object)
5. It is fairest for everyone to share something; either everyone becomes poor together, or vice versa.	Far 2.67	Near 3.33	Middle 2.93	5 (strongly object)
6. Poverty is the result of sloth or incompetence; it has nothing to do with society.	Far 3.43	Near 3.34	Middle 3.52	5 (strongly object)
7. Everyone should strictly mind their own business.	Middle 3.89	Far 4.03	Near 4.22	5 (completely disagree)
8. With the exception of one's parents, no one in this world is reliable.	Far 3.52	Middle 3.74	Near 4.48	5 (strongly object)
9. A person's greatest value is his contribution to his country and society. For this, he should sacrifice his self-interest.	Far 2.44	Middle 2.94	Near 1.93	1 (completely agree)

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Table 2: Continued

Value	Students in private migrant schools (N =155)	Migrant children in public schools (N =69)	Local children (N = 27)	Reference value (mainstream value)
10. One should do what one thinks is correct; other people's views are not important.	Middle 2.72	Far 2.93	Near 3.15	5 (strongly object)
11. Knowledge can change one's life (or fortune).	Far 2.31	Middle 2.21	Near 2.19	1 (completely agree)
12. The government has free rein to accomplish what it wishes to accomplish.	Far 4.34	Middle 4.21	Near 4.78	5 (completely disagree)
13. The government works only for the rich.	Middle 4.05	Far 4.13	Near 4.67	5 (strongly object)
14. We should obey the government's orders regardless of the circumstances.	Far 3.09	Middle 3.28	Near 3.33	4 (object)
	Far	Middle	Near	

441 students would shrink from 9.7 to 6 for Chinese and from 13.6 to 8.3 for
 442 mathematics.²²

443 A variety of pictures and slogans were posted on the walls of Hucheng
 444 Secondary School, such as pictures of famous people and their teachings and
 445 the mottoes of successful previous students. Photographs and summaries of the
 446 achievements of outstanding students, in addition to posters for various types
 447 of competition, were also on display. All of these items were aimed at showcasing
 448 mainstream values involved in personal achievement. By contrast, Jinxiu School
 449 only exhibited the school administration's notices on school fees, lunch and trans-
 450 portation charges, and various regulations regarding student safety, all of which
 451 were poorly presented with no attention to the presentation form.

452 In other words, the symbol system and etiquette that characterized the public
 453 school were focused on student autonomy and self-discipline. By contrast, the
 454 symbol system and etiquette that characterized the private migrant school
 455 stressed student compliance with authority. The latter emphasis is an indirect
 456 indication of poor discipline among the students in the private migrant school,
 457 which was so severe that the administration at Jinxiu School apparently felt
 458 that it must repeatedly assert its authority.

459 Nevertheless, the differences in values between these two types of schools
 460 should not be exaggerated. If the ranking of the three sample groups were disre-
 461 garded and they were viewed in terms of level of agreement, it would be clear that
 462 there is little difference between migrant children and local children, regardless of
 463 whether a school is a public school or a private migrant school. The children
 464 tended to have similar value systems. The only notable difference was that
 465 local children were probably more inclined to be politically correct. In other
 466 words, local children vocalized greater support for mainstream values, whereas
 467 migrant children tended to reject these values. Simply put, relative to local chil-
 468 dren, migrant children's values deviate slightly from mainstream values.
 469 However, the students in the two groups are not polar opposites.

470 The survey found that there was no statistically significant difference in aspira-
 471 tions for the future between migrant children who studied at public schools and
 472 those who attended private migrant schools after they graduated from these
 473 schools ($p > .05$). It is noteworthy that in the private migrant schools, a greater
 474 proportion of students hoped to find work immediately after graduation and
 475 that only 10 per cent of these students were willing to return to their home cities
 476 to continue their senior high school education (see Table 3), which indicates that
 477 this group of students had less desire for learning than their peers in public
 478 schools. This trend is even more pronounced in higher grades. Children in
 479 upper grades were more pessimistic about their future. When compared with chil-
 480 dren in grades 5 and 6 from the same school, a significantly lower percentage of
 481 children in grade 9 at the private migrant school wished to continue their higher
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484 22 Chen and Feng 2013.

485 Table 3: Plans of Migrant Children in Different Types of Schools after Completing
 486 Junior Secondary Education
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488 Option	Public school	Private migrant school
489 1. Find work	1 (1.4%)	12 (7.7%)
490 2. Learn a skill	16 (23.2%)	38 (24.5%)
491 3. Attend technical school or polytechnic in 492 Shanghai	24 (34.8%)	55 (34.5%)
493 4. Attend senior secondary school in hometown	27 (39.1%)	45 (29.0%)
494 5. Other	1 (1.4%)	5 (3.2%)
495 Total	69 (100%)	155 (100%)

495 *Notes:*

496 Chi-squared value: 6.5021; degree of freedom: 4; P-value: 0.0895.
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499 education in their hometown. Likewise, the percentage of migrant children in
 500 grade 8 who wished to continue their higher education was lower than that in
 501 grade 7 in public school. Additionally, a significant difference was found between
 502 these two years regarding options before graduation (see Table 4). Such a differ-
 503 ence is largely the result of children's expectations for higher education and suc-
 504 cess. Children at the higher grade levels were more aware of the system's
 505 bottleneck than those at lower grade levels. They were unable to attend senior
 506 secondary school or even sit for university entrance examinations in Shanghai;
 507 additionally, they had no competitive advantage in their own hometowns because
 508 of the poor teaching resources and administration at the private migrant schools
 509 in Shanghai. Most children opted to abandon their educational aspirations once
 510 they discovered that there was no chance of furthering their studies.

511 One of the questions in the survey questionnaire began with: "If you have a
 512 classmate whose dream it is to become the mayor of Shanghai, would you
 513 think that he/she..." The three choices given are in accordance with three differ-
 514 ent attitudes. The first indicates an optimistic attitude towards upward social
 515 mobility; the second option indicates a positive view of social mobility but recog-
 516 nizes that such mobility may be limited; and the last option demonstrates a pes-
 517 simistic view of minimal social mobility and opportunity. The results of the
 518 survey question are as follows.

519 Migrant children at the public school were more pessimistic than children in
 520 the private migrant schools, with 20 per cent fewer migrant children at the public
 521 school choosing Option 1 than students at the private migrant schools. Moreover,
 522 15 per cent fewer migrant children at the public school chose Option 2 than stu-
 523 dents at the private migrant schools. In addition, twice as many migrant students
 524 at public school chose Option 3 than students at the private migrant schools.
 525 Statistically, there was a significant difference between the two groups with
 526 respect to their attitudes. The data support the author's hypothesis that students
 527 in public schools have lower expectations regarding their personal prospects as a
 528 result of their awareness of the obstacles to their further education.

Table 4: Plans of Migrant Children at Different Levels after Completing Junior Secondary Education³⁷

Option	Private migrant school			Public school	
	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 9	Grade 7	Grade 8
1. Find work	2 (4.0%)	8 (16.0%)	2 (3.6%)	1 (2.9%)	0 (0)
2. Learn a skill	14 (28.0%)	7 (14.0%)	17 (30.9%)	7 (20.6%)	9 (25.7%)
3. Attend technical school or polytechnic in Shanghai	13 (26.0%)	11 (22.0%)	31 (56.4%)	11 (32.4%)	13 (37.1%)
4. Attend senior secondary school in hometown	19 (38.0%)	23 (46.0%)	3 (5.5%)	14 (41.2%)	13 (37.1%)
5. Other	2 (4.0%)	1 (2.0%)	2 (3.6%)	1 (2.9%)	0 (0)
Total	50 (100%)	50 (100%)	55 (100%)	34 (100%)	35 (100%)

Notes:

Results of chi-squared test: chi-squared value: 45.0553; degree of freedom: 16; P-value: 0.0001.

573 Table 5: “If You Have a Classmate Whose Dream It Is To Become the Mayor of
 574 Shanghai, Would You Think That ...” (Answers of Migrant Children in Different
 575 Types of Schools)

Option	Public school	Private migrant school
1. He/she would ultimately succeed so long as he/she persevered.	19 (27.5%)	74 (47.7%)
2. He/she has high ideals. Even if he/she were not ultimately successful, such ideals are commendable.	43 (62.3%)	73 (47.1%)
3. He/she is an impracticable idealist and is bound to fail.	7 (10.1%)	8 (5.2%)
Total	69 (100%)	155 (100%)

583 *Notes:*

584 Results of chi-squared test: chi-squared value: 8.6023; degree of freedom: 2; P-value: 0.0136.

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 587 As they grow older, it appears that migrant children become more pessimistic
 588 about their future social mobility and opportunities. The percentage of children
 589 who selected Option 1 decreased for children in a higher grade, whereas the percent-
 590 age of those who selected Options 2 and 3 gradually increased. The only exceptions
 591 occurred in grades 8 and 9, but I speculate that the result may not have reflected the
 592 real situation and may have been caused by school type. As one of the delimitations
 593 of the present study, all the students in grade 8 were public school students, whereas
 594 all the students in grade 9 attended the private migrant school. Additionally, there is
 595 a statistically significant difference between students in different grades.

596 In contrast, local children were far more optimistic about social mobility and
 597 opportunities. As many as 63 per cent of the students believed that success could
 598 be achieved through perseverance, whereas the remaining 37 per cent chose
 599 Option 2, and none chose Option 3. More than half of the migrant children
 600 chose Option 2, and there were 20 per cent fewer migrant children than local chil-
 601 dren who thought that perseverance breeds success. As many as 6.7 per cent of
 602 migrant children had abandoned the prospect of social mobility. The p-value
 603 of the chi-squared test is 0.068; this result amounts to a significant difference
 604 in views between the two types of students.

605 It is difficult not to notice that the ceiling for further studies has had a signifi-
 606 cant impact on migrant children studying in public schools, such that they
 607 become increasingly pessimistic as they grow older. This ceiling is a bottleneck
 608 for personal development in real life and represents low expectations for one’s
 609 personal future. In this case, the “ceiling effect” refers to a situation in which
 610 migrant children, through their interaction with the outside world, have relatively
 611 low expectations for their future prospects (a ceiling prevents their upward mobil-
 612 ity). As a result, they abandon, without prompting, any efforts at further studies.

613 We may call this phenomenon “institutional self-disqualification.”²³

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 615 23 Institutional self-disqualification refers to a situation in which the majority of students become more
 616 inclined to abandon their study efforts as a result of negative incentives inherent in the system and

Table 6: “If You Have a Classmate Whose Dream It Is To Become the Mayor of Shanghai, Would You Think That ...” (Answers of Migrant Children in Different Grades)

Option	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 9
1. He/she would ultimately succeed so long as he/she persevered.	32 (64.0%)	26 (52.0%)	13 (38.2%)	6 (17.1%)	16 (29.1%)
2. He/she has high ideals. Even if he/she were not ultimately successful, such ideals are commendable.	18 (36.0%)	21 (42.0%)	19 (55.9%)	24 (68.6%)	34 (61.8%)
3. He/she is an impracticable idealist and is bound to fail.	0 (0)	3 (6%)	2 (5.9%)	5 (14.3%)	5 (9.1%)
Total	50 (100%)	50 (100%)	34 (100%)	35 (100%)	55 (100%)

Notes:

Results of chi-squared test: chi-squared value: 27.8664; degree of freedom: 8; P-value: 0.0005.

Table 7: “If You Have a Classmate Whose Dream It Is To Become the Mayor of Shanghai, Would You Think That...”

Option	Migrant children	Local children
1. He/she would ultimately succeed so long as he/she persevered.	93 (41.5%)	17 (63.0%)
2. He/she has high ideals. Even if he/she were not ultimately successful, such ideals are commendable.	116 (51.8%)	10 (37.0%)
3. He/she is an impracticable idealist and is bound to fail.	15 (6.7%)	0 (0)
Total	224 (100%)	27 (100%)

Notes:

Results of chi-squared test: chi-squared value: 5.3807; degree of freedom: 2; P-value: 0.06786.

The largest difference between migrant children at public schools and those at private migrant schools is the “counter-school culture” as defined by Paul E. Willis, which is strong among children at private migrant schools.²⁴ Many higher-grade students in these schools do not have no respect for the teachers’ authority and believe that the principal is merely a boss who is only interested in making money. Many of the students in the private migrant schools also voluntarily drop out of school to work, and some even become gang members. They see most of the knowledge they gain at school as useless and have no belief that it can alter their destiny or situation. Thus, the promise of the school’s slogan, “helping migrant children to step out of the footsteps of their parents,” is viewed as an unattainable goal. Instead, these children view fooling around, experiencing teenage love and fighting as “cool” behaviour – much in the same way that working class children pursued “masculinity” in the works by Willis.²⁵ School observations show that the public schools provide order, whereas the private migrant schools clearly lack discipline.

As a volunteer tutor at a private migrant school, I spent more than half of the lesson time maintaining order. Wei Wen, a university student who is a long-term volunteer at a private migrant school, angrily reported the following during an interview: “These children will form the main criminal force in Shanghai when they reach 16 or 17; in fact, I think 80 per cent of the children in my class will commit crimes in the future.” Although it sounds rather extreme, this comment nonetheless indicates how teachers in private migrant schools react when faced with rebellious student behaviour. By contrast, there is a “study first” atmosphere

footnote continued

institutional arrangement. This type of self-abandonment is not based on individual personality or preference. Instead, students take the view that despite their efforts, nothing they do will be fruitful as a result of institutional discrimination. As such, they abandon their studies. See Xiong 2010, 140. See also Ogbu 1978.

24 Willis 1981.

25 Ibid.

at the public schools, which greatly increases the likelihood that the migrant children in these schools will choose to pursue further education.

Almost every private migrant junior high school examined during the current study had a small “gang” (some gang members were even in the higher primary school grades). The members of such “gangs” typically had a strong sense of honour regarding their own class, so they generally did not bully their own classmates. Instead, they tended to take issue with students in other classes with whom they were uncomfortable. If students from other classes bullied their classmates, they frequently stepped in to assist in maintaining the honour of their class. When children at private migrant schools were bullied outside of school, some asked the members of these “gangs” to address the problem. The ensuing fights created many problems for school officials. The “gang” members were sharp-tongued and liked to challenge the teachers’ authority by determining a teacher’s weaknesses or individual characteristics and creating secret nicknames for them. When the teacher addresses the class seriously, these “gang” members may target the instructor’s flaws to make the entire class laugh. If the teachers punish them, gang members may threaten revenge.

The emergence of such “gangs” is relatively recent. Reports show that among the children under the age of 18 and who committed crimes in Shanghai between 2000 and 2002, the ratio of local perpetrators to those from outside Shanghai was 6:4. This ratio reversed to 4:6 in 2003 and was 3:7 in 2005. All the young criminals from outside Shanghai were migrant workers’ children.²⁶

After graduating from junior high school, migrant children have three options: they may stay in Shanghai to study at vocational schools; they may return to their hometowns to take senior high school admission exams; or they can go to work. A survey conducted by the Shanghai Committee of the Communist Youth League and Shanghai Community Youth Affairs Office shows that after migrant children graduated from junior high school in Shanghai, approximately half stayed in Shanghai to do business, work with their parents, or study at a vocational or other type of secondary technical school, whereas the other half were scattered geographically and were neither in school nor employed. Only a few students (mostly boys) with good exam results returned to their hometowns to continue their studies.

If migrant children do return to their hometowns to continue their studies, they and their families must pay not only high financial costs but also high costs in terms of separation. In addition, the teaching materials and methods used in rural schools are different from those in Shanghai, so these students will be in yet another disadvantaged position. All these factors drive most migrant children in Shanghai to choose to work or receive secondary vocational education,

26 Xiao Chunfei and Yuan Jian. 2006. “Nongmingong zhinü fanzui lü shangsheng, nanyi rongru chengshi zhi xinli piancha” (The rate of crime committed by children of rural migrant workers rises because it is difficult for them to blend into the city, which causes psychological deviation), 17 October, http://news.xinhuanet.com/legal/2006-10/17/content_5214183.htm.

749 both of which accelerate the reproduction of their social class. Although voca-
 750 tional training enables rural children to be more competitive in terms of securing
 751 a job, it does not provide any opportunity for upward mobility. Almost all
 752 migrant children end up employed in blue-collar jobs – such as factory workers,
 753 hotel service staff, cooks and salespersons – after they graduate from vocational
 754 institutions. I found that the wage level of migrant children after graduating from
 755 vocational schools was 2,000–2,500 yuan per month in 2013. Thus, it is apparent
 756 that the return for vocational education is on the low side; the average monthly
 757 salary for a university graduate in Shanghai was 4,746 yuan in 2013.²⁷

758 Among those who return to their hometowns for senior high school, only a
 759 small number are able to attend college (and in the process, change their house-
 760 hold registration and achieve upward social mobility). Overall, urban students
 761 have 5.8 times more opportunities to gain a higher education than rural stu-
 762 dents.²⁸ Thus, the educational resources (secondary vocational schools and voca-
 763 tional high schools) available to migrant children are likely to cause the
 764 reproduction of social class rather than enable upward social mobility.²⁹ As
 765 soon as they graduate from junior high school, many children take up “3D” (dif-
 766 ficult, dirty and dangerous) jobs, following the paths taken by their parents to
 767 some extent. Some may not find a job or are unwilling to work after graduat-
 768 ing from junior high school and become what Yang Yang (a 15-year-old girl from
 769 Sichuan province) referred to as “loafers in society.”³⁰ To a large extent, the
 770 counter-school culture is caused by the ordinary life challenges faced by migrant
 771 children.

772 It is important to note that public schools prioritize the type of teaching that
 773 focuses on discipline over students’ bodies and minds because these schools are
 774 under pressure to ensure that students progress to higher grades. A teacher
 775 from Hucheng High School indicated that the teacher’s task is to “impart
 776 how to behave and how to work.” This task is undertaken sincerely. By contrast,
 777 the mission of most private migrant schools does not extend further than ensuring
 778 the physical safety of the students. Benchmarks that the educational authority
 779 uses for appraising such schools typically address safety and hygiene. As long
 780 as students are safe at school, the schools are considered satisfactory.

781 The mobility of teachers in these private migrant schools also leads to a low
 782 sense of responsibility and little emotional communication with students. For
 783 instance, the home visit, which is common at public schools, rarely occurs at pri-
 784 vate migrant schools. In private migrant schools, migrant children can easily

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787 27 See [bj.chinanews.com](http://www.bj.chinanews.com). 2013. “Ben shi 2013 jie gaoxiao biyesheng pingjun yuexin wei 4,746 yuan”
 788 (Average monthly salary of city’s high school graduates of 2013 is 4,746 yuan), 17 June, <http://www.bj.chinanews.com/news/2013/0617/31281.html>.

789 28 A survey of 37 Chinese colleges and universities at different levels in 2004 shows that, in general, urban
 790 students have 5.8 times more opportunities to obtain higher education than rural students. This figure is
 8.8 for China’s prestigious colleges and universities and 3.4 for local colleges and universities. See Zhang
 2005.

791 29 Woronov 2011.

792 30 Interview with Yang Yang, a 9th grade migrant student, Shanghai, 16 July 2008.

793 observe conflicts of interests between the school and themselves. For instance,
 794 students at Jinxiu School privately call the principal “boss” and believe that
 795 the principal’s car was bought using the students’ “tuition fees and donated
 796 money.” They doubt every aspect of the school’s operations. Unlike migrant chil-
 797 dren at public schools, those at private migrant schools do not consider poor
 798 exam results or dropping out of school as marks of failure, and even students
 799 with high grades at private migrant schools cannot wait to step into society
 800 and enjoy being working adults.

801 802 803 Discussion and Conclusion

804 Previous studies on migrant children tend to treat schools as homogenous entities
 805 and ignore the differences between them.³¹ This paper investigates the impact of
 806 school types on migrant children’s values and social mobility. Different schools
 807 have different reproduction mechanisms. The “counter-school culture” proposed
 808 by Willis operates mainly in private migrant schools, whereas for public schools,
 809 it is the “ceiling effect” that inhibits the upward mobility of migrant children. The
 810 opening of social mobility channels does not necessarily produce positive results
 811 for migrants if the elites open only lower-level schools. Under an unjust social
 812 system, half-measures and local resistance typically do not change the system.
 813 Local resistance, in fact, strengthens and reproduces an unjust social system.

814 The answer to the question of whether schools serve as reproduction mechan-
 815 isms or promoters of social mobility depends on the interactions among four
 816 agencies: the government, the market, society and the family. The school is
 817 sited in an environment shaped by these agencies, and to a large extent, education
 818 itself is determined by these agencies rather than existing in an autonomous field.

819 The first issue that must be emphasized is that of the role of the government.
 820 The dual education system in Chinese cities is the result of governmental
 821 action. The government has institutionalized a two-track system that produces
 822 systemic discrimination against migrant children. The government provides nei-
 823 ther subsidies nor funding for private migrant schools and is concerned only
 824 with the safety and sanitation of the school compound. It pays no attention to
 825 internal administration and teaching quality. As such, migrant children cannot
 826 compete with their local counterparts on an equal basis. Although public schools
 827 have recently been opened to migrant children, migrant children have been
 828 offered only low-level teaching resources.

829 The second issue is the role of the market.³² Private schools are in essence a
 830 type of market institution that collects school fees from students for a profit.
 831 However, migrant children’s parents typically have low incomes – their average
 832 income can be 30–60 per cent lower than the average income of an urban resi-
 833 dent. Thus, migrant workers can only afford to send their children to private
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835 31 DiMaggio 1982; Collins 2009; McLaren 2006.

836 32 Ball 1993; Tang 2010.

837 migrant schools which charge low fees. Similarly, given the low profits of private
 838 migrant schools, the operators of these schools are typically unwilling to invest in
 839 additional facilities. In addition, many teachers at private migrant schools have
 840 no proper teaching qualifications. Some schools are also handicapped by employ-
 841 ing teachers with low educational qualifications and little teaching experience.
 842 Furthermore, most migrant workers themselves have not received a good educa-
 843 tion. Modern education tends to be “all-round” and “three-dimensional,” which
 844 means that parents, private tutors and professional training institutions should all
 845 be involved in education. Exemplifying this trend, the competition among chil-
 846 dren in terms of exam results begins long before tests are taken. Hence, “kinder-
 847 garten wars” have begun to occur. These features of modern urban life signify the
 848 demand for a longer and larger investment in education, but migrant workers can
 849 hardly afford the steep costs necessary to educate their children.

850 The role of society is also an issue. Although five to six NGOs in Shanghai pro-
 851 vide free extramural guidance, arts education and civic education for migrant
 852 children, these groups generally operate on a small scale, with each organization
 853 capable of holding only 50 to 200 children at one time.³³ Fellow migrants from
 854 their hometowns, villages or county provide a social support network in addition
 855 to NGOs. Whether looking for a job, securing a loan or upholding their rights,
 856 migrant workers will frequently seek help from other migrants from their home-
 857 towns first. Their social network is therefore small in scale, high in homogeneity,
 858 exhibits a significant degree of exclusiveness, and typically consists of other
 859 migrant workers with low socio-economic status.³⁴ These traits facilitate migrant
 860 workers’ residence in the city but do not frequently aid them in achieving upward
 861 mobility. Well-connected urbanites can use their social networks to place their
 862 children in the best schools.³⁵ For wealthy individuals, an urban registration
 863 may no longer be crucial because high-quality and high-priced private schools
 864 have been organized to serve their needs. Migrants, however, are deprived of
 865 financial and social capital, and the cheapest option – the public school – is
 866 inaccessible to most.

867 Finally, there is the issue of migrant children’s families. The parents of migrant
 868 children generally secure low-income jobs which require considerable manual
 869 work. Migrant children experience distinct disadvantages with respect to cultural
 870 capital during their schooling.

871 These disadvantages can be observed in several areas. The first hindrance for
 872 migrant children is the low level of their parents’ education, with most having
 873 completed only primary and junior secondary education. These parents lack
 874 financial resources and cultural capital and do not have the financial means to
 875 invest in their children’s education. They also lack the time and energy to
 876 guide their children in completing their school work. Conversely, urban parents
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878 33 Wang, Yijie, and Tong 2004; Ling 2012.

879 34 Jin et al. 2006.

880 35 Zhou and Lu 2009.

881 are able either to help their children with homework or to employ home tutors for
882 their children.

883 The second hindrance is education style. Migrant workers are more likely to
884 use corporal punishment and demand total submission from their children. By
885 contrast, urban parents (particularly the middle class) tend to counsel and display
886 affection and attention when educating their children. Urban parents are more
887 likely to tolerate their children's mistakes and are more focused on cultivating
888 their children's independence and their ability to reflect on past mistakes.

889 The third obstacle is the interaction between home and school. Urban parents,
890 and particularly those from the middle class, have a similar social status to the
891 teachers and thus use similar language and share identical values and tastes.
892 As such, they find it easier to communicate with teachers. Conversely, migrant
893 workers are not used to speaking with teachers, partly because of their lower
894 socio-economic status.

895 In summary, these migrant children are "non-citizens" from the state's perspec-
896 tive, and therefore lack entitlement to public services.³⁶ From the market perspec-
897 tive, migrant children's parents have been restricted to the secondary labour
898 market, in which they provide equal work for unequal pay. In terms of social cap-
899 ital, migrant children's parents lack a social support network. Finally, from the
900 migrants' perspective, the migrant family lacks economic and cultural capital.
901 The combined effect of these four forces means that migrant children face
902 more barriers and obstacles than their local counterparts, which forces them
903 down to the lowest levels of urban society. Certainly, social mobility is not the
904 binary opposite of class reproduction. I do not believe that education has no
905 impact on the social mobility of migrant children; instead, I believe that educa-
906 tion has only a limited impact, such that it does not enable a break from class
907 reproduction.

908 Why has the resistance of migrant children been ineffective? Once migrant chil-
909 dren in public schools realize that there is no chance or no point for them to con-
910 tinue with their studies, they tend to become disdainful of the need to acquire new
911 knowledge. Students in private migrant schools even refuse to recognize the
912 authority of their schools and teachers. Indeed, whether because of the "ceiling
913 effect" or "counter-school" culture, there is an unorganized resistance without
914 collective consensus. Rather than viewing this resistance as directed against the
915 current system, one should view it as an adaptation to the external environment
916 and the system's bias; the inevitable result of this protest is the academic failure of
917 migrant children. This failure, in turn, becomes a "self-fulfilling prophesy," and
918 to a large extent, reinforces the inequalities in the system.

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922 36 See Solinger 1999, 1.

923 37 During the 2008 survey, there was only one grade 9 class in the junior secondary section of Jinxiu Private
924 Migrant School. Moreover, Hucheng School only accepted migrant children into its grade 7 and 8
classes.

摘要 本文试图解释为什么中国的教育无法为农民工子女提供向上流动的机会。通过比较上海的一所公办学校和农民工子弟学校，作者发现了两种不同的阶级再生产机制：一是存在于公办学校的天花板效应，二是盛行于农民工子弟学校的反学校文化。这两种机制与其说是农民工子女对主流制度体系的反抗，不如说是对外部环境和制度性歧视的适应。这些机制的存在进一步强化了嵌入在制度体系中不平等。

关键词 阶级再生产；社会流动；制度性歧视；天花板效应；反学校文化

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