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Everybody educated?

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

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CONCLUSION

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We are all running very hard. We are all dream chasers.

(Xi Jinping, New Year's speech 2019)

In 2018, more than eight million Chinese youth graduated from university, an enormous increase from one million graduates in 1998, the year in which the Chinese state started the rapid expansion of the country's higher education system.⁶⁷ Much of this rise was due to the increased enrolment of rural Chinese students into the higher education system, now making up more than half of the country's university student population. This increase in student numbers, especially in the number of rural students, is often celebrated as a sign of development. In China, this rapid and immense educational expansion, also referred to as an 'educational miracle', is viewed as a great step towards further economic growth and alleviating social inequalities, particularly those between the country's rural and urban populations. In this dissertation I have investigated what enrolment in higher education actually means in the lives of rural Chinese youth, and whether it enables them to challenge deeply ingrained rural-urban hierarchies as well as push the boundaries of the categories that make up these hierarchies. I have shown that these youth, who I refer to as 'education migrants', simultaneously experience success and failure as they become the first of their families to go to university, but tend to get stuck in the bottom segment of China's stratified higher education system. Subsequently, these youths' limited access to the higher education system leads to their being precariously positioned in the urban labour market and ultimately channels the translation of rural-urban inequalities into rural and urban youths' differentiated access to urban jobs and capital. Educational expansion, while exacerbating rural-urban inequalities, makes these inequalities more invisible. After this expansion, rural students enrol in higher education in large numbers, which is considered to be a sign of inclusion and development within the education for development ideology promoted by the Chinese state as well as by international development agencies. Additionally, within this vision of development that views the rural and the urban as representing two opposite ends of a development spectrum, with the rural being the backward segment in need of development and the urban signifying the future and the goal of development, rural youths' limited success within the education system is interpreted as proof of these students' 'low quality' and the need for more development and educational expansion. Ethnographic research is important for looking behind these 'ideological screens' that promote education as an unequivocal force for growth, equality, and progress. It allows us to study what education migrants' access to higher education, which is both increased and limited to the lower segment of the higher education system, really means for this group, taking

into account those factors that determine the meaning of their education in the social and economic context in which they try to build their lives.

In this thesis, I have shown that there are crucial differences between different kinds of Chinese universities that strongly influence graduates' opportunities in the urban labour market. In combination with the large body of research that demonstrates the segregation of rural and urban youth within the Chinese higher education system, with the majority of rural youth attending schools in the system's bottom segment, this finding allows me to argue that the Chinese higher education system perpetuates rural-urban inequalities and translates them to an urban context. Yet the question remains: if education does not deliver on its promise of social mobility for rural Chinese youth, then why do they continue to study in such great numbers? To answer this question, it is important to think beyond the human capital approach, which measures the success of an educational trajectory by outcomes on the labour market alone. My research, alternatively, highlights the prices these students pay as well as other functions of higher education, including its function as a vehicle for rural-urban mobility and as a shield against the continued stigmatisation of rural citizens in Chinese cities.

In the introduction of this dissertation, I mentioned 'the alarmists' and 'the enthusiasts' as two camps with a vision of the position of education migrants in China. I explained that whereas the alarmists decry high unemployment among university graduates, the enthusiasts celebrate the successes of rapid educational expansion. In this concluding statement it will become clear that my research does not support either of these two visions. Whereas the alarmists focus strongly on the school-to-work transition and report high unemployment, I have shown that education migrants' higher education is important for them in multiple ways and that they are rarely unemployed, yet are often employed under conditions of informality that might not be picked up by statistics-based research. The enthusiasts' research, on the other hand, does not pick up on other important facets, including rural-urban inequalities and the possible downside of educational expansion.

The ethnographic approach of this research project has demonstrated that it is important to think beyond the human capital interpretation of education, and to instead consider what education means to youths themselves, in the context of their life trajectories and family histories. It shows that expanded educational opportunities for rural Chinese youth give rise to particular kinds of dreams and ambitions, aimed in particular at making stable lives for themselves in an urban environment. Yet, at the same time, structural inequalities within an education system considered to be fair and meritocratic also inspire feelings of

⁶⁷ These numbers are based on statistics provided by the Chinese National Bureau of Statistics via: www.stats.gov.cn.

unworthiness and failure, with important consequences for the ways in which these youths view their own position in urban society.

This research has introduced education migrants as an emergent rural-urban migrant population that moves along the rural-urban spectrum through China's (higher) education system. It has shown that these youth are driven by new educational policies and a rural-urban developmentalist ideology. Important characteristics of this ideology are the idea that Chinese society is moving away from its agricultural past towards a predominantly urban (read: modern) future and the belief in the power of education to advance individuals within society, as well as society as a whole, on its path towards modernity. Education migrants are very important players in this narrative because they personify urbanisation with their newly acquired urban tastes, ideas, and visions for the future. Not only do they advance on the geographical rural-urban spectrum, but also, as the first in their families to attend university, they break with their family histories of agriculture and labour migration to join the ranks of university graduates. Does their education enable these youths to create a new stability and slow down the hyper-mobility experienced by themselves and their family members as a result of China's rapid rural-urban transition? And does the growing number of rural university students signal a breakthrough in historically hierarchical Chinese rural-urban relations?

This dissertation has focused on the connections between rural-urban migration and educational expansion, two processes that are both expressions of the development vision with an urban bias that has shaped Chinese society since the start of the reform era. Educational expansion drives rural-urban migration, as students move step by step from villages to towns and cities, where universities are located, throughout their educational trajectories. This means that rural-urban migratory patterns change as growing numbers of Chinese youth move to the city as students, and not as labour migrants, with important implications for the future of rural-urban relations in Chinese society. I have used the term 'education migrants' to emphasise these youths' dual identity as an emerging type of rural-urban migrant and as the first generation of rural Chinese university students. This project has shown that it is important to study China's educational expansion within the framework of the country's greater rural-urban transformation, because it highlights the central role of mobility in educational trajectories. For education migrants, going to university is not only about 'developing themselves' and improving their position in the job market, but it is also a way of moving to the city and 'becoming urban'. For the Chinese state, educational expansion provides the benefit of driving economic growth or lowering

youth unemployment and is also a way to stimulate the rural-urban migration necessary to achieve ambitious urbanisation goals.⁶⁸

There are several conclusions that can be drawn from this dissertation's empirical chapters, which contribute to debates on rural-urban relations and educational expansion in China, as well as to broader discussions on education and equality, and education and mobility. In the following pages I will expand on these conclusions and how they contribute to existing debates.

Education Migrants

It is increasingly important to study education migrants as a separate group from labour migrants. Differentiating between these two migrant categories highlights important changes in Chinese rural-urban migration and reveals that in addition to the well-known drivers of Chinese rural-urban migration, which include rural-urban inequalities, technological developments in the agrarian sector, labour opportunities in urban areas, and relaxed mobility policies, China's higher education system has now become a key facilitator of rural-urban migration. The fact that education migrants do not fit very well in conceptual frameworks used in existing studies – are they migrants? or are they students? – has made this study both exciting and sometimes confusing. One might ask whether these youths should be called 'migrants' at all. I have chosen to use this term because they are mobile actors who are made vulnerable by their lack of local networks and knowledge, as well as by their limited access to local rights and state services. Referring to this group as 'migrants' is meant to remind the reader of the precariousness of their position in urban society. Of course, these are not migrants who move directly from point a to point b. Education migrants do not necessarily have a 'home' from which they departed, and they do not always consider themselves to have arrived in a new destination. They live in a state of constant mobility, moved around first by the education system, and subsequently, with increased but still limited agency, in response to the whims of urban labour markets.

Existing studies have studied rural university graduates as 'new generation migrants' (Cheng 2014; He & Wang 2016), 'intelligent migrants' (Han 2010), and 'the ant tribe' (Si 2009; Chan & Lu 2011; Gu & Sheng 2012; He & Mai 2015; Bregnbæk 2016), describing these youths as a growing subsection of China's labour migrants and as the inhabitants of urban 'ant colonies' that house the growing number of precariously positioned university graduates in Chinese cities. In contrast, this research views the emergence of this new migrant population as the outcome of Chinese educational policies aimed at promoting

⁶⁸ The state's urbanisation goals are described in the New-Type Urbanisation Plan (2014-2020).

urbanisation. As they move through the education system, education migrants become strongly oriented towards the city, envisioning themselves as future, urban white-collar workers. Their educational trajectories do not only inspire a desire for reaching across the rural-urban divide, which is the deepest divide within Chinese society, but also pushes the boundaries of the categories that make up this division. I have demonstrated that referring to education migrants as ‘rural youths’ is problematic, since their lives have become far removed from things generally associated with ‘the rural’, e.g. countryside living and agrarian work. The education migrants described in this dissertation who were not already born in towns in the first place often started boarding for the first time in primary school, and then continued living on school grounds in towns and small cities throughout middle and high school, as well as university. It is this continuous mobility rather than rurality that has been the key characteristic of their young lives. Yet, despite these youths’ weak connection to the countryside, their rural identities on paper as administered by the Chinese *hukou*-system, as well as their symbolic rural identities in the perception of their urban counterparts, including employers and classmates, continue to limit their opportunities in the city.

This research has demonstrated that youths’ educational experience inspires more permanent designs on urban life. After families have invested greatly in their children’s education, and youths have long lived away from home as they moved from one educational institute to the next, a return to the countryside after graduation has become unthinkable. In the villages, successful students’ achievements are celebrated with enrolment banquets and picture expositions on village squares that indicate the urban jobs they currently hold. It is clear that their graduation from university has launched them into a different category of citizen for whom it is unimaginable and even shameful to live in the village again. Of course, education migrants’ inability to return should also be understood in light of the rapid rural transformations happening in China, especially in relation to rural citizens’ access to land. As farmers either lose access to their land to land consolidation projects or come under the influence of ‘dragonhead enterprises’, working in agriculture is becoming less and less attractive, as illustrated by the immense drop – from 70.7 percent in 1978 to 27 percent in 2017 – in the percentage of the Chinese labour force working in this sector. Since many education migrants therefore do not have a location to which they can ‘return’, they should be considered new permanent inhabitants of the Chinese city. Education migrants can now even apply for a *hukou*-registration in second-tier cities. Yet, through disentangling multiple dimensions of the rural-urban divide, being the symbolic, the administrative, and the experiential, this research has shown that the rural-urban divide runs much deeper than the *hukou*-system, and that even though geographical divisions between China’s rural and urban areas are increasingly blurred and the administrative divide between the country’s

rural and urban citizens becomes less rigid, the divide between those citizens considered rural and urban remains deep.

The *Hukou*-System and Mobility

The *hukou*-system should not be considered the only or the main factor maintaining China’s rural-urban division. The findings presented in this dissertation support those scholars who have critiqued the centrality of the *hukou*-system in studies of China’s rural-urban divide in recent years (e.g. Zhan 2011; Cheng 2014; Lan 2014; Jakimow & Barabantseva 2016). In fact, in 2017 Chinese second-tier cities started to allow education migrants to gain local *hukou*-registration, in an effort to attract talented youth, who are considered to bring economic growth, to settle in these cities. Education migrants thus have the opportunity to become administratively urban, yet they do not immediately jump on this opportunity. A similar lack of enthusiasm has previously been noted among labour migrants who were given the opportunity for *hukou*-conversion in some medium- and smaller-sized cities (e.g. Zhan 2011, Chen & Fan 2016). I have drawn three arguments from this observation. First, in addition to studying the effects of the *hukou*-system, it is important to note other mechanisms of exclusion that maintain the rural-urban divide, including the workings of the education system, the urban real estate market with its sky-rocketing prices, and identity-based forms of exclusion resulting from the stigmatisation of rural people in Chinese society. Education migrants have referred to their inability to overcome such hurdles to justify their lack of interest in acquiring urban *hukou*-status. Second, there are social divisions other than the rural-urban divide that are built upon the back of the *hukou*-system and which are increasingly important, but not as visible in research on Chinese society. This research has highlighted the importance of the division between those with *hukou*-registrations in first- and second-tier cities, following interlocutors’ explanations about the benefits attached to a Wuhan *hukou*-registration being incomparable to a *hukou*-registration in any of China’s first-tier cities, namely Beijing, Shanghai, or Guangzhou. Whereas a second-tier city’s *hukou*-registration is not considered very valuable, *hukou*-registration in a first-tier city is still considered a ‘golden ticket’, giving access to the country’s best medical and educational resources, as well as good pensions and an advantage in China’s most competitive real estate markets. Third, my research findings show that the variety in interest in the *hukou*-system between citizens differently positioned in Chinese society should be understood in relation to the ways people are already positioned in the existing social class structure and their expectations of social mobility in the future. For example, whereas youths who feel confident about purchasing urban real estate in the future, because they know they can count on family financial support and networks that give access to high-paying jobs, are interested in *hukou*-conversion for its ability to improve their access to this real estate market, it is harder to see the point of conversion for those who know they will never be able to make

such a purchase in the first place. Finally, it is also important to consider what kind of rural *hukou*-registration people are expected to give up, since some rural *hukou*-holders wish to hold on to their rights if they expect great compensation pay-outs when developers wish to build on their land, and it is not possible to reverse a *hukou*-conversion.

Education migrants' lack of enthusiasm for *hukou*-conversion is not indicative of their longer-term plans for their futures. These youths plan to stay in the city permanently. Yet it is important that the permanence of their city lives is not mistaken for stability. In fact, achieving stability and slowing down the hyper-mobility that they have experienced throughout their lives is what most education migrants describe as their greatest desire. Expressing their feelings of fatigue regarding constantly moving from one place to the next, youths often wonder: 'who wants to keep floating?'. Even when education migrants stay in one place their lives are marked by constant changes, as they go in and out of jobs, and frequently change residence. The trouble with education migrants' connections to both rural and urban parts of China is that they fall in between several narratives and conceptualisations of belonging in Chinese society. Different to the rural-urban labour migrants who were seen as temporarily coming to the city to increase their rural household incomes, but continuing to have important roots in their home community, education migrants do not have that kind of safe haven to return to. They spent most of their young lives on school campuses in multiple locations, only visiting family members occasionally, and do not have a place in which they feel strongly rooted. Education migrants are often born into mobility. Their families have either already lived the migrants' existence for decades or still farm in a place they call home, but have felt strongly determined to mobilise their children to 'find a way out' ever since they were born, realising that they might be the last generation to farm on family-sized plots. Education migrants' rootlessness and inability to return is an important factor that contributes to their experience of precarity in the city.

In China's intensely mobile society it has become a privilege to have 'roots', as in a place of familiarity, history, and embeddedness in local networks. Having these kinds of 'roots' gives legitimacy to claims of entitlement to resources in that particular environment, as illustrated in the debates about access to educational resources in the third empirical chapter of this dissertation. Education migrants' subtle understanding of the advantages of being local over being 'an outsider', which is the most common word used colloquially to refer to migrants in Chinese cities, inspires them to employ a relatively flexible concept of 'home' as an act of defiance against the 'outsider label'. Having grown up in various parts of Hubei province, the education migrants in this dissertation view Wuhan as a part of their extended home, and speak about staying within the provincial borders as 'staying home'. Some youth identify as 'Southerners', and extend their idea of home to the south of China, including

the megacities Guangzhou and Shenzhen, where many education migrants end up going to look for better jobs. These areas are considered closer to home and less different from Hubei province than, for example, Beijing, which is located a similar physical distance to the north. Their self-identification as southerners makes this orientation feel more natural, giving the impression that moving south is easier and closer to home. A closer look at these differently scaled imaginations of home and belonging reveals that education migrants cope with their feelings of uprootedness by broadening their idea of home. Of course, and as illustrated throughout this work, this one-sided claim does not protect them from being seen and treated as 'ruralites' and 'outsiders' by others, who might be equally aware of the advantage of being local and wish to protect their privileged position.

Even though education migrants wish to reduce the mobility they experience, this is not always an option, since not everybody can 'afford' to stay put. Men who are expected to make great investments for marriage unwillingly especially undergo bouts of hyper-mobility, during which they work in the southern megacities with the aim of 'going home'. These undertakings often prove counterproductive when they extend into long periods of hustling in the economic margins of these cities, which offer even less opportunity for achieving stability. Moreover, when these young men managed to marry and buy marriage homes, more mobility was often required to earn the money necessary for covering mortgage expenses, leaving homes empty and newly-weds separated. Still, marriage and the purchase of real estate are the two most important strategies for education migrants to 'settle down'. Owning real estate has become one of the most important markers of status and belonging in Chinese cities, and is considered even more important than a local *hukou*-registration. The importance of marriage for these education migrants is certainly heightened by their mobile lifestyle and desire to create a new stability.

Moving to the city as a student instead of as a labour migrant and entering the urban labour market as a university graduate is also meant to improve youths' position in urban society and help create a new stability. Yet this proves difficult due to the low value of education migrants' university degrees, leading to my argument regarding higher education systems' potential to intensify inequalities in societies.

Education and Equality

The rapid expansion of the Chinese higher education system has gone hand in hand with the system's stratification, making it very important to differentiate between types of universities when researching higher education systems. Moreover, research projects conducted in many corners of the world have shown that when highly stratified higher education systems intersect with existing inequalities, higher education systems exacerbate these inequalities

(e.g. D'Andrea 2007; Reay et al 2013; Chesters & Watson 2013; Ersado & Gignoux 2017). In the case of China, there is a large body of research that shows that for students from rural backgrounds, access to higher education is mainly restricted to the bottom segment of the country's higher education system. This research shows that the number of students from rural backgrounds in universities decreases as the institutional rank rises (e.g. Liu 2007, Qiao 2010, Hua 2015, Li et al 2015, Loyalka et al 2017). I have described how the Chinese higher education system consists of multiple layers that range from high-profile key point universities, which are well-financed institutes operating under the wing of the national Ministry of Education, to a range of provincial universities that operate with significantly less funding. For all Chinese youth decisions regarding university enrolment are crucial, since the status of the institute they are able to attend has a great effect on the kinds of labour opportunities available to them after graduation. Education migrants entering the urban labour market with sub-standard university degrees perpetuates the historic rural-urban division in this labour market and in Chinese society at large.

Ever since the state's withdrawal from the urban labour market, educational credentials have become very important for achieving social mobility in urban Chinese society. In particular, acquiring degrees from China's famous key point universities, which give access to top-level jobs in China's liberalised labour market, has become an important strategy for elite and middle-class families to safeguard their children's strong position in society (Fong 2004). Rural families' 'educational desire' has not gone unnoticed as rural families have started to make great investments in their children's educational trajectories, viewing the educational pathway as 'the only way out' of poverty and rural life (Kipnis 2011; Obendiek 2016). I have shown that this educational pathway indeed facilitates the physical movement of great numbers of students from rural to urban areas, but that educational credentials often fail to promote the social mobility students had hoped for. China's urban labour market exists in a dynamic relationship with the higher education system. Following the rapid expansion and stratification of the higher education system, vacancies now specify exactly which kind of university candidates must have attended in order to be taken into consideration. Many vacancies specify that only graduates from China's key point universities may apply, but there are also employers who are more interested in graduates coming out of the lower end of the education system. In contrast to the media reports and academic research that claim a spike in youth unemployment following the rapid rise of the number of yearly Chinese university graduates (e.g. Bai 2006; Chan & Lu 2011; Bregnbæk 2016), my ethnographic research shows that education migrants are rarely without work, a discrepancy that can be explained by a large informal labour market and untrustworthy statistics. In fact, in response to the increased number of university graduates, a white-collar segment of the informal labour market has come into existence. This segment consists of sales jobs that

offer very little security, with salaries just over minimum wage, and the promise of three percent commissions on sales. In these jobs, youths work without labour contracts and regularly get fired without notice. The management regimes they work under cause stress and competition between colleagues, leaving education migrants feeling even more isolated. Having few people to rely on, education migrants feel close to their employers, sometimes to the point of idolising them. Sales jobs often lead to disappointing results, but are popular with education migrants because they are easy to find and offer both a white-collar working environment and the promise of future riches.

In the Chinese labour market, youths' rural identities play an important role. In the informal job market where youth work under tough labour conditions, their 'being rural' makes them capable of 'eating bitterness' in the eyes of employers. Some employers seek out these youth purposefully, because their unfamiliarity with the law and lack of networks make them easily exploitable. From these employers' recruitment practices it is clear that they work with an understanding of the connections between various layers of the higher education system and the rural-urban divide. The categories 'rural' and 'urban' can work as euphemisms to mask class relations in a society with a recent and violent political history of class eradication. The developmentalist ideology that has shaped Chinese state policy since the start of the reform era rather looks at the rural and the urban as two different 'stages of development', with the first clearly trailing behind the other. Bourdieu argued that especially in those places where the hereditary transmission of power and privilege is a social taboo, school systems work to conceal the reproduction of class relations (Bourdieu 1973; in Harker 1990: 95). The school system offers an 'ideological screen' that masks the economic calculations behind social and cultural practices and changes the face of the higher education system from a site where the in- and exclusion of social groups is organised to a land of opportunity, where inequalities are diminished and weak social groups find emancipation. This explains the disconnection between education migrants' self-representation as 'university graduates', and their employers' persistence in referring to them as 'rural kids'. Both parties interpret the meaning of these university degrees obtained in the lower segment of the higher education system differently, one as proof of their successful completion of their studies, and the other as a certificate of rurality.

Ideological screens' ability to mask dynamics leading to inequality has an effect on the ways education migrants perceive of themselves. It hides the ways in which these youths' access to higher education is structurally limited and stands in the way of them evaluating their experience with any other language than the language of meritocracy and self-responsibility, fostering feelings of worthlessness and self-blame. Education migrants therefore often come out of the higher education system feeling that they got what they deserved and that the

obstacles and hardships they might meet in the future can be traced back to their self-inflicted educational failures.

Family and Gender

In this thesis, I have argued that it is crucial to study education migrants as part of a family unit, since it is otherwise impossible to understand their motivations and greater goals. These youths' educational trajectories would have never been possible without the support of their families, making their university graduation a family achievement. Being the first person in their family to attend university can also create high expectations of what they will be able to achieve. Education migrants' contradictory position of being considered a success story in their families, but at the same time finding themselves very weakly positioned on the urban labour market, causes them to feel pressured and frustrated as they struggle to live up to the expectations of their loved ones. Yet, the stakes are much greater than the desire to make one's parents proud or feelings of indebtedness (Obendiek 2016). Despite many education migrants having spent long periods of time living apart from their families, they feel greatly attached to and responsible for their family members. Family members feel connected through their shared state of mobility, and the familial bond is a rare source offering a sense of security and purpose. The feeling of 'only having each other to rely on' motivates youth and parents alike to try hard in life. Rural families in Hubei province face two major challenges in today's China. First of all, the rural pensions provided by the state are still almost non-existent at 660 renminbi (85 euro) per year. Education migrants' parents have often not lived in the countryside for a long time themselves, and a 'return' is therefore not practical. In some cases, parents lost their land to a land consolidation project, and in other cases, they never had much land to start with. If parents wish to retire in, for example, Jingmen city, they will have to pay for renting an apartment, food, and medical fees in case of illness, and will therefore need their children's financial support. Second, following decades of son preference and the one-child policy, the low number of marriageable women in rural Hubei province has made it very difficult for families to achieve marriage for their sons. Marriage costs are high, especially now that families will only agree to their daughters' marriages after a (semi)-urban apartment has been bought for the new couple to live in and a generous bride's price has been paid. A parent's wish to see their child married goes beyond notions of family honour and continuation. In particular, those families that have already lived through long histories of mobility want to see their children settle down. They do not want their sons to 'keep floating' from city to city, and job to job, never able to start a family or have a home to call his own. These two family goals are interrelated. Parents do not want to retire before their children are settled. And when elderly, and sometimes sickly, parents continue to practice labour migration themselves, working in labour-intensive industries,

education migrants feel pressured to achieve the success that will enable themselves or their brothers to marry, and therefore their parents to retire.

The cases presented in this dissertation show that female graduates in particular are being pulled in multiple directions. If they want to do well by their family, they might have to give up their personal ambitions. Even if they are successful in their careers, they might still disappoint their parents by remaining unmarried. Young women are simultaneously positioned on the labour and the marriage market. Navigating both markets while supporting their families sometimes resembles a real balancing act. Not only are they expected to marry themselves, but they are also asked to help finance their brothers' marriages. Due to son preference most young women have brothers, which means that their parents face the almost impossible task of realising a son's marriage, for which they require their daughter's help. Young women contribute their savings towards this goal. Sometimes they are encouraged to marry early in order for their family to receive the bride's price. Other times they are asked to marry late, so that they can financially contribute towards their brother's marriage for as long as possible. Whichever strategy a household may choose, it is clear that a son's future is always considered of greater importance than a daughter's future, and that all family members are expected to contribute however much they can to a son's future marriage. These dynamics leave daughters not only without personal savings, but also without the hope of any family capital ever being invested in their own future development, increasing young women's dependence on their husbands for financial security as well as housing, a situation further worsened by women's inability to claim ownership rights on the marriage house. In discussions about education and gender equality, scholars often count girls' improved access to education as a measure of women's emancipation (e.g. Tsui & Rich 2002; Tuwor & Sossou 2008; Zeng et al 2014).⁶⁹ My research shows that it is important for scholars to take the meaning that is ascribed to women's education into consideration. Women's education can easily be woven into patriarchal narratives that view educated women as better mothers and wives, and educational capital as an important form of marriage capital. In the Chinese context, for women to be career-oriented is considered to be damaging for their position on the marriage market, as illustrated by the concept of the 'hero woman'. Of course, there are young women who are determined to defy all expectations and follow their own path. Yet, these 'trailblazers', who I have described in Chapter Four, have to deal with pressure and judgements from family members as well as society at large, causing great emotional suffering.

⁶⁹ For an overview of the literature on 'women's development' and education, please see LeVine, LeVine & ScŪjell (2001).

Education and Displacement

Education is often considered a positive force promoting economic growth, equality, and empowerment. The explosive manner in which China has ‘revamped’ its education system is celebrated as exemplary for other countries (Yeravdekar & Tiwari 2014), and regarded as proof of China’s emergence as a new world power (Li et al 2008; OECD 2009). In Chinese newspapers, articles about the ongoing ‘educational revolution’ and its benefits for China’s economy are ubiquitous.⁷⁰ Scholars have long voiced critiques about the Chinese education system’s tendency to exacerbate inequalities and push through an agenda of development (Wan 2006; Ross & Wang 2010; Wu 2016). Moreover, numerous academic studies and international news reports claim a crisis of youth employment following a spike in the number of Chinese university graduates. This study has argued against these claims about high unemployment, but has also demonstrated that education migrants often work under dire circumstances. Observing university graduates’ difficulties on the labour market and reading about intensifying inequalities makes one wonder: Why does the Chinese state continue to grow its higher education system at record speed? Is there more to educational expansion than the proclaimed desire to achieve economic growth and promote equality? Are there alternative goals to which this expansion contributes?

This dissertation has described China’s educational expansion as part of the process of rural-urban transformation, which has led to the argument that educational expansion can also be looked upon as a strategy for displacement. My research has shown that China’s land system is rapidly changing, especially in Hubei province with its plains suitable for larger scale agriculture. Families lose access to their family-sized plots when land consolidation projects and ‘dragon head enterprises’ are introduced (Zhang, Oya & Ye 2015; ScÚeider 2017). These changes are of great consequence for the rural-urban divide in Chinese society. Since the 1980s, the country has seen significant rural-urban mobility, but during the last two decades the Chinese state has started to facilitate the movement of rural youth to the city via the country’s education system that is shaped in such a way that each step forward within the education system is a step towards the city. Village primary schools lead to town middle school, and then to city high schools and universities. Since the first nine years of Chinese students’ education have become compulsory in 1986, it could be said that rural-urban migration can no longer be avoided by Chinese youths. Recent policy statements indicate that the Chinese national government aims to expand its compulsory education, making high school attendance universal in coming years (Yue et al 2018), which will intensify this dynamic.

70 See, for example these articles in the China Daily, published on January 5th and January 17th, 2019. Last access on April 5th 2019: <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201901/17/WS5c3fec79a3106c65c34e5004.html>, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201901/05/WS5c301ecca31068606745f043_1.html

Scholars who have studied China’s ‘agricultural modernisation’, which is the term used by the Chinese government to describe the country’s rural transformation, point out that busting the myth of the Chinese peasant economy is long overdue (Zhang, Oya & Ye 2015). As capital has entered Chinese agriculture, small-scale farming has become less and less viable. China’s National Strategic Plan for Rural Vitalisation (2018-2022) also emphasises the importance of land consolidation and moving away from small-scale farming to increase efficiency (Long, Zhang & Tu 2019). The Chinese state makes no secret of its ambitious urbanisation goals. The connection between promoting rural-urban movement and changes in the agrarian sector is clear: in order to move onto large-scale, industrial farming, rural landholding families need to give up their access to land.⁷¹ Of course, the push for education within the framework of ‘education for development’ goes hand in hand with youths’ departure from the countryside, creating possibilities for rural development. This alternative perspective on the motives behind educational expansion goes against official narratives about education for development and equality, and raises a different set of questions. It shows that in addition to questions about rural-urban inequalities in the education system and the connection between education and employment, it is also important to note how the displacement of rural Chinese youths is inherent to the emergence of education migrants. Educated rural youths do not only feel less attached to the countryside, but also lack agrarian skills and knowledge, and have a desire for urban living, making their rights to land usage connected to their rural status relatively unimportant to them. Yet, it is important to ask questions about what the futures of these youths will look like if they lose their access to land and continue to face social and economic marginalisation in urban society.

One might ask the question: how important is ‘education’ really in this story, as a social institution with the aim of providing youths with knowledge and information that will help them get ahead in life? Think again about the fact that in 1977 only three percent of the 5.4 million university entrance exam-takers enrolled in universities, whereas in 2015 all of the 9.42 million students who took the exam qualified for enrolment.⁷² Should this development be studied in terms of educational expansion? Or does a focus on education prevents us from seeing behind the ideological screen masking the displacement of the next generation of China’s rural citizens? With my research, I hope to inspire further critical investigations into educational expansion as the driver of development agendas with particular visions of the future. In China, this is an urban future, with cities that continue to boom economically due to the influx of new people and capital. Education migrants play an important role in these cities’ futures. President Xi said in his New Year’s speech that everybody is running very hard, being dream chasers. This dissertation has stressed the

71 The state’s urbanisation goals are described in the New-Type Urbanisation Plan (2014-2020).

72 Those who do not enrol after the exam generally either re-take the last year of high school or join the army.

importance of standing still to think about the shape of those dreams and the aim of the running. Why is it important for everybody to be educated? What makes an educational trajectory worthwhile? And what kind of framework is most helpful for discussing these kinds of questions?

The education migrants whose stories formed the basis for this dissertation would surely give me a mixed response to these questions. Some of them look back on their university experience with great satisfaction, while others have fallen into depression. There are those who continue to feel hopeful about the future and those who are outright angry and disappointed. One thing education migrants have in common is that they have never really had a choice in the first place. Their only alternative to becoming a student was becoming a migrant worker, which they knew would entail plenty of challenges. Now, after graduation, there is not much else to do but to make the most of what still remains of those dreams they once set out to chase.