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The Price of Aspirations: Education Migrants' Pursuit of Higher Education in Hubei Province, China

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Abstract

This article offers an analysis of the educational aspirations of China's education migrants. These rural youth, who enrol in Chinese universities in great numbers, are often the first in their families to pursue higher education. Thereby, education migrants play an important role in China's rural–urban transition. Yet these youth continue to be confronted with rural–urban inequalities in Chinese society. This article draws on the framework proposed by Zipin et al. (*Educ Philos Theory* 47(3):227–246, 2015) to demonstrate how education migrants navigate the gap between the dominant belief that education is a meritocratic vehicle for social mobility and the realities with which they are confronted in the Chinese higher education system. It also suggests how this framework can be adjusted for studies of societies undergoing rapid social transformation. Finally, the article makes a case for bringing together discussions about aspiring youth and debates about the social structures in which young peoples' aspirations are grounded.

Keywords Aspirations · China · Migration · Education · Youth

Résumé

Cet article propose une analyse des aspirations éducatives des Chinois et Chinoises qui migrent pour faire des études. Ces jeunes ruraux, qui s'inscrivent en grand nombre dans les universités chinoises, sont souvent les premiers de leur famille à poursuivre des études supérieures. Les étudiants migrants jouent ainsi un rôle important dans la transition rurale-urbaine de la Chine. Pourtant, ces jeunes restent confrontés aux inégalités rurales-urbaines dans la société chinoise. Cet article s'inspire du cadre proposé par Zipin et al. (2015) pour montrer comment les étudiants migrants gèrent l'écart qui existe entre la croyance dominante selon laquelle les études incarnent le système méritocratique permettant la mobilité sociale et la réalité à laquelle ils font face dans le système d'enseignement supérieur chinois. L'article suggère également la façon dont ce cadre peut être adapté pour les études sur les sociétés en mutation so-

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ciale rapide. Enfin, l'article plaide en faveur d'un rapprochement entre les débats sur les jeunes qui ont des aspirations et les débats sur les structures sociales sur lesquelles se fondent leurs aspirations.

Introduction

In April 2016, Morning Sunshine asked me to accompany her to the university from which she was on medical leave for problems with depression and anxiety. She needed to collect some summer clothes from her dormitory and knew I was interested in meeting her classmates, so she asked me to tag along. As we entered, the light in the dorm room was dim. The sparse daylight that came in through the windows in the back of the room lit the seven young women's silhouettes. They had skipped class for Morning Sunshine's visit and sat on beds, small stools and chairs, making jokes and chewing on sweets. This room was home to four 19-year olds. There were four desk-bed combinations, with the desks forming the support for the 'high-sleepers' placed along the walls. The sleeping spaces were shrouded in muslin, providing students with privacy and warding off mosquitoes. This was one of Wuhan's *zhuanke* universities, the lowest segment of China's stratified higher education system. All of the young women in this room were studying to be accountants.

The prevailing attitude in the dorm was one of cynicism. 'Graduation equals unemployment', said one of the accountancy students when I asked her what she would do after graduation. The others snickered. 'It's very hard to find a job. At least, to find a job you like', one student explained. She added dramatically: 'In my next life, I'm going ... to a better university'. A student at the back of the room intervened: 'You have to keep hope for *this* life', she responded, 'You have to keep on hoping that you can at least accomplish something'. Shoulders slumped inside their big coats, the young women sat together quietly as they watched their friend, Morning Sunshine, prepare for what would become a permanent departure.

Morning Sunshine is one of a great number of rural Chinese youths who have moved to Wuhan to go to university since the start of the expansion of the Chinese higher education system in 1998. The rapid increase in the number of Chinese undergraduates, from 3.4 to 28.3 million between 1998 and 2018, has been largely driven by students like her (Cai 2013; Chinese Ministry of Education 2018). These youths, whom I refer to as education migrants, practice rural–urban migration via the Chinese higher education system, in contrast to migrant youth who are born and raised in the cities to which their parents have previously migrated (see Kaland's article (this issue) about migrant youth in Shanghai's vocational education). Education migrants are the first members of their families to attend university and the first generation of Chinese rural–urban migrants to arrive in the cities as students, rather than as labour migrants, in such large numbers.¹ This article demonstrates

¹ Education migrants are different from examination migrants or *gaokao yimin*; high-school students who move to locations to improve their access to higher education (e.g. poorer areas with lower score lines). Moreover, education migration itself is not an entirely new phenomenon, as rural students also moved to Chinese cities in the pre-reform and reform era, yet the scale of these migrations has become much larger since the start of the expansion of the Chinese higher education system in 1998.



that these youths' engagement with the higher education system should be understood in relation to structural changes in the Chinese countryside that have led to the declining viability of rural livelihoods. It shows that the precarity experienced by rural families as a result of these changes drives the formation of educational aspirations among rural youth, but at the same time curbs their mobility in China's stratified higher education system, resulting in their overrepresentation in the universities at the bottom of the system and their weak position in the urban labour market. Overall, this article shows that education migrants and their family members pay the price for China's aspirations as a country, as it demonstrates how education migrants' movement from the countryside to the city and their enrolment in the country's higher education system contributes to three intertwined strategies central to China's development agenda: promoting urbanisation, expanding China's higher education system, and speeding up the country's rural–urban transition.

Unlike most studies on aspirations that focus either on the aspiring individual or on structural conditions, this article brings the analysis of the structural condition of China's social transformation and higher education system into dialogue with a discussion about the goals to which Chinese rural youth aspire. In doing so, it argues that aspirations are best understood as the result of an interplay between structures and aspiring individuals. In line with the approach set out in the introduction of this Special Issue, this article understands aspirations as an orientation towards a desired future. The cases presented in this article demonstrate that young people's understanding of the structures they engage with deepens with time and changes the ways in which they envision their futures. It shows that their aspirations are dynamic, as they change in response to rapid societal change and an evolving understanding of the workings of society. I draw on the findings presented in this article to reflect on the framework proposed by Zipin et al. (2015) that separates three kinds of aspirations: those grounded in dominant ideologies (doxic), biographical–historical conditions (habitual), and lived-cultural resources (emergent). Zipin et al. base their framework on a study conducted in Australia and use Bourdieusian tools, developed in the context of French society. Can it also be useful for analysing the aspirations of Chinese rural youth? Unlike Australian and French society, Chinese society has a recent history of profound social transformation. The reform policies launched in 1979 have led to the emergence of new class structures (Woronov 2015; Zhang 2012) and rapid urbanisation. Education migrants therefore live in a society that is very different from the one their parents were born into and that continues transforming rapidly. Their life-worlds change too fast for their pasts to become present, as Zipin et al. describe as the outcome of habituated aspirations. Instead, education migrants have no choice but to verge towards 'futures not yet written', which, according to these scholars, amounts to developing emergent aspirations (2015: 238). Emergent aspirations, Zipin et al. explain, are rooted in 'funds of knowledge', which is a form of historically accumulated knowledge that has use as community and household resources (2015: 236). In this article, I argue that the emergent aspirations of youth in societies undergoing rapid social change should be understood as based on an 'emerging understanding', which arises from youths' *own* increased knowledge of the workings of the structures that shape their lives. In the case of Chinese education migrants this emerging understanding relates to (rural–urban)



dynamics in the Chinese higher education system and urban labour markets. The process of developing emerging understanding is not an individual undertaking, but a collaborative project that mainly involves peers who follow similar trajectories.

This article is based on multi-sited anthropological fieldwork in the context of a PhD project on rural students in China's higher education system. I conducted 11 consecutive months of fieldwork in 2015 and 2016 in various rural villages in Hubei province and in Wuhan, the provincial capital. I returned for a 3-week follow-up visit in the summer of 2017. Previously, I had lived in Beijing for 6 years, mostly as a student of Mandarin, the language in which this project was conducted. Until today, I have kept in regular contact with my key interlocutors through *weixin*, China's most popular social media application. The research data on which I base my arguments are triangulated in various ways. Firstly, I stayed with four different families during this period of research. Secondly, I used a variety of qualitative methods including participant observation, group conversations, and interviews, and met the same people in different contexts. For example, I discussed data gathered in my role as a 'visiting English teacher' in three different high schools, during group conversations with high-school students in the villages. Furthermore, I complement data gathered during family stays with studies into the policies that shaped the context of these families' experiences. Finally, the case study central to this article was selected for its ability to demonstrate how various intersecting social processes, including urbanisation, educational expansion, and economic transition, shape the context in which rural youth and their family members make decisions on higher education.

The article is organised as follows. Firstly, I analyse the structural context in which education migrants' experiences are embedded. Then I present the case studies to demonstrate the ways in which families and individuals interact with these structures.

Students in a Rural–Urban Transition

In this article, I use the term rural–urban transition to refer to the dual process of urbanisation and agricultural modernisation, the term used by the Chinese government to describe changes in Chinese agriculture. Scholars demonstrate that the Chinese state aims to increase agricultural efficiency by promoting land consolidation and moving away from small-scale farming (Long et al. 2019; Schneider 2016). As a result, it is becoming less viable for families to continue farming on family-sized plots. Statistics show that the number of Chinese citizens working in agriculture is dwindling fast, from 70.7% in 1978 to 26.5% in 2019 (World Bank 2019a; Guldin 2001). These developments are especially pronounced in Hubei province; one of China's leading agricultural producers and a province that aims to become a 'national leader in agricultural sustainability' (World Bank 2018). The plains in the centre and east of Hubei province are therefore among the first to be affected



by agricultural modernisation campaigns.² Statistics show that the average cultivated area per farmer in Hubei province increased from 800 m² in 1982 to 3700 m² in 2010, although urban expansion had diminished the total amount of arable land (Wong et al. 2015: 253).

China's agricultural modernisation is intertwined with the state's urbanisation plans. Rural–urban inequality has soared in China since the 1990s, when government expenditure on agriculture dropped and the township and village enterprise sector collapsed while the Chinese state and foreign investors continued to invest heavily in the country's urban development (Zhang 2015; Wen 2008). The subsequent rural–urban migration has not only been an important driver of China's economic growth, as it provided the country's urban industries with a cheap and flexible workforce, it has also paved the way for large-scale agriculture (Solinger 1999). Between 1979 and 2018, the Chinese population living in cities rose from 18 to 59.5% (World Bank 2019b; Shijia 2019). This means that the urbanisation goals set out in the 'New Type Urbanisation Plan 2014–2020' (http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2014-03/16/content_2640075.htm), which aim to reach 60% by 2020, are likely to be achieved.

The expansion of the Chinese higher education system has been crucial for driving urbanisation in several ways. Firstly, the Chinese education system as a whole is structured in such a way that it leads rural students from primary schools located in villages, via middle schools in towns and high schools in small cities, to universities in larger cities. Thus, pursuing higher education amounts to rural–urban migration. Secondly, educational trajectories prepare students for urban lives. With schools being located far away from the villages, students start boarding at a young age, and spend little time in the countryside as they grow up. During their school years, the notion that 'the good life' is located in an urban environment is strongly impressed on students and schools prepare their students for white-collar work, which is located in cities. Education migrants, whose dual identities as rural–urban migrants and as the first people in their families to go to university, personify the linkages between processes of urbanisation and educational expansion. Yet their trajectories also continue to be shaped by China's long history of rural–urban inequality.

Rural–Urban Inequality in the Education System

The Chinese higher education system is the world's largest, with 2,880 institutes. It is a pyramid-shaped system with a small number of high-quality institutes at the top and a large base of lower-quality institutes (see Table 1). The universities at the top of this pyramid are well-funded through special elite funding programmes aimed at rapidly establishing a small number of world-class Chinese universities. Chinese researchers who conduct research into rural–urban inequality in the higher education

² Details about agricultural change in Hubei province are derived from the provincial 13th 5-year plan, the 2018–2020 Specialty Agricultural Produce Development Plan, and the National Strategic Plan for Rural Revitalisation (2018–2022).



Table 1 Overview of Hubei higher education system, 2014 (total = 123)

Class	Funding	University	<i>N</i>
One	Recipient of 2 major additional state funding schemes	National	2
	Recipient of 1 major additional funding scheme	National	3
	No additional funding	Provincial	14
Two	No additional funding	Provincial	25
Three	No additional funding	Provincial	24
<i>Zhuanke</i>	No additional funding	Provincial	55

Based on information sent to me directly via email by the Wuhan Bureau of Education in May 2016

system have observed that the further up the hierarchy in the stratified Chinese higher education system one looks, the fewer rural students one will find (Li et al. 2015; Qiao 2010; Liu 2007). Moreover, reports in the media claim that the share of rural students in China's top universities has fallen in recent decades (e.g. at Qinghua University, from 50 to 17% from 1970 to 2014; at Beijing University: from 30 to 10% in the last decade) (see, for example: http://www.bjreview.com/print/txt/2011-09/13/content_389542.htm).

In 1977, when the university entrance exam was reinstated after an 11-year hiatus during Mao's Cultural Revolution, only 5% of all the exam-takers gained admission to university (Barendsen 1979: 10). In 2018, all 9.7 million students who took the exam were expected to find a place in a university (Zou and Wang 2018). In order not to be blinded by these impressive numbers, it has become especially important to ask not only whether students enter university, but also *what kind* of university they enrol in. Whereas entry into top universities is likely to pave the way to gainful employment, enrolment into institutes at the bottom of this education system often leads to badly paid and precarious employment.

In light of these facts, it is to be expected that education migrants' entry into the urban economy is not without challenge. My research shows that graduates with *zhuanke* degrees are in a weak position in the urban labour market. The vignette of the accountancy students in this article's introduction shows that China's education migrants are not oblivious to this reality. Why, then, do education migrants continue to enrol in these institutes in such great numbers?

Belief in Education

China's educational expansion is discussed in various ways in existing academic work. Some scholars view this expansion as an 'educational miracle' that promotes further economic development, and economic and gender equality (e.g. Yue et al. 2018; Yeravdekar and Tiwari 2014; OECD 2009). Others emphasise the precarious position of graduates in contemporary Chinese society, with a focus on difficult



school-to-work transitions in competitive labour markets, particularly for rural students (e.g. Bregnbæk 2016; He and Mai 2015; Gu and Sheng 2012; Si 2009). This article is part of a larger body of literature that draws on Bourdieusian frameworks to study empirically how China's educational expansion interacts with and reproduces existing social inequalities in Chinese society (e.g. Ling 2019; Xie 2016). These studies show that rural parents and youth continue to believe in education as a driver of social mobility even if they face obstacles in gaining access to education (see also Kaland, this issue). In rural Hubei province, parents' commitment to education might be further intensified by the pressure to find an alternative to agriculture and their perception of Hubei as one of China's 'big education provinces', with more educational resources and a relatively high number of schools and universities than other parts of China.

Doxic aspirations, or doxic logic, as described by Zipin et al. (2015) refer to dominant narratives about what the good life is and what people should strive for, grounded in 'populist-ideological mediations' (231). In China, this logic is shaped by the urban bias of the country's development policies that view Chinese society as moving away from its agricultural past towards a predominantly urban (read: modern) future (Bach 2010). Education is seen as an important strategy for advancing individuals and society as a whole along these lines. A retired high-school teacher who had worked his whole life in a small town middle school articulated these ideas as follows:

I taught for decades in schools in the countryside. Those children have to study well in order to develop and have future perspectives. If they don't, they'll just stay here, where they have no future. If they do well, they'll find a job somewhere eventually. Some students from rural places now even go abroad. And a lot of them you can find all over China. They have good jobs, they are doing well! One of my previous students is now a manager of a China Mobile store in Shanghai. Without education, he would never have had this opportunity.

This statement provides an illustration of the doxic logic in Chinese society that prescribes that finding urban employment is an important part of what constitutes the good life and education is a vehicle towards such employment. In the countryside, the teacher explains, these youth 'have no future', and education is necessary for having opportunities in the future.

In addition to education's power to promote equality and foster the emancipation of vulnerable groups in society, it is also seen as crucial for the success of the Chinese nation. In his speech on China's 34th Teacher's Day, President Xi stated that education is the foundation for national revitalisation and social progress, as it is significant for promoting people's overall development, strengthening the nation's innovation capability and realising the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (Cao 2018). This kind of education-for-development ideology, which is not unique to China (see, for example, Chopra and Jeffery 2005), forms the foundation of the belief system that encourages many millions of Chinese education migrants to embark on long, intensive and expensive educational trajectories. Rural families, who have benefited relatively little from their country's economic boom, are particularly hopeful about higher education's potential to improve their access to such benefits.



Tensions clearly exist between this doxic logic and the structural rural–urban inequality in access to education described in previous paragraphs. This article demonstrates that Chinese education migrants, whose life-worlds have little in common with the one in which their parents grew up, draw less on habituated aspirations, and are challenged to develop emergent aspirations based on the emerging understanding they develop as they move through the education system and into the urban labour market. The context of a rapidly changing society leads to a partial transmission of habitus across generations, and a young generation that is left with no choice but to learn as they move through life. Zipin et al. (2015) explain that even if emergent ideas go beyond the doxic and habituated logic and hint at an emergent sense of potential alternative futures, they should not be romanticised or assumed to be necessarily good. In their words: ‘Enactments of agency are never guaranteed to be progressive but can go in many ways, destructive as well as constructive, for the lives of selves and others’ (Zipin et al. 2015: 242). For education migrants, who have long held a strong belief in education as a vehicle for upward social mobility, it can be difficult to confront the idea that education may not deliver on its promise. Developing emergent aspirations is their way of navigating the gap between doxic beliefs and the reality with which they are confronted as rural youth with limited mobility in the Chinese higher education system.

In the next section, I return to the case of Morning Sunshine and ask why she was the only person in her family to attend university. This analysis demonstrates the importance of structures for understanding aspirations.

Morning Sunshine

Morning Sunshine was born and raised in a small village 100 km south-west of Wuhan. She was the third out of four children in her family. Her family’s demographic structure was typical of rural Hubei province where many parents had as many children as it took to have a son. In the case of this particular family, it took four. When these children grew up, their parents sustained the family by cultivating rice and rapeseed on the family-sized plot of land assigned to them in the 1980s, when China’s agricultural land was decollectivised after the death of Mao Zedong. Seeing that it was difficult to raise four children on only a farmer’s income, Morning Sunshine’s father made extra cash by working as a mine-cart driver.

When I arrived in Morning Sunshine’s home village in May 2016, most of its once 2000 inhabitants no longer lived there. The mines in this area had been closed and the farmers in the village had lost access to their land when a land consolidation project was implemented in 2011. As a result, most villagers had become labour migrants. The posters in the village square still celebrated the introduction of the land consolidation project, as they proudly declared that this project had been the result of the village board’s commitment to ‘making the farming of the land more environmentally friendly and the labour of the farmers lighter’. For losing access to their 2466 m² plot of land Morning Sunshine’s family received a yearly compensation of 260 renminbi (33 euro). The land was now farmed by ‘a big boss’ who allowed villagers to work as day labourers for 60 renminbi (7.75 euro) per day. Yet



most villagers, including Morning Sunshine's parents, considered this salary too low, and were left with no choice but to find alternative employment.

In the village, Morning Sunshine's family owns a house they built in 2002. It is a traditional farm house with concrete walls and floors, three bedrooms and a simple kitchen in a small courtyard. The house is sparsely furnished and without a private toilet. Since the family members started 'working outside', which is how people commonly refer to doing migrant labour, nobody has lived in the house. Sometimes, when family members are in between jobs or need a place to rest, for example, after Morning Sunshine had her nervous breakdown, they return to this house to recuperate.

Among the four siblings, Morning Sunshine was the only one who attended high school and university. Even though she and her family members explain that as a result of her having been a better and more eager student than the others, a look at her family's economic circumstances offers additional insights. Morning Sunshine's two sisters, who were 3 and 8 years older than her, finished middle school, which since 1986 has marked the end of China's 9 years of compulsory and free education, at a time when her parents could not afford tuition fees. 'Our family had many children, so we had no money. When my oldest sister graduated from middle school, my parents couldn't even afford to give her the monthly 5 kuai (0.6 euro) school breakfast fee', Morning Sunshine explained. One of the reasons the family was poor at this time was because they were paying hefty fines for having had four children under the one-child policy. Once, when the family had no money to give to pay the fine, all their possessions were confiscated. In 2010, the year that Morning Sunshine graduated from middle school, there were several reasons why her high-school enrolment could be considered. Firstly, a new state programme now subsidised high-school tuition fees for the country's poorest students, which reduced the yearly 2000 renminbi (250 euro) fee by approximately one third. Secondly, Morning Sunshine's score on the middle school exam was high enough for her to be offered further discounts to enrol in lower-scoring high schools. Thirdly, as the two older sisters had become migrant workers, Morning Sunshine's parents were no longer under pressure to feed four children. Moreover, her sisters were able and willing to contribute to their younger sister's school fees. This window of opportunity that allowed Morning Sunshine to enter high school was short lived. When her younger brother graduated from middle school 2 years later, everything had changed. His graduation collided with the implementation of the land consolidation plan. As the family entered a period of great uncertainty, the little brother decided to join the workforce directly. As it were, Morning Sunshine's ability to continue her education was a result of the favourable timing of her middle-school graduation in the midst of a rare period of relative stability for her family.

This analysis showing why Morning Sunshine was the one to go to high school and subsequently enrol in university provides an example of why it is important to think about the structural context in which aspirations come to fruition. Without taking this context into account one could easily interpret Morning Sunshine's long educational pathway, in comparison to her siblings, as a marker that she was more aspirational than the others. Of course, as her family confirms, Morning Sunshine did have the ability and the desire to study. Yet it is clear that it would have been





Fig. 1 Dayi High School, May 2016. Photo by author

unlikely for her to have had this option if she had not graduated from middle school in this opportune moment.

Dayi High School

Morning Sunshine attended Dayi High School between 2010 and 2014. This school, located in a poor rural township near her home village, does not have a good reputation, but is typical of schools in poorer counties. The fact that Dayi High School is underfunded is easy to see (Fig. 1). The building itself is dilapidated and the classrooms are bare and devoid of technology. Students sit behind old and damaged wooden desks, hidden from sight by the stacks of work books and text books piled up in front of them. Teacher Wang, who was once Morning Sunshine's favourite teacher, discussed the state of the school with me in her storage-room-turned office:

Once we had about 3000 students, but now we have less than 1000. This school is really, really, really bad. It's really terrible. Only the children with the lowest scores come here. Those who can go elsewhere, don't stay here. (Teacher Wang)

To enter high school, Chinese students take the high-school entrance exam. This exam does not have the same profile as the famous university entrance exam, but in recent years scholars have demonstrated that the most decisive moment in Chinese students' educational career is the transition from middle to high school (Loyalka et al. 2017; Hua 2015). For students who attend middle school in smaller, rural towns, it is very difficult to transfer into 'key point high schools', the type of high school that gives students access to top universities. When some of my interlocutors,



for example, took the high-school entrance exam in a small town middle school in 2008, 20 places were reserved in the quota of the nearby key point high school for the 1600 students taking the exam in that school.

High minimum scores and a student quota system that determines the number of students that can enrol from each school, and which is very low for rural middle schools, keep the number of students who transition from small town middle schools to key point high schools very low. In addition to the division between 'key point' and 'normal' universities, schools are ranked based on their students' test results. For high schools, as well as all other schools, it is thus important to improve their students' scores, as these scores not only have consequences for the students themselves, but also influence the way the school and its teachers are evaluated by the state (e.g. Wu 2016). This system creates a dynamic that gives rise to the practice whereby low-scoring schools offer financial incentives to poorer, higher-scoring students to enrol. To improve the scores of their school, they offer discounts on tuition fees for students who will enrol in their schools despite having a score that makes them eligible to enrol in a higher-scoring school. Rural students' financial constraints thus bar them from turning their scores into making the best possible transition from middle to high school.

Several students have told me about high-school teachers visiting their families in the village after their exam results were announced to recruit high-scoring students. One student went as far as to borrow 1000 renminbi from an uncle to self-fund her enrolment in a better high school after her parents had already agreed to her enrolment in a lower-ranked high school in exchange for a discount. She went on to get a Master's and then a PhD degree from a top university in Wuhan, something that would have been highly unlikely had she not fought her parents' decision at the time.

Morning Sunshine did not fight her parents' decision. Even though her score at the middle school entrance exam had made it possible for her to enter a mid-range high school, she ended up in the low-scoring Dayi High School because this school offered her one year's tuition worth of discount. This resulted in an exam score on the university entrance exam that only enabled her to apply to *zhuanke* universities, even after doing the final year of high school twice, and spending the money that was eventually saved on the one year of free tuition after all.

It is clear that parents' material constraints affect rural students' success in the education system. And there is evidence that in the case of access to education, China's rural-urban gap remains especially pronounced, in comparison to, for example, poor and non-poor youth in Chinese cities (Li et al. 2015: 204). At the same time, parents' difficult material circumstances were also central in students' explanations of why they were so determined to do well in their education.

Why Study?

During my research stay in Morning Sunshine's home region I had the opportunity to teach several English classes to second-year students at Dayi High School. I used these classes to gain more insight into how students of this age imagined their future, and the role of their education in shaping this future. All the students



in this high-school class grew up, like Morning Sunshine, in the rural villages surrounding the township in which the school was located. In our conversations they constantly referred to their families' position in society, calling their families 'poor' and describing their feelings of uncertainty about the changes in their living situations. In most families, one or both parents had already spent time away from home as labour migrants. Other struggles that most families dealt with were the necessity to save up enough money for a son's marriage (see, for example, Driessen and Sier 2020; Choi and Peng 2016) and achieving a level of financial security that could allow the parents to retire. The state retirement funds for rural Chinese citizens are deeply insufficient: the basic pension benefits amount to 660 rmb (85 euro) per year, which means that parents rely on their savings and their children's financial help when they stop working (Shu 2018). The students believed that if they did well in their education, they would be able to support their parents in overcoming these hurdles. Moreover, they were convinced of the necessity of education, and felt that they could 'do nothing' without it. One student explained: 'In China, if you don't have a degree, there is nothing you can do! You can only be a farmer, or a worker, do things that are very, very hard for very little money'. Deterred by their family members' experiences with farm and migrant work, these students tried to carve out alternative pathways for themselves through their education. In doing this, they hoped to improve their parents' situation as well.

One day, I asked the students to write down anonymously what they considered their most important desires and challenges. The notes I collected carried messages that were very similar in nature, including:

My family lives under quite difficult circumstances. I just want everybody to be happy. My biggest challenge is to finish my studies. (Student 1)

My biggest wish is to go to a good university, so I can meet my parents' expectations and have a bright future. (Student 2)

My biggest wish is to finish my studies, so my father won't worry about me. My biggest challenge is making myself work hard enough. (Student 3)

These answers show that students' desire to go to university is part of a larger aspiration to support their family members who live hyper-mobile lives as a consequence of China's rural–urban transition. Of course, motivating one's actions in this manner may be informed by students' knowledge of the ideologically desirable answers to these types of questions, especially in China, where the importance of filial piety is strongly emphasised in children's education and upbringing (Lan 2002). Yet in my research among education migrants, including Morning Sunshine, I was able to observe how youths' desire to help their families was more than politically correct behaviour and shaped some of their most important decisions.

One such decision for Morning Sunshine had been regarding her choice of major. Morning Sunshine had always wanted to become an English teacher. Yet her low score on the university entrance exam put her in a difficult position. Her



parents approached a cousin with a Master's degree for advice and were told that studying either English or education on the *zhuanke* level (which was the only level Morning Sunshine's score allowed her to apply for) was useless, as this would not enable her to become a 'real teacher', and she would only get a job in a kindergarten. This cousin advised Morning Sunshine to study accountancy, which offered better career opportunities. Morning Sunshine was not happy with this advice:

I felt a lot of pressure. Having asked my cousin, my parents now wanted me to study accountancy, but I don't like accountancy at all. But, after talking to my cousin, I didn't have the confidence to pursue my dreams anymore. I had already taken my final year in high school a second time, and still I didn't have a very high score. (Morning Sunshine)

Morning Sunshine was at a very important crossroad. The decisions made in this moment would greatly affect what was to come afterwards and she would ponder over them for years to come: what if she had stuck to her guns instead of following her cousin and her parents' advice? Yet feeling too insecure to do this, and not wanting to be selfish, she did as she was told and became an accountancy student, only to drop out with a nervous breakdown in the second year of her studies.

In addition to her having no interest in accounting and regretting not having studied English or education, Morning Sunshine also suffered from financial stress and a depressing, emerging understanding of the position of *zhuanke* graduates in the urban labour market. She was borrowing 6000 renminbi (780 euro) per year from the bank to pay her tuition fees and spent all her free time working in a crate factory and a noodle stand to cover as much of her living costs as possible. While working as hard as she did, she could not help becoming increasingly familiar with the dim job prospects for graduates from her university. In the next section, I explain how such an emerging understanding develops, starting with students' views on the high schools they attend.

Emerging Understanding

I use the term emerging understanding to encapsulate the insight into the workings of the Chinese higher education system and the white-collar urban labour market that education migrants develop during their time as students and upon entering the labour market after graduation, and argue that this understanding drives the development of emergent aspirations. Throughout their educational trajectories, Chinese students are aware of being part of a larger world of education; one of many hierarchically organised layers. Most of the high schools in smaller cities and townships had their school gates framed by gigantic posters showcasing last year's students' test results (Fig. 2), and were strongly focused on tests and rankings, despite the turn towards 'quality education' proclaimed by the state. Within schools, there were further hierarchical divisions. Students were placed into ranked classes, with names like class A, class B, rocket class and normal class, and even within the classroom the floor plan was organised according to the students' place in the class ranking





Fig. 2 Poster showing last year's results outside a high school in Hubei province, May 2016. Photo by author

system. Students' knowledge of the way they were ranked in their school and in the larger world of education influenced how they imagined their futures.

In Dayi High School, students knew that it was rare for students from their school to enrol in any institute that was not a *zhuanke* institute. The knowledge that they were limited to this bottom rung of the higher education system affected which majors these students showed an interest in. When we discussed their plans for the future as part of an English class, students at Dayi High School indicated interests that were quite different from students in higher-scoring high schools. In the three high schools I had visited in Jingmen city, a small city in central Hubei, I had noticed that many students were interested in studying finance, which was considered to be a subject that offered the best chance of landing a well-paid job and one of the majors with the most stringent entry requirements. When asked which major they were most interested in, students in several classrooms had chanted 'finance!' at me from all corners of the room. Yet, when I asked the same question in Dayi High School, students answered: music, English, dancing, kung fu, acting, history and computer science. Surprised by these answers, I asked them whether they were interested in studying finance, when a boy immediately joked: 'Our IQ is not high enough for that. We are too stupid!' raising a roar of laughter through the classroom.

Peers and family members often mark the boundaries of where they imagine students can go by means of banter or advice. In conversation with high-school students on a school campus in Jingmen city, a group of 30 students burst out laughing when a female student 'joked' that she wanted to go to Wuhan University, one of the two top universities in the provincial capital. When I asked them why they were all laughing like that, they explained through their giggles: 'We can never go there'. While staying with a family in rural Hubei, I observed an exchange between two cousins with a 7-year age difference that played out in a similar way. As soon as



the younger cousin, who was about to graduate from middle school, shyly admitted that she hoped to go to Wuhan University, the older cousin promptly shattered her younger cousin's dream:

It is very, very hard to get into a university like that. That's very unlikely to happen. But, there are also many other good universities, and ... it really doesn't matter so much. The class two and class three universities are also good. It would be better if you got into a class two.... But these schools are all good schools, there are many good schools in Wuhan. The only difference is that some have access to some more funds than others, but don't worry, class two and class three universities are also good. (Older cousin)

Even without any knowledge about her younger cousin's study results, the older cousin knew that there was no chance of her enrolling in this top university. She based her ideas on the emerging understanding of the workings of the education system that she had developed while she was in high school. She encouraged her younger cousin to change her aspirations in the same way that she had adjusted her own a few years earlier: aim lower. She also familiarised her cousin with the narrative that is often heard in low-ranking universities and that shifts the focus from the structure to the individual: 'It does not matter, all schools are similar, as long as you work hard, you will be successful'.

For parents, especially those who never attended university, it is difficult to guide their children in making choices about their education. They do not always understand the differences between particular majors and are therefore strongly led by rankings and their understanding of the hierarchies in the education system (Ling 2019, Kim et al. 2016). Xie and Postiglione (2016) argue that parents' class position and social connections determine their involvement in their children's education. They show that peasants with weak social networks cannot influence their children's school success in the same way as those who have strong networks. The difference between differently positioned parents' involvement in students' decision making was easily observed at the university fairs organised on school campuses after the university entrance exam. The small-scale information events held on the campuses of key point high schools were attended by parents who gathered in tightly packed groups around university representatives to fire questions at them relentlessly. Their children waited at a few metres' distance, standing in little formations, and were completely uninvolved in the conversation. In contrast, the fairs visited by the graduates from normal high schools were attended by unsupervised students who talked to university representatives by themselves and often had no idea about how to make their decisions.

Many of her classmates in Morning Sunshine's accountancy programme admitted that they had had no idea about what accountancy was when they chose to enrol in the programme. They had only heard that accountancy was a major that would help them make money in the future. Other interlocutors in my project told similar stories:

How I chose my university? I just looked at my score. I mean, I did not have that many options. There was only one class-two university in Wuhan that



accepted my score: the Hubei University of Education. For my major ... I honestly had no idea what it meant. Most people don't know what they get into before they start. Parents don't know either. They have never studied at this level, so they can only say: you do whatever you want. I talked to my classmate and she made a joke: 'You can edit books, you should choose editing!' That's why I wrote editing on my form. (Female student, 23-years old)

Education migrants' emerging understanding of their prospects for the future has many facets. After they enrol in their universities they learn more about what their major really entails, but they also learn about the way their school is positioned in China's overall higher education system. Morning Sunshine had felt especially hard hit by her dawning realisations about where she had ended up during her first two years in university. After having worked as hard as she had to get to where she was and having given up her personal dream of becoming a teacher to enrol in this university, she came to realise that the degree she was working towards offered very dim prospects in the urban labour market. This realisation, in combination with the debt she was amassing to pay for tuition fees and her disappointment with the dullness of the programme, brought about a real crisis of belief in her. Where was the sense in continuing to pour money into an education that was not leading her anywhere? The stress-related illness induced by this question became grave enough for Morning Sunshine to be advised to take a year's medical leave.

In the months that followed, as Morning Sunshine tried to reckon with the disappointment of her university experience, she fell into a deep depression. She started taking medication, and it was soon difficult to detect in this young woman who had become so quiet and withdrawn her original bright and curious character. When she first dropped out, she intended to return to her studies the following school year. However, when the time came returning proved impossible, as the school made it a condition for her return that one of her parents would live near the school campus. This was something her parents could never do, as they could not afford to rent an apartment on top of all the other school fees. Just like that, Morning Sunshine's 15 years of struggling in the education system ended with disappointment and frustration.

Conclusion

The stories of Morning Sunshine and her classmates, who were from similar family backgrounds and were equally disappointed in their university experience, are important because they encourage us to think critically about China's educational expansion and the role of higher education in the lives of rural youths. These stories hint at a paradox between education as a social structure that offers hope and strengthens youth agency and a system that perpetuates and deepens rural-urban inequalities. In this article, I have used and developed Zipin et al.'s framework. I have shown the importance of emergent aspirations for youth in rapidly transforming societies and argued that these aspirations are based on an emerging understanding developed in collaboration with peers. I have also shown that



education migrants are often strongly attached to the optimism gleaned from the notion of a meritocratic education system that provides them with routes to social upward mobility and enables them to alleviate the impact of the consequences of China's rural–urban transition on their families. This means that for them developing emergent aspirations can involve letting go of hopes and expectations. Additionally, I have demonstrated the importance of incorporating an analysis of individuals' structural contexts in discussions about aspirations.

The strong belief in the power of education to empower youth to help their families overcome the major obstacles of transitioning to non-agrarian work, achieving the marriage of sons, and affording retirement, puts an enormous responsibility on the shoulders of education migrants. These youths are expected to perform miracles with their educational credentials. Their new status as university graduates is hoped to enable these youths to help their families overcome the consequences of decades of development policy with an urban bias. Yet, as they advance on their pathways to the city, education migrants find that the inequality they are striving to overcome still shapes their educational trajectories, making it hard to achieve upward social mobility. In some cases, these young people hold on for dear life to the hopeful rhetoric of meritocracy, repeating to themselves: 'those who work hard, will succeed!' In other cases, including *Morning Sunshine's*, young people collapse under the pressure and either suffer mental health problems or disconnect from the world and their families by losing themselves in television and video games or running away. Young women who flounder in the urban labour market often resort to marriage. And, of course, there are also graduates who find work and contribute to the household income.

Overall, the optimistic rhetoric about China's educational miracle and the education-for-development logic promotes the idea of education as a reliable vehicle for upward social mobility. Yet, the rural–urban dynamics in the education system make it hard for rural youth to compete for enrolment in China's better universities. Currently, long and expensive educational trajectories do not always lead to graduates' improved position in the urban labour market. Moreover, the education system drives rural youths' migration to the cities, loosening the next generation's grip on agricultural land, and facilitates another wave of urban–rural wealth extraction through educational fees. In many ways, education migrants pay the price for China's aspiration as a country. Through their financial and energy investments they hold up the facade of China's educational miracle and contribute to the concealment of the country's rural–urban inequalities behind a shroud of meritocracy.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The author declare that they have no conflict of interest.



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