Upward Social Mobility via Education for Rural Children in China

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Introduction

While China’s urban cities continue to grow and prosper, her rural population has undergone significant changes as well, with many migrating to these urban areas in search for job opportunities that is severely lacking in their hometowns. With “221 million migrant people in 2010”, making it “one of the largest internal rural-urban migration in its history” (Koo 2012), the impact of this phenomenon cannot be underestimated. “Education is the engine for social mobility in modern societies” and the “central answer to the question ‘who gets ahead’ is ‘those who are educated’. (Deng and Treiman 1997) While rural populations migrate, do the children benefit more educationally if they follow their parents and attempt to enter succeed in urban schools or are they better off staying with their extended family members and continue their education in rural schools?

While there have been studies done for both scenarios to a certain extent, there has yet to be any that attempts to compare their effectiveness. Thus, existing literature on China’s migrant workers and their families, education in both rural and urban areas, the hukou system, as well as rural-urban inequalities will be reviewed in this paper to assess the current information available.

The Hukou System

According to Cheng and Selden (1994), “China implemented a code of laws, regulations and programmes”, known as the hukou system, “to differentiate residential groups as a means to control population movement and mobility” since the 1950s. This has allowed the central government to implement the bifurcation of its population separately into rural and urban groups and implement policies differently for each entity. According to Cheng and
Selden (1994), China’s “hukou registration not only provided the principal basis for establishing identity, citizenship and proof of official status”, but without it, “one cannot establish eligibility for food, clothing or shelter, to obtain employment, go to school, marry or enlist in the army.” Even though “a more flexible hukou system has been adopted since the 1980s, it continues to differentiate opportunity structures for the entire population on the basis of position within a clearly defined, if once again partially permeable, spatial hierarchy.” (Cheng and Shelden 1994) Additionally, “rural residents are disadvantaged in job markets because of low educational attainment, even though the relaxed hukou system allows them freedom to access the (urban) market.” (Wang 2012)

As a result of the relaxed hukou system, the rural population continued to pour into the urban cities in search of job opportunities to support themselves and their child’s education fees in hope that they do well enough and achieve upward social mobility. As stated by Koo (2012), “As with other Chinese families, education is perceived as the key to economic success” and that “parents see education as the route out of poverty and a means of establishing a better life for their children.” She adds that the Chinese parents’ “strong belief in the positive relation between education and income is derived from their daily experiences and observations as poorly educated migrant workers in an urban centre: labourers without education must work tirelessly in order to make ends meet.” (Koo 2012). In addition, these migrants also view education as the most viable avenue to attain “urban status” and the benefits that come with it.

These literatures have shown the high importance and perceived benefits of education in China’s rural population. However, there is a lack of agreement among academics on the
effectiveness of rural-urban migration in improving the chances of their child achieving upward social mobility through education.

The Education System

Hansen and Woronov (2013) describes China’s education as consisting of “nine years of free compulsory education to all children nationally” and that those who wishes to continue must apply for entrance to secondary school with their High School Entrance Exam (HSEE) results and pay fees.” They add, “pass rates on the HSEE are determined on the municipal level and depend on the number of seats available each year in a given area’s regular schools.” (Hansen and Woronov 2013) While Hansen and Woronov described a seemingly fair meritocratic examination, “there are class differences in the acquisition of cultural capital at home, which depends substantially upon parental education and parental occupation” (Ganzeboom, De Graaf, and Robert 1990, p.95; Peng and Treiman 1993, as cited in Deng and Treiman 1997) and “has been shown to strongly affect educational attainment.” (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdie and Passeron 1977; De Graaf 1986,1988, as cited in Deng and Treiman 1997) Thus, education in urban schools often lead to high fees that rural migrants are unable to afford. In addition, urban families have the economic capital to provide their child with additional resources to aid their education. From this, it remains to be examined whether rural children are better off having their education and examinations in rural schools rather than competing with urban children in urban schools who possess more economic and social capital.

After clearing the HSEE, students proceed to enroll in secondary schools that are “regular high schools which prepare students to take part in the University Entrance Exam (UEE, gaokao) and it is “generally recognized that the best high schools, defined as those
graduate high school finishers with the highest scores on the UEE, are in urban areas.”
(Hansen and Woronov 2013) The “social consequences of the hukou system for defining the position of villagers in the Chinese social system” as described by Cheng and Selden (1994) can be seen here where “a student’s individual household registration – in an urban or non-urban area respectively – is decisive for which school he/she is able to test into” and that “ambitious and financially strong parents from rural areas often try to secure an urban household registration for a child deemed to be a promising student, which is one of the many examples of the deep rural-urban divide with regards to finances and qualities of education in China.” (Hansen and Woronov 2013) This is also supported by Koo (2012), as “under China’s household registration system, these children inherit their parents’ status and remain officially members of the rural population, are not entitled to access to education in urban areas and also how to pay high educational fees if they do gain admission to public schools.” (Fleisher and Yang 2003; Liang and Chen 2007, as cited in Koo 2012) Therefore, even if the rural children do well in their studies, they may “not be given a chance to fulfill their dream in the city due to their disadvantageous position when compared with local (urban) students.” (Koo 2012)

Central Government Policy

On the other hand, according to Crabb (2010), “the current hegemonic cultural model of merit and value naturalizes the reorientation away from ‘relying on the state’ to ‘relying on yourself’, that legitimizes the current production and reproduction of social inequality through education”. Although the government policy openly promotes meritocracy and opportunities for all, there remain social and economical issues that prevent that from occurring. Even though “the government policy universalizes nine years of compulsory schooling” and provides “initiatives to lessen the financial burden of schooling for poor rural
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and minority families” (Crabb 2010), Wang (2012) disagrees as “the government provides less funding for education in rural regions than in cities.” Quoting statistics from the National Bureau of China (2009, as cited in Wang 2012), “public funding for secondary schools in rural areas in 2007 was 103.2 billion yuan (US$14.7 billion), which was only two-thirds of total expenditure on urban secondary schools, even though the population in rural areas was 1.3 times larger.” In addition, “in terms of per-student budgetary expenditure, the figure for urban primary was 154 yuan (US$22), which was 1.6 times the figure in rural areas where it was 95 yuan (US$13.60)” (Wang 2012).

Urban and Rural Differences

This hegemony, coupled with the “increasing privatization and commodification of education” has led to the emergence of “for-profit tutoring, review classes, exam preparation and language schools since the beginning of the reform era in China” (Crabb 2010) in urban cities as urban parents are able to afford such services to give their child an advantage in their education. Lu’s (2012) examination of the consequences of out-migration for children’s education in rural-urban bifurcation and limited rural educational opportunities found that “parental migration has not given children left behind a significant advantage in educational prospects as their parents had hoped” as “it often entails family separation that can lead to deleterious and unintended ramifications for child development.” She adds, “Unless rural migrants are provided better chances of incorporation into Chinese cities, the opportunities of upward mobility for their children would be rather limited.” (Lu 2012)

Research has shown significant differences between children from urban and rural backgrounds. Deng and Treiman (1997) states that “admission examinations permit students who have enjoyed superior prior schooling to obtain superior results”, which “favours
students from urban areas.” Lu (2012) also adds “unless a family has enough money to ‘buy’ a spot in a top public secondary school as a ‘self-paying’ student, exams remain virtually the only criterion on which admission to key senior middle schools is based.”

These studies have shown that urban students have an unfair advantage to begin with as compared to their rural counterparts. Their acquired economic and social capital gives them additional resources to perform better in education, thereby contributing to the maintenance of their urban class status.

As stated in Hannum, An and Cherng (2011), “the patterns of advantage and disadvantage associated with different dimensions of household and village socioeconomic status shows that different factors matter at different stages of education”. In the “early stages, residing in villages that have an established tradition of education, along with the infrastructure to support education, is important.” (Hannum, An and Cherng 2011) On the other hand, “residing in a wealthier household shapes the chance of persisting in the system to the examination stage, and offers second chance possibilities later in the game: wealthier youth are more likely to make it to both university and vocational education.” (Hannum, An and Cherng 2011)

Conclusion

Therefore, even though significant research has been done on rural education, the hukou system, as well as the effects of rural-urban migration, the area of study I would like to look in further detail is the comparison between the effects of rural children attending urban schools when they move to the cities with their family and rural children staying behind in rural schools with their extended family members as their parents move to the cities for work.
Even though the child may be more economically well off due to his/her parents’ remittances, the quality of schools and teachers in the rural areas may dilute the positive impact on the child’s education.
References:


