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On the Margins: Migrant Education in Beijing

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Emily Feng investigates how China's migrant workers and their children, shut out of the public education system have long pursued education at quasi-illegal "migrant schools." Now China is urbanizing again - and migrant education is changing.

Sometime last summer, I found myself in Changping district, on the outskirts of Beijing proper, surrounded by screaming children, their faces browned by the sun overhead and the ubiquitous haze of dust floating above the low-slung courtyard.

These were migrant children, children whose parents had moved to China's prosperous eastern cities looking for work and a better life for their families. Unfortunately, because of anachronistic migration policies enshrined under the hukou, or residency, system, these children cannot attend urban public schools. Many of their parents elect to leave their children behind with family members as they migrate for work. Others bring their children with them to places like Beijing, enrolling them in illegal migrant schools.

Over the past year, I've done both ethnographic and policy research on the phenomenon of Chinese migrant education, specifically in Beijing where the problem is the most severe in scope and degree. What I found is an extraordinary variation in the nature and administration of Beijing's migrant schools, and indeed, among national migrant education policy. I witnessed human generosity that gave me much to hope for and instances of neglect that created equal amounts of despair. Whether China confronts the issue of migrant education is inevitable; how it can do so effectively is the real question.

Recently, China has announced a new urbanization plan which, if successful, will bring nearly 200 million rural citizens into cities and reform the restrictive hukou system. This state-sponsored massive urbanization will change the landscape of migrant education and indeed, the circumstances underlying migrant labor themselves.

When my parents grew up in the sixties, they lived in the Chinese countryside. My father grew up irrigating rice paddies and herding cows in a small village which sat at the bend of a river. Today, almost all our relatives live in the nearby city of Huzhou in Zhejiang province; only the elderly and the occasional city dweller, seeking some bucolic peace, remain in my father's old village. It was easy for my relatives to transfer their hukou to the urban backwater of Huzhou, which was not a popular destination for migrants.

They were lucky; for nearly 250 million migrant workers today, there has been no opportunity for such mobility. These migrants work largely in the informal sector, underpaid and unprotected by employment contracts. Accompanying them are nearly 23 million migrant children, who cannot attend public school like their urban counterparts. While 54% of Chinese citizens now reside in cities, only 36% currently enjoy urban benefits like housing, social insurance and pension, and primary education for their children.

Often unheard, however, are the voices of these migrant children who accompany their parents to factory towns or urban metropolises like Beijing or Shanghai. To meet the educational needs of these children, quasi-illegal migrant schools pop up in large cities densely populated with migrants, like Beijing and Shanghai. In Beijing today, there are approximately 150-200 migrant schools, but their number is dwindling. They face a number of challenges: scarce funding, under-trained and underpaid teachers, safety issues, and outdated curricula. And, like all Chinese institutions, they suffer from the capricious twists and turns of political favor.

The unique situation of migrant workers is due to the hukou system, leftover from the 1950s under the auspices of Chairman Mao Zedong. Under the system, citizens are given either a "rural" or "urban" hukou and receive social services and welfare benefit according to their hukou designation. As the new nation grew and developed, the categories of "rural" and "urban" artificially sorted citizens into pseudo social

classes, with urban citizens enjoying the bulk of benefits from China's post-reform economic development. Since Reform and Opening in 1978, migration restrictions have largely disappeared, but those who do decide to migrate relinquish many of their social benefits.

The image of the migrant worker has slowly threaded its way, through films like *Last Train Home* and Jia Zhangke's *Touch of Sin*, into global conceptions of China. Migrant workers power the mammoth factory-states in Guangzhou and Shenzhen, China, churning out the cheap exports we all rely on. They are the hidden force behind China's consistently breakneck economic growth, an invisible labor reserve army that has contributed its poorly compensated lifeblood to the growth of the nation and received very little in return.

It is an altogether precarious existence which migrant children and their parents face: unstable employment, no consistent education options, and nowhere to call home.

Two years ago, during the third time Zhen came to Beijing looking for work, she also began looking for an elementary school that would accept her young son.

Zhen's story is a typical one among Beijing migrant workers. She migrated with her husband from her native Hubei province to Beijing for the first time ten years ago, looking for work. The move was difficult; they had to leave their son, then one year old, behind with his grandparents while they sought employment. It was the beginning of what was to be a life characterized by volatility. Whenever work dried up, Zhen and her husband moved on to the next city.

Two years after they first "went out" from Hubei, Zhen returned to care for her now three-year-old son. They eventually brought him to Beijing, where Zhen and her husband sell produce from a cart on the side of the street. Yet Zhen is unsatisfied with her son's elementary school. "It's chaotic," she explains, echoing the sentiments of many of the other migrant parents in Bai Miao, a neighborhood in Changping district. Still, without a Beijing hukou, she cannot enroll her son in a public school. Still, with nothing to lose, she tried registering her son at the nearby public school. "The line was incredibly long," she remembered. "I waited all afternoon, only to be told that I didn't have the right paperwork and permits."

Migrant parents face several difficult options for their children's education. They could leave their children in their home villages to further swell the ranks of "left behind children" cared for by the elderly and those unable to "go out." Left behind children face a host of disadvantages. A recent report compiled by the China Youth and Children Research Center found that nearly half of left behind children had suffered accidental injuries and suffered higher rates of behavioral and emotional problems.

Wealthier migrant parents - whose only commonality with the migrant worker we know so well is their hukou status - can also send their children to expensive private schools or have their hukou transferred through work. They are the exception; for the majority of migrant parents, the options are limited to migrant schools of various quality. Migrant children may complete their elementary years in such a manner, but migrant schools which accept middle school age students are rare and migrant high schools are nonexistent. At this point, academically serious students either return to their home villages to prepare for the college entrance examination, a test they can only take in their native provinces. More often than not, migrant students join their parents in their search for work.

Migrant schools must also make strategic choices given their limited resources. Almost none of Beijing's migrant schools has an official permit to operate, meaning their facilities have not been inspected according to zoning or safety regulations, curriculum has not been standardized, and diplomas they issue are therefore usually not recognized by public schools. Mostly dependent on the school fees of their migrant students, migrant schools usually choose not to allocate resources to begin the costly permit application process.

Even if migrant schools could pass safety and curriculum inspections, many school principals I talked to hinted at a strong element of political intervention in the school permit application process. One of the founders of Tongxin Elementary School in Chaoyang district explained the change in political winds: "The schools also would not pass the permit process...Before it was easy to establish a private school, especially in the 1990s. From 2000-2004 they would let you [start a private school]. Now people are not allowed to start a new one."

For the most part, migrant schools are private enterprises, established by private entrepreneurs often with commercial, rather than educational, interests at heart. Many profiteering principals viewed their migrant schools as a business, their students as customers, and school fees as revenue.

"The principal [where I work] is very young and just graduated from a nearby Beijing university," said Wu, an English teacher at a migrant school in Beijing's Changping district. "The reason why he is successful is that he is good at promotion and publicity; that's how he got so many kids [to attend his school]." Yet his educational credentials were conspicuously absent. The principal studied engineering and bought mismatching sets of English textbooks for the school as he had no background in education.

Wu's story is one of many I heard illustrating the unintended consequences of outsourcing migrant education to an ill-regulated private sector. Unsurprisingly (though with notable exceptions) migrant schools are more poorly maintained and understaffed, and their students experience higher rates of behavioral and learning disabilities than those in public schools.

I was curious about how Zhen, the migrant worker and mother from Hubei, had fared in her search for schooling for her young son and decided to pay Bai Miao Middle School a visit. Of the more than 100 migrant schools that still remain in Beijing, the one Zhen's son attends falls somewhere in the middle of the pack of migrant schools. Many migrant schools repurpose old factories or barracks for school facilities,

but Bai Miao's school has a clean swept front yard and brightly painted walls. It relies on per semester school fees of 1,300 RMB to fund operations (Zhen has a monthly income of 1,000-2,000 RMB). The school is on the large side with 900 students, and is able to purchase the standard primary school curriculum from the Beijing Education Bureau. Still, the principal ran his school like a business, and extracurricular and after school programming were nonexistent. A surly, grey-faced man, he chain smoked cigarettes while artfully evading my questions. "The teachers are all home for the Dragon Boat Festival," he told me when I asked to speak with them. The Dragon Boat Festival had ended two days before.

While the quality and execution of migrant education remains in flux, the Beijing government has moved decisively to crack down on migrant schools all across the city. As a result, the landscape of migrant education is changing. Since 2006, in preparations for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, city officials began an ongoing crackdown on migrant schools. In the Fengtai district of Beijing alone, officials closed sixty migrant schools. Migrant schools were pushed out of Beijing's center, and the majority now are located in the peripheral suburbs hours away by bus. Through a combination of these school closures and reform efforts, fewer and fewer smaller migrant schools remain. If they do, their lack of a permanent space (usually an evasive tactic so as to avoid unfriendly authorities) make them nearly impossible to track down and visit repeatedly. Those that remain must win government or corporate support -- or perish.

Blue Skies Elementary School in Fengtai district is one of the only migrant schools that survived the pre-Olympic crackdown. Unlike most of its peers, Blue Skies has an official permit to operate, despite a Fengtai moratorium on new migrant schools. In 2005, Blue Skies won a 1.5 million RMB (\$240,000) grant from the Fengtai district government, which to this day provides the school with furnishings and waives the monthly rent for the modest facilities the school uses. "It's very easy to get [a permit] because we have government support," Liu explained. Only three other migrant schools in Fengtai still exist.

This mixture between public and private funding places Blue Skies in a new category of migrant school, one that is closer in status to a private school or American charter school. Unlike other migrant schools, it receives grants from the Fengtai district government but has more leeway in recruiting migrant students. In this respect, Blue Skies is an experimental approach the Fengtai government has sponsored for better accommodating migrant students. How the principal, however, managed to foster such close government support remains a mystery. In ways equally opaque, Dandelion Middle School, a well known school which enjoys partnerships with elite Chinese and western universities including Duke University, has leveraged the political connections of its formidably competent principal, Zheng Hong, into becoming one of the best migrant schools in Beijing. To me, Dandelion's staff offered a more straightforward explanation for their success. "The [local] government is working with our school because they recognize that after nine years [of operation] that it's pretty good," said Marcus, a volunteer coordinator. "Thus, the school has more freedom and creative opportunity."

Other migrant schools have turned to community activism to protect themselves from the vicissitudes of political fortune. When One Heart Elementary School in Picun Village was threatened with closure due to urbanization plans, Beijing educators, artists, and parents used social media to draw attention to their school; eventually, One Heart was allowed to remain open even as a nearby migrant school was shut down.

Yet most other Beijing migrant schools have not fared as well, due to the growing hostility of Beijing authorities. After months of futile searching, Zhen has given up her quest to enroll her son in a public school. She will send her son back to Hubei to attend middle school. "There is no hope anymore," she sighed.

In August 2013, the national Chinese Ministry of Education announced a new education policy which would reverberate throughout the migrant education system. Under the auspices of standardizing the school enrollment and permit systems between China's many provinces and cities, every eligible child would receive an electronic school enrollment number tied to their hukou status. The resulting electronic system, called "一人一生一号" ("one person, one life, one number"), would make accessing school records and transcripts from all locations easier. Because more than one third of Beijing's residents do not have Beijing hukou, Beijing implemented its own city-specific policy in January 2014 to accommodate the new electronic enrollment system. According to this "five certificate policy," all Beijing migrant students must submit five items of paperwork so as to qualify for an enrollment number in a Beijing public school. These "certificates" include things like proof of employment and permission to reside temporarily in Beijing. Ostensibly to provide a pathway for migrant students to attend Beijing public schools, the five certificate policy instead has opposite effect; its requirements are so onerous that virtually no migrant student in need qualifies.

The five-certificate policy has only exacerbated Zhen's concerns about her son's education. "My permits were all stopped up, because if I can't get a temporary resident permit than I can't get the other permits," she said, referring to the sequential nature of the five items of paperwork.

In addition to the high barriers erected by the five-certificate policy, the policy's inconsistent implementation across Beijing's districts has further stymied migrant parents. In some districts, both parents must apply for each child, whereas others only require one parent. Other districts require migrants to have labor contracts dating back at least six months to three years when applying for an enrollment number. Additional modifications for just one permit may include business permits, approval from work supervisors, and proof of social insurance; multiplied by five, and all the different requirements can become impossible keep track of.

These variations have caused a general environment of uncertainty among migrants. Even though Zhen plans on sending her son back to Hubei for middle school, she is fearful that his grades will not be able to be transferred to a Hubei school after hearing of cases of failure from family members. Because she has not lived in Hubei for more than a decade, she is unsure if her son can apply for an enrollment number there despite having local hukou.

Far from accelerating the entry of migrant students into Beijing public schools, the five-certificate system has further codified their legal exclusion. Migrant students and schools operate parallel to the state education apparatus in a politically limbo: their existence widely acknowledged as necessary yet simultaneously opposed by the authorities.

Up against such odds, migrant students and their parents often find little for which to hope. Anyi, a mother of two whose children attend the same school as Zhen's son, has never dared to think beyond the immediate present. "We haven't really thought about our kids' future," she admits. "Of course we want them to attend school, but it all depends on where they find work. They can only go to schools with a bad environment, anyways."

Moreover, Beijing's five-certificate policy exacerbates the lack of education continuity in a famously rigid educational system. Migrant students find it difficult to attend middle school, because of the dearth of migrant middle schools, and often elect to return to their home province. However, students who attend an accredited elementary school can enter a publicly licensed middle school more easily, and only those who have graduated from a public, accredited middle schools may attend public high schools that offer a curriculum which prepares students for the Gaokao, or National College Entrance Examination. Moreover, only residents with Beijing hukou can take the this examination in Beijing which confers advantages; China's best universities are in Beijing, and Beijing students receive preferential admission. Saddled with even more uncertainty due to the five certificates, Beijing migrant students face tough choices between staying with their family or pursuing an education in a hometown they may have never seen. Combined with the hukou system, a geographic caste system of sorts, migrant students begin life on an uneven playing field heavily tilted against them.

In May 2014, only about twenty miles from Bai Miao, at a much-televised press conference Chinese spokespersons announced a plan that, by 2020, would move an additional 200 million citizens into China's cities. Most importantly, the plan declared that 150 million migrants living in cities would receive urban benefits like public education by 2020. Small to medium cities have already begun easing their hukou restrictions so as to attract migrants, but tier one cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen will continue to have extremely high barriers of entry for migrants. Migrant schools will slowly disappear in these places, either incorporated into the public system (as in Shanghai) or slowly edged out (as in Beijing). But migrant students themselves may start to head for other places, where the competition is less intense and local hukou much easier to get.

Urbanization, by loosening social institutions and encouraging migration, will create new opportunities for migrant workers and their children. As the human flow of migrants turns inland towards China's relatively undeveloped central and western provinces, China may finally begin building the social infrastructure to finally incorporate migrants as urban citizens with access to jobs, education, and social benefits. Providing these growing cities with the resources necessary to create these opportunities will be an immense social-planning challenge. Indeed, such a human migration on this scale is unprecedented, but so has China's path been so far.

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