



## **Chinese Migrant Children in Crisis**

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With the increasing population of Chinese migrant children in China and the call for addressing educational equity and revising education goals on behalf of the whole child, research indicates that those children experience various challenges regarding their education and well-being including unequal access to education, low quality of education, discrimination, social anxiety, and depression. Thus, this article explores institutional-, school-, and family-level factors to understand how migration might create threats for Chinese migrant children. It is believed that government, community, school, and family have unintentionally formed an intertwined and complex dynamic where the development and education of migrant children is compromised. It is the authors' hope to raise awareness to the academic and practical arenas of both the educational plight and living conditions of Chinese migrant children.

### **Introduction**

Throughout the past decades, as China experienced a rapid economic ascent as a global supplier of cheap labor as well as labor intensive production (Liu & Zhu, 2011), it experienced the most unprecedented rural-to-urban migration. "Made in China" is a popular label today as the Chinese foreign trade production rate leads the way on the global stage and accounts for 70% of the employment rate in China (Pergolini, 2009). To meet the country's annual demand for production, forty million factory positions are filled with migrant workers. Along with those migrant workers, findings estimate that 35.81 million migrant children and youth now reside in Chinese cities (Federation, A. C. W. S., 2013).

Migration is a complex social process which forces migrant children into crisis situations. Migrant children's educational opportunities, psychological well-being, and social and emotional development are often subjected to serious challenges (Chan, et al., 2009). Recent research findings indicated that compared with urban children, migrant children have unequal opportunities to receive quality schooling and are more likely to develop negative self-perceptions and lower academic competence. Additionally, Chinese migrant children experience psychological problems such as shyness, anxiety, depression, and nervousness (Kwong, 2011; Lu & Zhou, 2013; Wang, 2006; Wong, Chang, & He, 2009). In order to understand how migration negatively contributes to the educational and developmental growth of Chinese migrant children, institutional, school, and family factors are explored.

## Risk Factors

### *Institutional factors*

Due to existing policy restrictions, migrant workers and their children are considered as temporary residents in Chinese cities (Chan & Buckingham, 2008). These low income workers are not qualified for access to local benefits like education, medical care, and other welfare efforts (Li & Zhao, 2015). More strikingly, a large portion of poor migrant children are deprived of legal rights to equal access to urban public education which is subsidized by the state (Wang, 2006). Therefore, seeking schooling opportunities becomes a battle between migrant families and state policies. In this conflict, migrant families are restricted by the household registration system (or *hukou*) which has brought extreme emotional distress to both parents and children (Li, 2015).

In China, the *hukou* is the main state instrument used to manage this rapid influx of rural-urban migration. In the 1950s, *hukou* was implemented to “differentiate residential groups as a means to control population movement and mobility and to shape state developmental priorities” (Cheng & Selden, 1994, p. 644). In accordance with this system, based on “socio-economic eligibility” and “residential location,” all Chinese people are categorized into four *hukou* types which follow along two dimensions: agricultural or non-agricultural, and local or non-local *hukou* (Chan & Buckingham, 2008, p. 587). Individuals registered under the agricultural category are expected to survive by their own labor in the fields; non-agricultural individuals are entitled to governmental ‘cradle to grave’ benefits resulting in urban residents seemingly more superior to their rural counterparts (Kuang & Liu, 2012). To maintain control over rural-to-urban migration, each citizen is required to register at his or her permanent residence. “One’s *hukou* status was inherited from one’s mother and was thus predetermined” (Zhang, Zheng, Liu, Zhao & Sun, 2014, p.54). Institutionally, people are regarded as legal residents only in their places of registration, that is, where their *hukou* is registered. According to Wang (2006), all citizens were then given a geographical area with an associated social and identity status. Migrant workers, defined as agricultural, are then denied many of the social benefits associated with urban residency and therefore, become segregated from urban populations. Consequently, migrant families and their children are negatively perceived by the indigenous urban residents, and subsequently, maltreated at work (Kuang & Liu, 2012). Because of this designation, as local and non-local agricultural *hukou* holders, migrant children are regarded as rural people. Thus, a vast majority is excluded from the better urban public schools and attend low-quality migrant schools (Wang, 2006). Unfortunately, there remains a small portion of children who simply have no school to attend. They “run wild” in vegetable plots, “romp” beside their parents’ stalls or play in dingy and rowdy street corners “ (Han, 2004, p. 34).

In most cases, village-, fellow-, townsman- and acquaintance-based networks play a crucial role in providing information to poor migrant populations regarding school choices (Li, 2015). This aggravates migrant children’s segregation, both residential and social, from the mainstream society. In addition, migrant families live in poor villages inside the city (*cheng zhong cun*) or urban ghettos (Li, 2015). Because of their limited transportation options, migrant families have no choice but to send their children to the nearest schools which are economically disadvantaged with unqualified teachers and few resources (Li & Zhao, 2015; Wang, 2006). As a result, migrant children begin to develop an “us versus them” mentality which can create a widening gap between migrant populations and urbanites (Li, 2015).

Another institutional constraint concerning the education of migrant children involves violation of China’s population control policies. From the initial implementation of the “One Child Policy” in 1979 to the transformation of the “Two Child Policy” in 2015, children of migrant families who violate these

policies cannot register *hukou* either in their rural hometowns or cities (Duan & Yang, 2008). This means, if not appropriately identified, it is impossible for migrant children to attend public schools (Hu & Szente, 2009). The *hukou* system is one of the major tools of social control employed by the state. Even if migrant families plan to return to rural hometowns for their children's formal schooling, as undocumented children, their lack of *hukou* status as well hinders the admission to rural public schools (Hu & Szente, 2009). In addition, one's *hukou* status is associated closely with students' school register (*xueji*). Without a school register, migrant children find it difficult to advance in the regular Chinese education system.

Not only do such policy restrictions create substantial difficulties to migrant children's education, but the process of seeking school access is also complex, stressful, and overwhelming to both migrant children and their parents (Li et al., 2010; Wang, 2006; Xie, 2010). Media stories describe how public schools often suspect migrant children of being developmentally disadvantaged and use this label as an excuse to deny school attendance ("Ce zhi shang ru xue", 2012). Acknowledging the deeply-held value of "saving face," both parents and children are humiliated and embarrassed in front of others when their children are suspected of being at risk (Kwong, 2011). Such an experience is likely to result in tremendous trauma on children's development of self-confidence and positive self-image. Many children share similar experiences and have witnessed their parents beg school authorities for their admission ("Nong min gong zi di xue xiao kun jing", 2016). In an extreme case, a child describes her plan of dropping out of school in order to prevent her father from kneeling again before school principals (Li, 2015). For the few children who successfully attend public schools, their enrollments are temporary and their academic achievement is not considered in formal school rankings in order to protect the reputation of the schools (Han, 2010). As a result, these practices most likely lead to discrimination, low self-esteem, and social anxiety among migrant children (Lin et al., 2009; Wang, 2006).

Generally, many migrant children choose to attend privately-run migrant schools (Chen & Feng, 2013; Gao et al., 2015). However, such schools are considered as unstable and of low quality which undermine children's well-being (Goodburn, 2009; Wang, 2006). According to Lu & Zhou (2013), these schools are also increasing in order to meet the greater numbers of arriving migrant children. For example, in 2007, more than 300 privately-run migrant schools have catered to 170,000 migrant students in Beijing. Migrant schools with school-home adjacency, flexible schedule, and tuition waiver opportunity become the preference among migrant families (Goodburn, 2009; Ming, 2009). In spite of their popularity, however, migrant schools do not have a clear standing in the Chinese educational system and have complicated relationships with local governments (Gao et al., 2015). In 2006, for example, the Beijing city government began a campaign to close 239 migrant schools and leave nearly 100,000 children without education ("Clashes after China school closed", 2007). The most recent closure in Beijing happened in 2011 when 24 migrant schools were eliminated and more than 14,000 children were forced to drop out (Jiang, 2011). These schools continue to experience frequent suspension and closures because of health or safety concerns. The instability of these schools is ambiguous and threatens the healthy development of children (Kwong, 2004).

#### *Factors of Schools, Teachers, and Peers*

Migrant schools with affordable tuition, flexible schedules, and close-to-home locations are popular among migrant families. However, they are generally low-quality in terms of school buildings, teaching materials and teacher quality (Wong et al., 2009; Han, 2004). Although these programs charge a relatively lower tuition, it can still be a major burden on already financially strapped migrant families. Besides 300 Yuan tuition per month, migrant schools also charge extra fees, such as for books, uniforms, technology, and heating, as well as other miscellaneous fees (Han, 2004). This number has increased in the past decade. In migrant families, the per capita income is about 3072 Yuan per month, and the living expenses

take 32.9% of monthly income per capita (National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, 2016). On top of these expenses, to support at least one child's education in migrant school is challenging.

Even if a migrant family is able to send their child(ren) to a migrant school, the low-quality atmosphere and learning climate may have a negative impact on migrant children's development (Guo, Yao, & Yang, 2005; Chen, Wang, & Wang, 2009). Based on Kwong (2004), in Beijing, more than 65% of migrant teachers have no education-related qualifications nor prior teaching experiences. Rather, before becoming educators, most teachers have been construction workers, cooks, farmers, and general laborers. Teachers often feel limited and consider their teaching position as a temporary job until another opens in the city (Kwong, 2004). As a result, most of these teachers have negative attitudes toward work as well as lower expectations of migrant children. Consequently, they demonstrate impatience and use harsh discipline techniques to maintain classroom order (Wong et al., 2009). According to Wong, et al. (2009), such teacher discipline harms teacher-student relationships and increases children's depression, and social anxiety. This results in lower academic aspirations and may even promote a deep hatred of schooling. In a few cases, migrant schools have even been cited as being directly responsible for the deaths of children through unsafe environments and/or physically abusive practices (Hu & Szente, 2009).

Generally, migrant schools have enormously large class sizes which can also result in unsafe and unfriendly learning environments (Li et al., 2010). Han (2004) describes how it is common for more than three children to share a two-student desk, and many classrooms are packed with more than 60 students. One classroom contained an astounding 84 students. Needless to say, large class sizes result in children not receiving the appropriate attention for their academic learning and development (Guo, Yao, & Yang, 2005; Han, 2004).

Peer relationships are another contributor of migrant children's social emotional distress. Migrant communities are generally segregated at the edge of the city (Li & Zhao, 2015), thus there are rare opportunities for migrant children to interact with urban counterparts (Jiang et al., 2008). Therefore, most migrant children form stereotypical perceptions of urbanites, such as believing they are arrogant, generally well-to-do, mean spirited, and snobbish (Wang, 2006). Those who attend public schools frequently experience unsatisfactory interactions with urbanites, leading to their even stronger sense of marginalization, social exclusion, frequent academic anxieties, hostility, and lower self-esteem (Wong, Chang, He, & Wu, 2010). Ou (2008) found these children to be insecure, possessing poor social skills, learning difficulties, and deep feelings of loneliness. Because of these difficulties, migrant children are often exposed to widespread discrimination and ostracism (Xie, 2010; Wang, 2006).

Kwong (2011) recounted some disappointing stories about migrant children in recent studies. He reported that even if migrant children do attend an urban school, urban teachers and children belittle them for their lack of confidence, out-of-dated clothing, communication difficulties, poor academic performance, socio-economic disadvantages, and heavily-accented regional dialect. Migrant children tend to have a strong sense of inferiority in social comparisons with their urban peers (Li, 2015; Wang, 2006). Xiong (2010) described how some children feel embarrassed to identify their neighborhood or their parents' temporary low-paying jobs and are inclined to upgrade their parents' work; for example, children describe tailors as clothes designers. Migrant children frequently reject their urban teachers' requests for home visits. Xiong goes on to report that ironically, migrant children often express a sense of superiority over those who were left behind in rural hometowns while they continue to be discriminated by urbanites.

In urban schools, migrant children are frequently mocked and bullied by urban peers and are given less attention and guidance from teachers (Wang, 2006). Migrant children are not allowed to take part in

district-wide standardized examinations in cities, and their homework and exams are often not officially graded and recorded (Nyland et al., 2011). Because of this discrimination, migrant children are reluctant to attend urban public schools and eventually transfer to migrant schools (Wang, 2006; Li et al., 2010). Recent studies suggest that migrant children express a preference for making friends with their migrant peers. This gives migrant children a feeling of belonging which, in turn, creates a wider social gap between rural migrant children and urban children (Ming, 2009).

### *Risk Factors of Home and Family*

Most children share circular migration experiences between their rural hometowns and cities where their parents are employed (Liu & Zhu, 2011). This experience can further complicate the development of migrant children. Jeellyman & Spencer (2008) found that high levels of residential mobility have a negative impact on early childhood and subsequent social-emotional development. Their study indicated that high mobility is associated with greater sibling conflicts, increased aggression, property offences, and poor emotional adjustment. Many children travel back and forth because of parents' job change or failure of adjustment in either place (Li & Zhao, 2015; Li et al., 2010). Others are left behind in the countryside with grandparents, other caregivers, or simply left unsupervised for long periods of time (Liu & Zhu, 2011). Sometimes, migrant parents are able to visit their children in the countryside during major holidays; however, some parents do not go back for years because of financial constraints (Huang & Yang, 2013). Liu & Zhu (2011) discuss how this separation from parents "causes discomfort, low self-esteem, and social isolation in many of these children" (p. 455) and "as the period of separation lengthens, estrangement between parents and children grows" (p. 456). For many migrant children, this "left behind" experience is a period of time filled with loneliness, unhealthy behaviors, hardships, inferiority complexes, family conflicts, and a lack of parental care and supervision (Gao et al., 2010; Zhao, et al., 2014). Liu (2012) reported that these children experience psychological problems such as phobias, anxiety, impulsivity, and conduct disorder and often become juvenile delinquents at an early age while others suffer from years of sexual abuse because of neglect from the adults who are supposed to care for them.

Moreover, limited parental support for migrant children lowers self-esteem and establishes a stronger level of academic anxiety (Zhao, et al., 2014). A group of researchers (DeMarry et al., 2005) reported that quality parental support is a significant predictor of student's capacity to deal with stress, anxiety and loss of control. However, most migrant parents have only middle school education and work long hours (National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, 2016). This leaves parents little time to focus on their children's education and psychological well-being. Also, "because parents of migrant children may be too busy to deliver adequate care to the children, let alone time to play with them, many migrant children feel bored with urban life and are unhappy" (Liu & Zhu, 2011, p. 450).

In Chinese culture, academic excellence is highly valued as an important avenue to success (Chen & Wong, 2014). Like most Chinese parents, migrant parents want their children to receive a quality education. Yet, for migrant workers, financial and personal academic resources are at a serious disadvantage. It is obvious that this unmatched expectation versus resource availability places a great deal of pressure on parents and their children and further adds hardship on the relationship between the parents and their children (Li et al., 2010). Additionally, most migrant parents are viewed as conservative and strongly expect their children to obey their commands and directives. This authoritarian parenting style shared among Chinese parents has negative effects on children's well-being and parent-child relationships (Pong, et al., 2010; Wong et al., 2009; Chan, et al., 2009).

A poor physical family environment further challenges children's development. With the real estate boom, Chinese migrant families are either forced to move to urban ghettos, or reside in low-income neighborhoods inside the cities. According to Li (2015), these families live in dingy shacks, for example, around the trash dumps, beside public lavatories or inside gas stations; in most cases, all family members share one room which serves as a combination of bedroom and living room with a gas burner outside the room as the kitchen area. Wu's findings (2004) describe migrant housing and explain, on average, migrant housing is about 7.8 m<sup>2</sup> per capita usage. Further, 69% of migrant families have no access to bathroom facilities and 71% have no kitchen inside their dwellings. Rather, migrants often share public water and latrine facilities with people from neighboring streets. Overcrowding is a shared characteristic of migrant housing. A growing body of research supports the notion that children who live in crowded homes tend to display higher levels of psychological distress and behavior problems at school; further, parents from chronically overcrowded homes tend to be less responsive to their children and more likely to use punitive parenting and verbal reprimands (Evans, 2006).

## **Discussion**

In the past two decades, China has witnessed a rapid increase in the number of migrant children from rural to urban areas. The influx of migrant children and related welfare issues created an unprecedented challenge to China. The government took a wide range of initiatives to improve the education equity and well-being of migrant children. In 2004 and 2005, the Ministry of Finance issued two circulars to regulate arbitrary collections of educational fees. Both circulars stated that migrant children should be entitled to the same rights as the locals, and schools shall not collect temporary student fees and school selection fees (Xie, 2012). This initiative was strengthened by two other circulars issued by the State council, Ministry of Finance, and National Development and Reform in 2008; moreover, these circulars urged local government to admit migrant students who fulfill local criteria to state-run public schools and provide adequate educational funds for migrant children (Xie, 2012). In 2006, the Compulsory Education Law was revised and stipulates the following for migrant children's education:

For a school-age child and juvenile whose parents are working or dwelling at a place other than their permanent residence, if he/she receives compulsory education at the place where his/her parents or other statutory guardians are working or dwelling, the local people's government shall provide him/her with equal conditions for receiving compulsory education. The concrete measures shall be formulated by the provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities directly under the Central Government. (Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China, 2006)

*National Outline for Medium- and Long-term Educational Reform and Development (2010-2020)* issued in 2010 further set the needs of equal access to education among migrant children as a main goal for education reform in China.

Although the government took positive initiatives, the implementation of such policies is arduous. The above central policies all stipulated that migrant children should have equal rights to education as locals in the area they reside, but they should meet certain requirements which varied by different regional governments according to their specific conditions. Using Beijing as an example, migrant families are asked to provide five certificates (temporary living permit, certified proof of address, certified labor contract, certificate of no potential familial guardian reside in the place of origin, and registry of the entire family's household permanent residency) in order to apply for public schools (Yu, 2013). However, obtaining the five certificates consumes time and effort and, in many instances, is impossible for migrant parents. For example, most of migrant parents work in small family-operated businesses, such as running food stalls; there is no place for them to attain a certified labor contract (Han, 2010).

The disparities of educational resources between urbanites and migrant children are deeply rooted in the hukou-based administrative system. Kuang & Liu (2012) describe how the Chinese *hukou* system is a cause for institutional discrimination against rural-to-urban migrants. This discrimination then filters down to the children which creates an environment of stereotyping and prejudice with unequal access to educational opportunities for children born to these migrant workers. In China, local governments finance compulsory education by calculating the number of school-age children registered in the local area. Since migrant children are registered in their rural hometown, urban public schools were challenged to accommodate migrant children under the existing capacity. For those fortunate enough to attend either public or migrant schools, low-quality learning support and unfriendly relationships with teachers and peers have contributed to lower self-esteem, loneliness, depression, and anxiety.

### **Conclusion**

Clearly, while the education and health care for urban children continue to improve, the efforts to secure the rights of migrant children with relevant services continues to decline. It is evident that factors of policy, school, and family together create an intertwined and complex dynamic where the development and education of migrant children are compromised. The education and well-being of migrant children will have serious consequences for global economic realignment. Perhaps, the greatest problem facing all migrant families in China is the potential magnitude of its effects on the future of China and its people—for better, or, for worse. In order for changes to begin, a national system of implementation of existing equality laws, explicit monitoring and enforcement of these laws is urgently needed. Beginning at the community level, people's perceptions need to change so migrant children are regarded as valued citizens with strong abilities to learn. This need to change is dramatic. It is our hope that with this article, the voice of Chinese migrant children and migrant children in other socio-contexts can be heard by more educators, and resources can be allocated to better the education and well-being of migrant children.

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