

*Citizenship Education and Migrant Youth in China*

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Li Miao's book *Citizenship Education and Migrant Youth in China* is the result of her one-year ethnographic research on migrant children in two schools in Beijing, a public school and a migrant private school. Drawing on data from intensive participant observation and semi-structured interviews, she sought to provide insights regarding the following questions: (1) "How migrant youth produce subjective understandings of the value of education, engagement at school, academic and career aspirations, urban-rural dichotomies, and their own potential position in the occupational and social structure" (p. 2); and (2) "How migrant youth negotiate the space of urban working-class schools (both migrant and private) and urban/rural social settings so as to forge identities and become qualified citizens in tune with state ideologies and social discourses" (p. 2). To engage with the past literature, she explains the institutional discrimination, cultural capital and counter-school culture that shape life chances of migrant youth in China, and introduces the theory of "the cultural production of the educated person" proposed by Levinson, Foley and Holland (SUNY Press, 1996). As "the idea of the 'educated person' is closely interrelated with specific local contexts" (p. 7), her study examines the particularities related to the cultural production of the "educated person" in the Chinese context.

Li proposes a new conceptualization in chapters three and four to explain this, which is the discourse of "*suzhi*" (素质 "quality") as the core of cultural hegemony. Using rich ethnographic data, Li Miao reveals that a supposedly glaring gap exists between the quality – academic and moral – of the migrant children and their urban counterparts. This is largely due to "*suzhi*-mediated practices" being adopted in the education system to replace citizenship education, and to legitimize the biased treatments the migrant youth received from society and the two schools.

Li describes the migrant private school as using "formalistic" teaching practices, characterized by incoherent and inexplicit teaching schedules, monotonous teaching methods, poor classroom management, and the tolerance of cheating on exams, along with other serious issues that disrupted student attainment. The following chapter describes a public school where migrant youth make up the majority of students; despite having fairly good control over classroom discipline, examination orderliness and clear teaching schedules, teachers, in general, complied with the *suzhi* discourse and hence disparaged migrant youth and displayed indifference to their academic and psychological development. They were mostly concerned about avoiding safety incidents.

It is important to note that in both schools, teachers "labeled migrant youth as morally and educationally at-risk" and maintained very low academic expectations (p. 123). They firmly believed that the migrant youth would end up working in low-end manufacturing jobs or in service industries. In school, teachers were unable to reflect and form a critical position on redressing social inequality. Students were grouped into the educated and the uneducated. The migrant youth were perceived as having low *suzhi*, and thus categorized as the uneducated, or "the uneducable" in the author's words. Teachers "knew in their gut" that migrant youth cannot compete with their urban peers, nor can they change their own fate. Such low expectations would directly dampen the enthusiasm of the students, forming a self-fulfilling prophecy, as illustrated in chapter five.

At the same time, the two schools instilled “the ideology of individual efforts” within the students. This typical middle-class value believes that success solely relies on one’s individual efforts and has no bearing on external constraints. In chapter six, Li concludes that in contemporary China, the origins and background of a family determines whether students can achieve success and upward social mobility through education (p. 174). Schooling has become a key mechanism that perpetuates and solidifies socio-economic inequalities. The rural–urban dichotomy and the attendant social stratifications are justified by day-to-day schooling processes that suggest that the migrant youth at the bottom of the urban hierarchy are not victims of unfair institutional arrangements; instead, their academic failure is the natural result of fair competition.

Due to the household registration system in China, migrant youth are not allowed to take the national college entrance exam in hosting cities, leaving them two options, namely, return home as “left-behind children” or receive vocational education in cities (p. 178). Due to a very large gap between rural and urban resources for education, the odds of being finally admitted to a university, especially a prestigious one, are extremely low. In chapter seven, Li interviewed migrant youth who were unwilling to enter the labour market so early, and discussed whether vocational education serves as a desirable option for them. In recent years, despite the Chinese government emphasizing vocational education and increasing the wages of skilled workers, the long-standing social atmosphere continues to value educational qualifications more than skills. Vocational education remains a final choice for such youth. The children of migrant workers seeking further studies predominantly attend vocational schools in metropolitan areas. However, high-ranked vocational schools close their gates to migrant youth, the majority of whom end up attending poor-performing vocational schools. As Li contends, vocational schools offer professional programmes that are incompatible with the local market needs, and the teachers of such schools lack the hands-on experience at the frontline in factories (p. 143).

Here I want to refer to the large study which is currently being conducted by James Z. Lee of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, as part of the Lee Campbell Research Group. Between 1953 and 1993, more than 40 per cent of the educated elite came from the working-class and farmer families while between 1994 and 2014, more than 50 per cent of the educated elite came from wealthy families. The opportunities for social mobility are decreasing in Chinese society. The mechanisms that are causing this change are complex and diverse. Scholars of political science, sociology, economics and education are trying to unmask the mechanism of class reproduction. Li’s book provides us with a perspective from the sociology of culture. She uses a plethora of facts to describe the hegemonic practices through the *suzhi* discourse and the ideology of individual effort. As Li puts it clearly in the conclusion chapter, such schooling processes effectively cultivate migrant youth as qualified citizens who will contribute their efforts to the low-end manufactory and service industries, and accept their marginalized positions as part of the urban underclass. Notably, the production of an urban underclass has the potential to fuel China’s labour-intensive industries, and will influence global economic restructuring.

Nevertheless, this “citizenship education” does not currently exist in China, and the author’s title does not seem to match its contents. Perhaps a more fitting title would be “Schooling without Citizenship Education in China: Transforming Migrant Youth into the Urban Underclass.”

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