

Neo-Liberalism and the evolvement of China's education policies on migrant children's schooling¹

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Abstract

This paper explores the neo-liberal policies and practice embraced in the process of the economic and social changes in China over the last three decades and their impacts on the country's education system, particularly on the compulsory education of migrant children who relocate from rural to urban China with their parents. On the basis of ethnographic observation and documentation, the research demonstrates how education policies are devised and revised along the line of neo-liberalism and how privatisation, marketisation, and commodification of educational resources have an impact on migrant children's schooling. The policy shifts reflect the wider social and economic transformations China has been through since the early 1980s, and the attempt of reinventing 'socialism' so as to strike a balance between economic efficiency and social equality.

Key words: internal migration, policy shifts, social class, compulsory education, China.

Introduction

China started the economic and social reforms in the late 1970s. It results in a transition from a highly centralised planned economy to a market oriented economy, which has not only transformed the industrial and commercial sectors, but also restructured social welfare and security through appropriating neo-liberal ideas and policies (Mok and Lo, 2007). The marketisation and privatisation have led to a dramatic welfare cut so as to increase the economic efficiency through decentralising and significantly reducing the state finance in social care and protection (Cook, 2002; Leung, 1994). The responsibilities of social welfare and protection have largely shifted to individuals and their families, and similar to what Bourdieu observes in the Western European context, a social Darwinian world – a world resting upon competition and the right of the stronger – has emerged in the once egalitarian-oriented society. Having consistently pursued the aim for some fifteen years, China finally became a member of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001, which means many sectors of the country have to adhere to the norms and guidelines of the organisation underpinned by a neo-liberal approach. The neo-liberal approach has been expressed in the education sphere through the decentralisation and devolution of power and financial responsibilities to lower-level governments. The reform has undoubtedly driven a boom in the industrial and commercial spheres and given rise to new social strata of ‘petite bourgeois’ (*xiaozhi*) or ‘new middle class’; however, it has also deepened regional and rural-urban disparities, and intensified the gap between the rich and the poor (Knight and Song, 1999). The regional and rural-urban disparities have led to the phenomenal population movements from villages to cities, from western hinterland to eastern coastal regions within China’s borders.

It is against this wider social and economic backdrop that the evolvement of education policies on migrant children’s access to compulsory schooling² is examined in the present research. The mass rural-urban migration in China offers us an incredibly rich research field, and the research line of educational provision to migrant children is far from being exhausted. Although a number of recent studies have explored such issues as financing and managing migrant

² The People of Republic of China has a nine-year compulsory education system that covers from primary school to junior secondary school, about age six to fifteen.

education (e.g. Han, 2001; Fan, 2004; Day and Ma, 1994; Pieke and Mallee, 1999; Qian, 1996; Zhang, 2001), relatively little research has been published on the policy development in this domain, an important factor that conditions and constrains where and how migrant children obtain their schooling. The present study attempts to bridge this gap by taking a close look at the policy shifts in the light of critiques of neo-liberalism operating subordinate to the observable social and economic practices.

The time frame of this study focuses on the period from 1998 when a major regulation concerning migrant education was introduced, till 2003, when the most recent regulation from the central government was put in place. It looks at the impacts of these policies on the current situation of migrant children's education. Before embarking on that discussion, the paper describes the mass rural-urban migration, the education provision to migrant children, and the rise of privately-run migrant schools as a necessary contextualisation of policy evolution.

Migration, education for migrant children, and migrant schools

The rural-urban migration started in the wake of dramatic economic reform and social changes in the 1980s. Since the launch of economic reform in 1978, China's GDP has been growing on an average of 9.4 percent per annum, with a 6-fold increase from 1984 to 2004. The average household income in 1985 was \$280, and it rose to \$1,290 in 2005. The UNDP Millennium Development Goal (MDG) report indicated that China's MDG in poverty reduction had been achieved by halving the proportion of the population living in poverty (estimated at 85 million in 1990), 13 years ahead of schedule (UNDP, 2003). The reform transformed the urban manufacture and services industries, which attracts millions of labour migrants from villages to cities.

Before the 1980s, population movement was tightly controlled by a system of 'household registration' (*hukou*). The household registration system was put into place in 1958 and gradually became an instrument of controlling population movements during the three decades (1949-1979) of planned economy (Knight and Song, 1999). It groups people into

agricultural/rural or non-agricultural/urban *hukou*-holders at birth, and trans-generationally, since children depend on their parents' *hukou* status. Possessing a local *hukou* means one is entitled to local resources and social services. It has been gradually relaxed from the 1980s onward in response to the rapid growth of manufacture and service sectors (Ma, 1999). Migrants can move to and work in another locality without changing their *hukou* status. However, possessing a non-local *hukou* still means that the migrant worker is effectively excluded from the welfare and social benefits of the hosting city.

The relaxation in *hukou* has made the mass population movements structurally possible. The essential cause of the migration, however, lies in the very uneven levels and striking gaps in social and economic development among various regions in China. The urban-rural income ratio was 3:1 in the late 1990s (Knight and Song, 1999:29), and the GDP per capita was more than \$14,000 in Shanghai in 2002, which was 10 times than that of Guizhou, one of the poorest provinces in western China (UNDP, 2003). The UNDP 2001 report indicated that the Gini coefficient³ was 40.3, which was close to that of US (40.8) and UK (36.1). The rural-urban divide, rooted in the country's policies over a span of several decades, is ever more prominent as a result of economic reform.

The migrant population, according to the data of China 5th Population Census in 2000, reached 121 million in 2000, almost 10 percent of the nation's total population⁴ and this figure is expected to increase rapidly in the coming years (Fan, 2004; Zou, Qu and Zhang, 2005). In fact, the latest figures from a sampling survey conducted by the China National Statistics Bureau indicate that the migrant population had reached 147,350,000 by 2005.⁵ Migrants used to be mainly young male farmers working in towns and cities for a few months during a year, probably in non-cultivating seasons. More recent investigations show that a high proportion tends to relocate as family units and stay longer in cities than before. They

³ The Gini index measures inequality over the entire distribution of income or consumption. A value of 0 represents perfect equality, and a value of 100 perfect inequality. It is believed that there can be social tensions if the Gini coefficient exceeds 40.0.

⁴ China 5th Population Census showed that China's total population was 1.2 billion in 2000.

⁵ The latest figures are available at http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjgb/rkpcgb/qgrkpcgb/t20060316_402310923.htm, last viewed on 24 March 2006.

often labour at low-skilled jobs such as construction workers, waiters, cleaners, domestic workers, shoe menders, etc., the jobs that urban citizens tend to avoid, and thus locate themselves in the lowest urban social strata (Dong and Blommaert, 2009).

The migration in China differs markedly from that in the UK (Butler and Robson, 2003; Reay, 2004; Oria *et al.*, 2007) and other European countries (Blommaert and Verschueren, 1998; Raveaud and van Zanten, 2007), where problems of migration revolve around transnational migrants, particularly refugees and asylum seekers. The massive labour migration inside the European Union, from its poorer East European members to Western Europe, may bear some closer similarity. (Multicultural Centre, 2010).

The population movements we look at in this paper take place within China's borders, mainly for economic reasons. However, the issue of education inequality is essential in both China's internal migration and the transnational immigration in the Western European and Northern American contexts. Among China's some 150 million internal migrants, children form a young but important sub-group, and their education and living conditions have caused much public concern and media debate. The common concern is that urban public primary and secondary schools have inadequate capacity to accommodate the influx of migrant children, and therefore migrant parents have either to pay higher fees for their children to be admitted at public schools, or send them to privately-run migrant schools. Some parents have to leave their children to their relatives or boarding schools in the hometown because they find the living and schooling costs of their children in cities barely affordable. Debates over migrant children's education are centred on two issues: (1) who should pay for their education, and (2) the role of privately-run migrant schools.

Who should pay for a child's compulsory education? Definitely the state. The answer is simple and correct – it is 'compulsory' for the state to provide basic education to each and every one after all – but at ground level, things are a good deal more complicated. Who pays for children's education determines where they are entitled free or subsidised schooling. The economic reform has not only transformed the pattern of China's economy, but also reshaped

the public sector, particularly the social security and welfare system (Wong and Flynn, 2001; Mok and Lo, 2007). In the education sector, the decentralisation and devolution of the state power and responsibility to local and lower levels of governments have been striking (Mok and Lo, 2007). This education reform, as part of the wider economic and social reform, was first visible in a 1985 Regulation⁶ issued by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, and reinforced in the 1986 Education Law.⁷ The 1986 Law stated that ‘regional authorities shall assume responsibility for compulsory education, and it shall be administered at different levels’, which means that regional governments such as urban districts and towns are in charge of the primary and junior secondary education of the children in their administration areas. A 1993 Regulation⁸ further confirmed the decentralisation position and defined that the state would assume a general role of ‘macro-management through legislation’ (Mok and Lo, 2007). As such, the education reform reduced the state controls over schools and mobilised regional governments in inspecting and supervising compulsory education at various levels.

This decentralisation, however, gave rise to a practical difficulty: financing. According to the 1986 Law, the funding of compulsory education is decentralised to regional governments of cities, towns and villages and the amount of available funding varies with the region’s economic level.⁹ Uneven regional development results in inequalities in education provision across regions: children of wealthier areas are much better off than their inland and rural counterparts in the sense that the schools receive more subsidies for better facilities and teaching quality. Government subsidies of schooling are earmarked and allocated through the regional government to the public schools according to the number of school-aged *hukou* children in the school neighbourhood. Note that it is not the number of children the school admits and educates, nor children who reside in the area, but *hukou* children who have their household registration in the area. Recall what we know about *hukou*: possessing a local

⁶ *Decision of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party of China on the reform of the Educational System* (1985)

⁷ the *Compulsory Education Law of the People’s Republic of China*, issued in 1986

⁸ *Outline for Reform and Development of Education in China* issued in 1993.

⁹ Both the central government and local governments contribute to the financing of public schools, but the central government’s contribution, in the form of annual fiscal redistribution to a particular region, is related to the number of children registered as local residents through *hukou*.

hukou means that one is entitled to welfare and social benefits from the local government. As most migrant workers move to cities without having their *hukou* changed,¹⁰ the government budget for migrant children's education still goes to the schools of their hometown, i.e. the school of the neighbourhood where their *hukou* is registered. Being non-*hukou* holders in a city where they grow up, migrant children are often over-charged by urban schools on the grounds that the urban schools do not receive a government subsidy for non-*hukou* pupils and the legitimate education provider is that of their *hukou* localities.

As many migrants are low-paid workers and their families struggle at or near the poverty line, the extra fees for their children's schooling often rendered urban formal education unaffordable, and hence hindered their children's educational opportunities. To meet the surging demand of schooling for migrant children, privately-run migrant schools emerged in the early 1990s. It is believed that their original drive was simple: migrant workers spontaneously set up schools, or more precisely, private classes and tutoring, because their children had no schools to go to. A headmaster of one of the earliest migrant schools saw 'children running wild in vegetable plots and romping beside their parents' vegetable stalls; even fifteen-year-old children had no school to go to' (Han, 2001:4). She thus decided to set up a school so that the children from her hometown would have a chance to read and write. Because of the large demand from migrant families, her school expanded rapidly and admitted pupils not only from her hometown but also from almost every province of the country. This case reported in Han (2001) was typical of how migrant schools emerged and developed in the early 1990s.

These early migrant schools were quickly converted into enterprises, however, due to the new business opportunities of the surging education demands from migrant families. The number of such schools increased dramatically from just a handful to numerous during the 1990s. They were owned and operated by private individuals, mostly migrant workers, and most profits went to these school owners (Han, 2001; Lu & Zhang, 2001). In China's compulsory

¹⁰ It is usually extremely difficult to change one's *hukou* from a rural to urban category or from smaller cities to bigger cities.

education system, government funded public schools are the major education providers, and there are a growing number of private elite schools offering expensive education services; however, the privately-run 'migrant schools' we look at here are far from elite private schools. On the contrary, facilities and teaching in such schools were generally poor, because to operate on lower fees than those of subsidised public schools, and still make a profit, migrant schools had to compromise school conditions and teaching quality (Han, 2001; Lu & Zhang, 2001; Woronov, 2004; Zhang et al., 2003). With a few exceptions, where the proprietors were able to invest in property, most schools were built in temporary classrooms or rented cheap spaces such as warehouses which might have no windows (Han, 2001); the lighting and ventilation were poor; blackboards were made from pieces of wood painted with black paint; pupils' desks and chairs were of different sizes in one classroom, whilst some schools even improvised desks and chairs from 'wooden planks propped up on bricks' (Han, 2001:6). Classrooms were often over-crowded. In the sample of Han (2001), 11 percent of classes had more than 70 pupils, and there was a class packed with 84 children. Many schools had no playground and their pupils had to have their physical exercise class on the street.

The description in Han (2001) was about migrant schools ten years ago; my fieldwork visits to many migrant schools between 2006 and 2010 showed that increasingly more migrant children made their way to public schools, and that not every migrant school was still poorly equipped:

The school was twice as big as the first one, and very clean. There were three one-storey school buildings. Through the windows we saw that the classrooms were spacious and well-lighted. Students were busy with their study. In the backyard there was a national flag on top of a post. It looked like a proper school.

[Fieldworknote 2006-10-11]

This migrant school I visited in October 2006 during my fieldwork trip appeared much better equipped than the ones described in earlier research such as Han (2001) and Lu and Zhang (2001). Nevertheless, problems remain. For example, teaching quality was a major concern,

because many migrant schools, willingly or not, employed unqualified teaching staff in order to keep costs low; qualified teachers, who were by no means many in these schools, were often very mobile – they tended to see the teaching post as a temporary ‘springboard’ and would leave it for a better job readily. The frequent change of teachers had at least two unfavourable impacts on pupils: first, the teaching tended to be inconsistent, and second, pupils were discouraged by their teachers’ attitudes towards them and their academic careers.

The role and function of privately-run migrant schools are closely related to the general neo-liberal approach and the specific government policies and regulations on the education of migrant children in urban China. In what follows, we shall take a closer look at these regulations and policies as well as the interpretation and implementation of these policies in educational practice.

The evolvement of educational policies on migrant children’s schooling

Similar to Western European countries with post-war labour recruitment, the urban communities expected migrant workers to be temporary residents who would compensate for the labour shortage and would later return to their places of origin (OECD, 2006). It took the policymakers a while to recognise the existence of migrant children and their demand for education in hosting cities. As a consequence, there was hardly any traceable policy invention concerning migrant education prior to 1996, although migrant children had formed a sizeable community by then. This section will focus on three key acts and regulations enacted for migrant children’s schooling, namely the 1998 Regulation, the 2001 Regulation, and the 2003 Regulation, which can outline the trajectory of education policy development.

The 1998 Regulation

The initial reaction of the policymakers was to discourage children from moving with their parents into cities, after a period of silence on the entire issue of migrant children’s urban schooling. One of the very first regulations, *Provisional Regulations on Schooling for*

Migrant Children, was issued by the central government in 1998 (1998 Regulation)¹¹. It is significant in (1) defining where migrant children should have free or subsidised schooling, (2) legalising extra fees charged by urban public schools to migrant children, and (3) recognising the existence and functions of privately-run migrant schools.

First, the 1998 Regulation stipulated that the regional government of the migrant child's household registration (*hukou*) locality should take 'strict' measures to prevent school-aged children from migrating. It emphasised that every child should attend the school in their *hukou* neighbourhood, as long as a legal guardian was available. The migrant child could attend school in the hosting city 'only' when there was no legal guardian available in the *hukou* locality (Article 3). The rationale of this regulation was the decentralisation of education responsibilities in line with the 1986 Compulsory Education Law, which stated that every region should educate its *hukou* children. The 1998 Regulation clearly required the migrant child not to move with their parents; instead, they should stay in their hometown if possible, and the school of their *hukou* neighbourhood should be the legal education provider.

Second, the 1998 Regulation stated that 'urban public schools that admit migrant children were allowed to charge transient student fee to migrant families (Article 11)'. The so-called 'transient student fee', or 'school selection fee', was the extra fee higher than usual school tuition charged to those pupils who 'chose' not to attend their *hukou*-related school, on the ground that the schools they 'selected' did not receive a government subsidy for educating them as non-*hukou* pupils. This regulation therefore legalised the extra fees public schools charged in admitting migrant children and devolved the financial responsibilities to migrant families. The amounts of these fees varied greatly across regions. In Beijing, for example, migrant families had to pay about 3,000 RMB (about £200) per year if their children were to join an average public school, whilst local *hukou* pupils paid something like 300RMB (£20) per year (Chen, 2004). Despite living on low-income, migrant families had to pay extra fees which were often prohibitively expensive for their children's schooling. Although it was often

¹¹ *Provisional Regulations on Schooling for Migrant Children*, issued by the National Education Committee and the Ministry of Public Security of China in 1998. Available at <http://www.moe.gov.cn/edoas/website18/level3.jsp?tablename=1118300832763033&infoid=5952>, retrieved 20 August 2009.

circulated in the public and institutional discourses that the extra fees were meant to compensate the government subsidies which the public school did not receive for educating the migrant pupils, this regulation shifted the financial burdens to local governments, and local governments further devolved the responsibility to migrant children and parents. It recognised and legalised the differentiation between local urban children and migrant children in distributing educational resources and such differences were in essence inequality.

Third, the 1998 Regulation stated that ‘private institutions, organisations or individuals could set up and run migrant schools in accordance with related law,¹² and the requirements of setting up such schools are allowed to be less restrict than other types of school; such migrant schools are subject to approval and inspection of local educational authorities (Article 9)’. This was the first time that private migrant schools were officially recognised as possible education providers for migrant pupils. However, how a migrant school should be officially approved and inspected were left up to ‘local educational authorities to decide in accordance with the particular local situations’ (Article 18). As Han (2001) describes, the initial attitudes of the government towards the existence of privately-run migrant schools were that of ‘laissez-faire’: to allow them to be commodified, to compete against each other, and to flourish (or disappear) in line with free market principle and practices, so that the poor ones would be sifted out by market mechanisms. Such a position in policy making reflected the general trend of appropriating neo-liberal ideas of governance in the 1990s, which called for ‘proliferation of education providers and diversification of education finance’ (Mok and Lo, 2007). As long as private enterprises and individuals offered basic education and met the education needs of migrant children, the requirements of setting up such private migrant schools were compromised.

This neo-liberal position was circulated in the public and institutional spheres through such discourses as ‘there were too many migrant children and the public education system was struggling to accommodate them’. This discourse, however, was more of an illusion because the one-child policy has been implemented effectively in urban China for some 20 years and

¹² The law is the *Regulations on Running Private Schools* issued by the State Council in 1997.

the birth rate in cities has been steadily decreasing (Zhang and Zhao, 2002). As a result of less school-aged children in cities such as Beijing, urban underachieving schools had to be closed or merged so as to slim down the educational system (Zhang and Zhao, 2002). On the one hand, urban schools suffered from insufficient pupils; on the other hand, many migrant pupils could not take advantage of formal education due to their administrative status as non-*hukou* (non-local) pupils. Children who obtained only basic education from private migrant schools, who merely managed to read and write, would have a very slim chance of competing with urban children systematically educated in Chinese, mathematics, English, computer science, music, painting, etc. later in the job market. A majority of private migrant school graduates did not have a proper academic preparation for and orientation to university education; rather, they tended to enter the labour market as soon as they finished the compulsory education (about age 15), whereas most their urban counterparts had set the National University Entrance Examination as their immediate goal. In this way, the education system reproduces the social hierarchy in which the migrant children of the lowest urban social strata are located in these very strata once again. This is not to blame urban public schools for excluding migrant children; rather, both urban schools and migrant families are caught up in an education system that is rooted in and reproduces social inequality.

The 2001 Regulation

The 1998 Regulation was reformed and the clauses concerning migrant children were replaced with *Decisions on Reform and Development of Basic Education* issued in 2001 (2001 Regulation).¹³ The significance of the 2001 Regulation lay in the stipulation of urban public schools being the major education providers of migrant children (Article 12). This was a significant revision compared to the 1998 Regulation which stipulated that migrant children should have their education in their *hukou* locality and discouraged children from relocating with their parents to cities. Policy-makers were soon aware of the unrealistic attempt to prevent children from migrating, as well as the potential negative impacts of underachieving migrant schools on pupils' development. More importantly, migrant children were effectively segregated from their local counterparts and the mainstream urban communities by the way

¹³ *Decisions on Reform and Development of Basic Education* issued by China's State Council in 2001.

the education system functioned. In my fieldwork visits to migrant schools, pupils reported that they were stigmatised by the fact that they had to attend the ‘second-class’ schools instead of joining their urban counterparts in public schools (Dong, 2009, 2010). Mutual mistrust grew between urban and migrant children partly because they had little chance to get to know one another. In this sense, the 2001 Regulation was a step forward in enhancing migrant pupils’ access to equal education with their urban pupils.

The 2001 Regulation, however, made no difference in term of the ‘transient’ fees charged to migrant children by public schools. The extra fees were one of the major obstacles that prevented migrant children from equal access to urban formal education. The 2001 Regulation merely stated that urban regional government should educate migrant children who reside in their administrative areas; what it did not specify was how much funding the urban regional governments would receive to implement the task. In other words, a regulation was devised but it was not backed up with financial support. Urban regional governments therefore had to secure funds for the increasing number of migrant pupils and they tended to devolve such responsibilities to migrant pupils and parents by legally charging higher fees. It should be borne in mind that the urban education system did not lack of capacity to accommodate the influx of migrant children; there were redundant urban schools facing a closedown. The ‘funds’ here referred to the budget subsidies from the central and the regional governments reserved for each pupil through *hukou*. Migrant pupils could not be covered by these subsidies, which were distributed to their *hukou* locality schools as the administrative policy of *hukou* built in a wall of institutional barriers for realising equal access to formal education of migrant pupils. The essential cause of the education inequality, however, was much more profound than this; it lay in the adherence to the neo-liberal ideas and practices. These latter resulted in decentralisation of the power and devolution of state finance to regional governments, and which in turn further devolved these financial burdens onto migrant families. The education system, functioning under neo-liberal principles of budget accountability, thus excluded migrant pupils from urban compulsory schooling with their local urban counterparts for all practical purposes.

The 2003 Regulation

The year 2003 witnessed a socio-political event that was particularly relevant to migrant education – China’s premier visited a private migrant school in an attempt to raise public awareness of the education difficulties faced by migrant children (People’s News, 2003). The gesture was made, at least partially, to ease the increasingly tension-laden social relations between the rich and the poor, the urban and the rural, the local and the migrant, where growing numbers of migrant workers were among the lowest strata of urban working class (Li & Tang, 2002).

The regulation *Instructions on Further Improving Compulsory Education Provision to Migrant Children in Urban Areas* (2003 Regulation¹⁴) stipulated for the first time that the urban governments should regulate the tuition fees for migrant children, that they should reduce or waive fees if necessary, and that migrant children should pay the same tuition fees as local pupils (Article 6). It also urged urban regional governments to build up a ‘fundraising system’ to subsidize migrant pupils, and to ‘reserve money’ for the education of migrant children (Article 5). Further, it urged urban regional governments to ‘support and inspect’ private migrant schools, and to integrate such schools into the *minban* education system (cf. Mok and Lo 2007 on *minban* education; briefly, it refers to schools and colleges that are set up and run by private persons or enterprises).

In term of fees, this policy made significant progress. However, it failed to tackle the core issue – financing – and made no difference in the sense of devolving financial responsibilities to regional governments, and even though it was clear that the 2003 Regulation stipulated that the migrant and the local pupils were equal in how much they would be charged for schooling, the regional government often eventually, in one way or another, shifted these financial responsibilities onto migrant individuals.

¹⁴ Full content available at <http://www.moe.gov.cn/edoas/website18/level3.jsp?tablename=51&infoid=143>
Last viewed on 28/08/2009.

Regional governments and their policies,¹⁵ which were based on the central government guiding policies such as the ones evaluated here, usually stood for the interest of its local communities. Even though regional policies in principle were in line with central policies, there nevertheless could be much room for the regional government to interpret and to adapt to the local context. Migrant children were often perceived as someone who came to the city to compete for the limited educational resources with local children, and this appeared to conflict with the interests of the local communities. A Lanzhou regional regulation, for instance, stipulated that several public schools were specifically required by the regional government to admit migrant children, and migrant children who attended these schools should pay the same tuition fees as local pupils, providing the migrant parents held the ‘four Certificates’, namely, Certificate of Moving-out issued by the home village of the migrant worker, Certificate of Temporary Stay by the hosting city (i.e. Lanzhou city), Certificate of Single Child, and finally, Certificate of Purchasing an Apartment (Jinghua Shibao, 2007). To obtain a Certificate of Moving-out, the migrant worker had to travel back to the hometown and the costs of such journeys, in term of money and time, were unaffordable; the Certificate of Single Child was a major barrier for migrant families of more than one child, and as discussed earlier, more than 82.5% of a sample of 31,000 migrant families in the survey of Han (2001) had two children or more. The fourth certificate, Certificate of Purchasing an Apartment, was an impossible condition for most migrant families by definition – they were low-income workers who barely made ends meet. Consequently the regional regulations served to systematically exclude migrant children from urban formal education by adding extra conditions which migrant workers could rarely satisfy. The fundamental problem however was not how and to what degree the regional government ‘adapted’ policies to realities. The real question lay in the way power and responsibilities being devolved to regional governments, and regional governments, by definition, represented and protected the interest of its regional communities. Regional regulations such as the one in Lanzhou indicate inertia in the system as it exists – what works is hard to change, and when it changes, it

¹⁵ Examples can be found at all levels of regional governments: for the three centrally administered cities (Beijing, Tianjin and Shanghai) – *Beijing Provisional Measures on Providing Compulsory Education for Children of Migrant Population*, and *Shanghai Provisional measures on Schooling for Children of Migrant Population*; at provincial capital level – *Lanzhou City of Gansu Province Notice about Providing Compulsory Education to Children of Migrant Workers*; and the eastern coastal cities – *Suzhou City of Zhejiang Province Standards of Running Private Schools for Migrant Children*.

changes slowly and with resistance from those forced to accept the changes.

As for the current situation, cities such as Beijing and Shanghai vow to accommodate most migrant children within the publicly-funded education system. Shanghai, for example, is piloting a programme of offering free compulsory education to all migrant children residing within the metropolis (ChinaCSR, 2010). In Beijing, a migrant school headmaster I visited during my fieldwork indicated that

The local government was determined to close down all migrant schools which had no official approval. The clearing-up job wouldn't accomplish in a short time, and migrant schools such as mine would continue to exist and find their own ways to survive.

[Fieldnotes 2008-07-15]

According to the headmaster, the local education authorities are locating schools which receive special funds for admitting migrant children in order to close down underachieving migrant schools. This ambition of including most migrant children into public schools, however, is not easy to achieve. One of the reasons that discourage migrant children from joining public schools is their concern of being discriminated by their urban peer students and teachers. As a student of my fieldwork school told me that

Once there was a party of local children and us, when I studied at a migrant primary school. But I didn't attend the party. We were supposed to shake hands and exchange gifts (with local Beijing children). I didn't believe we would become friends by just doing that. I didn't want to go (to the party). It was useless. They were people of another world.

[Field recording 2007-06-19_011_25:19]

The child I interviewed described an event organised by the migrant school he attended, an opportunity for migrant children and local children to know each other and to make friends. The interviewee refused to join the party and argued that they could not really become friends

by these superficial activities, as local children were someone from a different world. Many migrant children in my fieldwork schools believed that their regional accents would differentiate them from local Beijing pupils whose speech they perceived to be ‘accent-less’ (Dong, 2009, 2010; Dong & Blommaert, 2009).

Discussion

I have tried to sketch the evolvement of government regulations concerning migrant children’s unequal access to urban schooling. The ways in which inequalities are played out in the Chinese context differ from the geographies of educational inequalities in the European context. There inequalities are located in the urban rather than rural sector, and problems of migration are mainly concerned with the immigration of refugees and asylum seekers from abroad rather than being an internal national problem. Yet, both cases generate considerable educational inequalities that need addressing. In the Chinese case, the social and economic transition of Chinese society, and the appropriation of neo-liberal policies and practices further complicate the whole story of migrant education. The privatisation and commodification in the education sector take the form of ‘proliferation of education providers’ and ‘diversification of education finance’. As such, privately-run migrant schools, despite their poor teaching quality and facilities, are regarded as a solution of accommodating the education demands of the huge and rapid influx of migrant children in cities.

Decentralisation of power and responsibilities to lower levels of regional governments, particularly devolution of financing responsibilities, pose major difficulties for migrant children to obtain formal and quality education in cities. This has been demonstrated by the three regulations: the 1998 Regulation defined that children of migrant workers should remain living and attending schools in their *hukou* locality, despite the fact that their parents had relocated elsewhere for work; the 2001 Regulation made progress in the sense it defined urban public schools to be the main education provider to migrant children; the 2003 Regulation stipulated that migrant pupils should pay the same fees with their urban local counterparts and should have equal access to local public schools. The reality, however, is that many migrant children are still outside the urban public education system; migrant parents interviewed in my fieldwork still worry about the extra fees they have to pay – now

under various names such as ‘donation’, ‘endorsement fees’ and so forth. The essential issue, as I see it, is that the regulations miss the core issue that must address – financial backup – and the urban regional governments on the one hand are forced to create funds for migrant education, and on the other hand represent the interest of the local communities which regard the presence of migrant children in urban education system as an added burden for sharing local children’s educational resources (Dong, 2009). Consequently, the financial responsibilities, or more precisely, the financial burdens, are eventually shifted to migrant children and their families. How this problem can be solved, i.e. what can be done to ensure migrant children’s real access to equal urban education, calls for more research, particularly in the light of theories such as social geography and political economy. But in the wider domain of social welfare, in the context of privatisation and commercialisation of education particularly for the urban poor migrants who cannot afford it, the central question is: what sorts of ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ will be (re)invented to tackle this evident inequality in access to education, in the context of government commitment to striking a ‘balance between economic efficiency and social equality’.

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