

**Immediate Context, Life Experiences, and Perception:**

**How do rural migrants in urban China perceive an unfair policy?**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines how rural migrants in China perceive a policy that deprives their children of the opportunity for a high school or college education. In-depth interviews with migrant families in Shanghai reveal that many remain unconvinced that the future of their children is strongly affected by this policy. Rather, they devalue the importance of formal education and emphasize individual effort and alternative pathways to success. By drawing on theories of cognition and the sociology of understanding, I argue that their perceptions of this policy are formed through three processes of validation: recognition of certain views by authorities such as school teachers, social workers, and the media; corroboration with the daily experiences of living in a modern city; and resonance with past experience. This study asserts the importance of immediate context and overall everyday life experiences in shaping perception toward policies. This case also provides insight as to how structural oppression that situates certain individuals in disadvantaged positions is subtly achieved through mechanisms at the micro-level.

**Keywords:** Education; Internal migration; China; Inequality, Cognition

## Introduction

The education of migrant children has become a major social problem in China in recent years because a growing number of migrant workers are now settling with their children in cities.<sup>1</sup> As of 2010, there were 221 million migrants in cities, and among them, an estimated 20 million children (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2012). Over the past two decades, policy reforms have been enforced to ensure that migrant children receive nine years of compulsory education. Since 2008, migrant children have been largely accepted into urban public or private schools at the primary (grades 1-6) and middle school (grades 7-9) levels. However, after completing this compulsory education, they are prohibited from taking the high school or college entrance exams in large cities like Beijing and Shanghai because migrant children are considered rural and nonlocal under the current *hukou* (household registration) system. Their *hukou* status requires them to return back to their rural hometown to further their education. This education policy greatly impacts their chances of attending university, regardless of whether they stay in the city or return to their hometown (Lan 2014; Ling 2015). It is not viable for them to further their education in their hometown because of the different curriculums in different provinces in China,<sup>2</sup> lack of educational resources in rural areas, and low college admission rates in their home provinces. Consequently, they are systematically deprived of opportunities for higher education, regardless of individual performance and preference (Xiong 2015).

This policy is unfair in both absolute and subjective terms. In absolute terms, this policy causes segregation of local and non-local students in the cities (Lan 2014), which affects the opportunity of the latter to receive a higher education. Subjectively, many migrants, both parents and children, think that the policy is unfair.

Despite such unfairness, the policy has thus far been largely tolerated. Often, appeals for changes come from liberal intellectuals or journalists (Kwong 2004), rather than the migrant workers themselves (Pong 2015).<sup>3</sup> Most importantly, collective resistance has been sporadic, especially compared to resistance in other social domains, such as labor rights. To be sure, structural constraints, such as state oppression or the lack of resources and education of migrant workers, are important factors that lead to their passivity. However, a question remains: do the vast majority of migrant workers who are victims of the policy also obey it at the subjective level? That is, how do they understand the policy? Do they think that it has a significant impact on the future life chances of their children? What contributes to the formation of their understanding of this policy?

Building on existing research, this paper will focus on how Chinese rural migrants perceive both the legitimacy of this policy and its impact on their life and the future of their children. In-depth interviews and an analysis of media content reveal that the rural migrants think that the education policy is unfair but legitimate. While many migrant students would like to return home to study and maximize their chances of entering university, their parents are reluctant because they are content with their life in Shanghai and hopeful for a better future. The parents appreciate the opportunity to stay in Shanghai, and thus, devalue the importance of a formal education and the impact of this policy by instead emphasizing individual effort and alternative ways to achieve success or happiness. Despite their desire for education, the children also adopt this discourse.

In the following, I first discuss the current state of the educational opportunities for migrant children. I then briefly introduce the sociological approaches for examining how people perceive their circumstances. After providing details on the data and methods, I discuss how rural migrants and their children in Shanghai perceive this education policy and how their perceptions

are related to their relationship with authority, daily experiences in the city, and past experiences. I argue that these three factors affect how they understand the influence of this policy on the future of their children and also account for the disparity in perception between the first- and second-generation migrants. By demonstrating the importance of the immediate context and life experiences in how these migrants understand the education policy, this case provides insight as to how structural oppression that places certain individuals in disadvantaged positions not only operates in explicit forms at the macro level, but is also subtly achieved through micro-level mechanisms.

### ***Hukou* system, Education of Migrant Children, and Educational Inequality**

Developed in the 1950s, the *hukou* system in China requires all households must register as either rural or urban according to their place of residence (Cheng and Dai 1995; Cheng and Selden 1994). At the time, *hukou* status was assigned at birth based on the registration status of the mother (Chan and Zhang 1999). After the market reform of the 1980s, large numbers of rural individuals went to the cities, but retained their rural *hukou* status. Even if their children are born in the city, they are still rural. They have thus been historically ineligible for the full citizenship rights and benefits enjoyed by urbanites, such as job opportunities. Initially, they were entirely deprived of the right to attend urban public schools (Solinger 1999).

Since the mid-1990s, the central government has gradually passed laws and designed policies that allow migrant children to attend urban schools, especially for their compulsory education. The Compulsory Education Act was revised in 2006 to provide the legal basis for migrant students to receive compulsory education in the receiving cities. Local governments have also begun to address the migrant schooling issue, but different cities have different rules, regulations, and policies (Ling 2015; Xiong 2015).

This investigation focuses on Shanghai, a city renowned for being supportive and receptive of migrant students in comparison to other large cities like Beijing. A series of pioneering reforms have been launched that incorporate migrant children into urban public schools for their compulsory education. In 2007, over half of the estimated 400,000 migrant children were attending public schools. Since 2008, the municipal government has attempted to reduce the barriers for migrant children to attend public schools, such as providing subsidies. Consequently, in early 2010, 97.3 percent were attending either public or government-subsidized private schools (Pong 2015: 68).

At the time of the main round of this research, migrant students in Shanghai must still return to where their household registration is based to take high school and college entrance exams. From the perspective of policymaking, high school and university education is beyond the compulsory stage of education and therefore not legally mandated, despite that in the urban areas, high school is almost universal. There is no legal framework or incentive for local governments to extend high school to migrant children. However, this policy is “unfair” in that, first, it has posed major obstacles to migrant students in large cities, and the rural-urban status contributes to unequal results in educational attainment (Treiman 2013, Liu et al. 2014). As previous research has shown, this policy reduces the motivation of migrant students, making them less competitive even if they return to their hometown to study (Xiong 2015). If they stay in Shanghai, their only options are to enroll in vocational schools or directly enter the job market after middle school, neither of which provides the means for upward social mobility or leads to decent jobs or economic rewards (Ling 2015). Some may not even find a job or are reluctant to work, thus becoming “loafers in society” (Xiong 2015, p. 18). Regardless, they remain “rural” (Ling 2015) in terms of their *hukou*, and the

existing inequality between urban dwellers and migrants is perpetuated (Woronov 2012).

Previous studies indicate that some migrant students return to their hometown to prepare for and take the higher education exams; however, the majority, especially those of lower socioeconomic status, choose to stay for various reasons (Ming 2014: 227-229).

Second, the exclusion is a two-way street in theory, but not in reality. Urban residents can enroll in rural high schools because usually only large cities have strict *hukou* restrictions on school enrollment. Like their migrant counterparts in the cities, urban residents in rural areas have to go back to their registered residence for higher education exams, but there are fewer disadvantages for them because college enrollment rates in places like Beijing and Shanghai are much higher.<sup>4</sup> Also, the educational quality in rural areas is much lower than urban areas (Wu 2011).

Third, based on the interviews in this study, the migrants themselves perceive the policy as unfair, regardless of whether it is considered “fair” by policy makers or urbanites. It is also considered unfair by various intellectuals and activists who are trying to combat educational inequality in China.

Recognizing the urgency of the situation, Shanghai policy makers established a point system in 2009 to evaluate the applications of migrants who were requesting local (urban) *hukou*. For the most part, families with higher levels of education, good jobs, and high income were awarded high points and therefore granted permits of residence, and their children could enjoy the same educational rights as local *hukou* holders.<sup>5</sup> The policy favors the privileged, but does not apply to the majority of ordinary migrant families in Shanghai who cannot accumulate enough points. My focus is on these migrant families.

## **Resistance and Subjective Understanding of Rural Migrants**

Existing related studies point out that institutional constraints such as this education policy lead to the reproduction of a social underclass in China (Woronov 2012; Lan 2014; Xiong 2015). However, there is little resistance, especially from the migrant workers themselves. To be sure, there are some overall criticisms, especially on the different enrollment rates of the different provinces, which lead to many annual protests. However, none are organized by the migrant workers. Usually the urbanites, especially those in provinces with relatively low university enrollment rates, participate in these movements. There are also movements for equal education in several large cities (with most in Beijing), but again, they are initiated and led by liberal intellectuals and other activists. The few migrant participants are usually financially well-off and have higher education.

The vast majority of ordinary migrant workers, who have a lower socioeconomic status, rarely show resistance. Only a small number have been involved in protests or petitions, and their impacts on government policy have been extremely minimal (Pong 2015: 157).<sup>6</sup> Some families have resisted by using various strategies to sidestep the policy, such as allowing their children to be adopted by local Shanghainese people. However, collective actions are few and sporadic, especially compared to the intensity and frequency of protests that are currently taking place in other social domains (Lee and Zhang 2013).

The social movement literature has long pointed out that there are three basic conditions for initiating or sustaining protests: political opportunity (McAdam 1982), resource mobilization (McCarthy and Zald 1977), and relative deprivation (Morrison 1978). The political opportunity theory analyzes the political environment of social movements, such as the relative openness or



closure of a political system (Tilly 1978). Therefore, the control of the authoritarian state in China means that there are few open protests. Protest incidents, such as the one by Zhan Haite, are strictly repressed by the government.<sup>7</sup> The resource mobilization theory argues that resources, such as access to financial funds, media, and outside organizations, are important in social movements. Particularly, the support of individuals external to a movement (i.e., those who do not directly benefit) is the most important resource (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Thus, initiators and organizers of collective actions are often not the impoverished, but those with political, economic, cultural or symbolic resources. Indeed, in China, protestors against the education policy are often middle-class.

Other important theories in the social movement literature are relative deprivation (Gurr 1970) and, related, cognitive liberation (McAdam 1982), both of which stem from grievance. While grievance is not sufficient to provoke protests, it is necessary for any form of resistance. According to Gurr, grievance is a “perceived discrepancy between value expectations and value capabilities” (1970:37). Grievance is usually caused by feelings of relative deprivation and discontent. The intensity and scope of relative deprivation strongly influences the likelihood of collective action. In the cognitive liberation theory, grievances are aggregated and transformed into consciousness. Therefore, according to McAdam (1982:51), “before collective [action] ...can get under way, people must collectively define their situations as unjust *and* subject to change through group action”.

To be sure, the low socioeconomic status and education level of migrant workers make it difficult for them to claim their right for education. But do these rural migrants have a feeling of relative deprivation? Little research has been done on how they understand this education policy.

Without this knowledge, we cannot know whether relative deprivation can be transformed into consciousness.

The subjective understandings of migrant workers and students have been briefly examined in a few related studies that revealed some unexpected responses. Ming (2014) found that students who were forced to end their schooling and were just “sitting at home” have “no words of complaints, only a calm acceptance”. She wondered why they are apathetic, as “(t)he problems faced...seemed painfully obvious, and the unfairness...almost ridiculous, but most...were oblivious to them” (2014:227-229). A study by Ling (2015) on the subjectivity of migrant students who are enrolled in vocational schools in Shanghai found that these schools actually provided them with the chance to experience an urban life style and build networks across social boundaries.

### **Cognition, Perception, and Sociology of Understanding**

Consequently, it cannot be assumed that migrant students or their parents view the lack of a higher education to result in a miserable life. There could very well be a discrepancy between objective social reality and subjective understanding. To understand how people respond to their situation, it is necessary to first construct an understanding of their subjective experiences and mindset, which warrants new theoretical tools.

Academics whose works focus on cognition and culture have pointed out that the ways individuals perceive or understand their circumstances are influenced by the context in which the event is taking place (Hutchins 1995; Zerubavel 1997). Thus, cognition is a social and cultural activity (Greenfeld 2013). Perceptions are largely influenced by the environment and cultural traditions (DiMaggio 1997), thus context greatly influences how circumstances are understood

(Hutchins 1995; Zerubavel 1997). This aligns with the long sociological tradition that has emphasized the contingencies of human behaviors in the social context, which is defined as the social environment of individuals. In classic writings, the context includes modalities in daily activities (Simmel 1921), external perceptions of one's self (Cooley 1922), the "situation" (Goffman 1963), etc. More recently, empirical research has revealed that social factors, such as our understanding of our position in the social world (Martin 2000), or external classification systems (Shepherd 2010), have major impacts on how individuals understand the world around them.

However, it is still unclear why people who are facing the same general culture (because they live in the same society) would develop different views. Most importantly, given that opinions or attitudes change, how exactly are particular understandings of situations sustained or consolidated, leading to concrete actions? To determine how individuals develop an understanding of their circumstances, Glaeser (2011) proposed a theory under the sociology of understanding. Understanding orients or directs actions, but is not always stable or reliable, and therefore requires validation prior to action. Glaeser (2011) contended that our understanding of circumstances is validated by three processes: recognition afforded by others, corroboration in action (observation across all of one's life contexts), and resonance with preexisting understandings.

Glaeser argued that this understanding forms or changes in response to countless everyday experiences. Worldviews are not only produced or expressed through ideological discourse, but also experienced at the level of the body and emotions (2011: 165-193). Thus, understandings are also emotively and kinesthetically experienced. These different modes do not influence actions separately; rather, they interact to differentiate or amplify each other.

Therefore, immediate contexts and everyday life experiences constitute the “culture” that determines the views of a group. Here, I draw upon this theory to analyze how migrant families understand a policy that significantly influences their opportunity for upward mobility, and how this understanding is related to their various modes of experiencing urban life.

## **Data and Methods**

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in the *Minhang* district of Shanghai. All of the interviewed students were enrolled in a public middle school, which admits both local and migrant students. Student respondents were referred by the principal and teachers and parental consents were obtained for conducting the interviews. Later, a snowball method of recruiting was used to avoid selection bias of the teachers. Non-random quota sampling was used to ensure respondent diversity.

In total, 74 semi-structured interviews with children and one or both of their parents from 32 migrant families were conducted. The majority were conducted from 2006 to 2008, and the rest, 2014 to 2015. The interviews took place at school in a closed classroom or in the residence of the respondents, where the students and parents were interviewed separately. On a few occasions, the parents were interviewed at their workplace.

All of the families are originally from rural China, mostly from the major migrant-sending provinces, such as Anhui, with rural *hukou*. They had worked as farmers with little income. At the time of the interviews, none had obtained urban *hukou*. Their current household monthly income (of both parents, and sometimes also working older siblings) ranges from 2,000 to 6,000 RMB *yuan* (except for one family with a monthly income of 20,000 RMB *yuan* and

another with 40,000 RMB *yuan*). Over half have more than one child in the household. By Shanghai standards, the living standards are low. Most importantly, the majority of the parents are either illiterate (30%) or have a primary to middle school education. Only two attended high school. None have a university education. The parents, especially the fathers, have worked in Shanghai for over 10 to 20 years. The children were either born or arrived in Shanghai before school-age. One-third briefly attended school in their hometown (grades 1-2).

Fifteen respondents were informally interviewed multiple times (in addition to the initial semi-structured interviews) across 8 years. The interview topics included their daily routines, future plans, assessment of their life in Shanghai versus their hometown, interactions with others, etc. By following, re-visiting, and re-interviewing this subset of families, I obtained an in-depth understanding of how they viewed their life chances, situations, and future in the city. The main theme of this paper, that the understanding of the policy is associated with their overall experiences in the city and validated by three processes, gradually emerged from the constant dialogue between data and theory.

To obtain a more holistic understanding of how these migrants have come to form their views, in-depth interviews were also conducted with two district-level government officials, the principal and four teachers at the middle school, and six social workers and two volunteers at two local social work organizations. The topics of these interviews included whether the local government prefers migrant students to leave or stay. If they were to stay, what are the government's major concerns? What do the teachers and social workers think of the non-local students? What do they suggest when advising the students? Do the students and parents respect the teachers and social workers? Do they follow their advice? I also collected relevant statistics, news articles, and opinions from various media sources. These provided a pool of discourses or

cultural repertoires that the migrants may have been exposed to and used to understand their circumstances. The interview transcripts were coded and analyzed until the major themes emerged, such as the role of the authorities in the formation of the understanding of these migrant families.

## **Migrant Families' Perceptions of the Policy**

### *Parents*

All of the parents perceived the policy as the most significant obstacle to settling in Shanghai.

The greatest obstacle is not being allowed to take the college entrance examination in Shanghai. The best strategy...is to return to our hometown, (have our child) study hard, and go to a first-tier university. Then we'll go back to Shanghai to work and settle down.  
(Case 12, Mother, sells vegetables in market, 6 years in Shanghai)

Although the parents understood that the major barrier to higher education is the education policy, they did not indicate that this policy is wrong. In fact, when asked about the possible abolishment of the *hukou* system so that their children could enjoy the same educational rights as the locals, they indicated its futility, and that there would be chaos (*tian xia da luan*) if it ever happened. They could not fathom this possibility because they had never thought of questioning the legitimacy of the policy. In fact, many sided with the government and local Shanghainese, defended the policy, and denied its impact on their children.

The Ministry of Education has its own views....They have to take the whole population of Shanghai into consideration...If they didn't implement this policy, the schools in Shanghai would need to expand. I...understand...(and) have no complaints...because this

is not a policy just for me. It's for everybody. (Case 8, Father, truck driver, over 20 years in Shanghai)

The necessity of this policy was also echoed by the majority of the parents. One of the reasons that they considered the policy to be fair is because it applies to all migrants without local *hukou*.

Another attitude widely shared by the migrants is gratitude that their children have the privilege of a quality compulsory education in an urban public school.

Because we do not have Shanghai *hukou*, our educational resources are allocated to Jiangsu Province. It's reasonable for the schools in Shanghai to charge us extra. It's beyond my expectations already that the Shanghai schools accept our children...The government has to implement this policy because they have no other better option. (Case 9, Father, truck driver, 14 years in Shanghai)

This comment echoes the official response of many local governments: the educational resources for nonlocals are allocated to their home provinces, and therefore the city government does not have the financial resources to provide an education for migrants without local *hukou*.

When asked whether they would leave Shanghai so that their children could receive a higher education, the parents denied the importance of a college degree.

I don't think that a child has to go to college or graduate school to succeed (*you chu xi*). Some people have gone to college, but they are still...unsuccessful. To be successful, you have to work hard...Many...without a college degree work harder...If the economy goes down...even university graduates can't find a job... (Case 26, Father, illegal cab driver, 15 years in Shanghai)

Such negative views of college graduates are very popular among the migrant parents.

Nowadays...those with a Master's or doctoral degree can't...find a job...(It's) a waste of their own money...(They) pay a lot for university tuition, and the family goes into debt. But after graduation... (they) can't even find a job to pay off the debt <sup>8</sup>...Someone from my hometown...got a PhD from the Shanghai Transportation University...(but) he just stares...at you...(He's) stupid and dumb. (Case 29, Father, small business owner, 15 years in Shanghai)

This attitude originates from observations of others or the mass media, as will be discussed in the next section. Although college is one of the most important means of upward mobility <sup>9</sup>, they emphasize instead the importance of individual effort for future achievements and success through alternative routes. This may mean attending a technical school, which holds true for many of the migrant families who operate small businesses.

...she can finish her middle school in Shanghai, then learn some technical skills, such as operating a computer. Then she can help me with my business. (Case 28, Father, small business owner, 12 years in Shanghai)

Several of the parents considered pursuing personal interests to be more important and the importance of personal happiness over success.

My daughter likes to draw. After she finishes middle school, she won't be going to high school. I'll send her directly to a specialized school just to learn art. I don't care about degrees or credentials.... As long as she's happy, that's good enough. After six or seven years of training...she can find a good job. (Case 16, Father, sales representative, 16 years in Shanghai)

Like many of the other interviewed parents, this father emphasized the importance of allowing



children to do what they are truly interested in doing; that is, they expressed that personal happiness overrides success.

### *Students*

In comparison to their parents, the children expressed more dissatisfaction with the policy.

I want to go back to my hometown to study. The policy in Shanghai has its own reasons. But it's disappointing and I think it's unfair. But I can't say it's wrong. (Case 29, 7<sup>th</sup> grader, 8 years in Shanghai)

Although “unfair” was used to describe the policy and the children expressed more discontentment, they still tried to justify the policy in terms of necessity. Many referenced the official discourse: “If they took away the policy, then everybody would come to Shanghai. There wouldn't be enough room”. (Case 3, 8<sup>th</sup> grade, 12 years in Shanghai)

The children also differed from their parents by expressing a greater desire for higher education. Similar to the finding in Koo (2012), half of the interviewed migrant families (both parents and students) agreed that if the children received a middle school education in their hometown, they would have a better chance for higher education. Many students wanted to return to their hometown to prepare for the exams, but were discouraged by their parents.

My parents are like, “if you can go to high school or university, that's good. But if you can't, that's fine as well.” I hope to further my studies. Their attitude breaks my heart...I have my own dreams. (Case 7, 8<sup>th</sup> grader, 10 years in Shanghai)

The parents of this interviewee felt that helping with the family business after middle school is a good option for her, but she felt differently. This difference in mindset is common in many of the

families.

Some of my classmates went back to their hometown...(they) go back early to familiarize themselves with the curriculum there...It's usually the kids who are determined to go back...I want...to...as well, but my parents do not... (Case 21, 8<sup>th</sup> grader, 14 years in Shanghai)

As shown, many of the migrant students disagree with their parents on schooling, but like them, consider personal effort and attributes to be the means for success, despite the policy.

I don't think this policy affects me much...If I work hard enough, I can be just as good as the Shanghainese...(or) even do better... (Case 4, 7<sup>th</sup> grader, 7 years in Shanghai)

It seems that their perceptions are contradictory; they aspire to higher education, but do not feel that the policy is a barrier.

Some of the students, influenced by their parents, have accepted that there are alternative pathways to success.

I don't think studying and going to university are the only paths...My father...said that when I reach grade 9 and cannot go to high-school in Shanghai, I can gain some technical skills and then go to work...I can learn to use a computer and...find a job. (Case 8, 8<sup>th</sup> grader, 14 years in Shanghai)

Half of the students seemed resigned to the "reality" that they will not attend high school or university, which is consistent with existing related studies. For example, Koo (2012: 559-560) found that in Beijing many migrant children believe that they have no opportunity to pursue higher education, while some opt for vocational schooling instead.

In sum, the perceptions of the two different generations of migrants toward the education

policy are largely similar. Both agree that the policy is a barrier, but a legitimate one. Factors other than the policy are emphasized as determinants of their future. The difference is that the migrant students desire a higher education more than their parents. Another difference is that the parents feel that they do not have local citizenship rights, nor the right to be treated as equals to the Shanghai residents. Their claims of “unfairness” are expressions of dissatisfaction that have little to do with the legitimacy of the policy or their rights. However, to the students, the policy is unfair because they feel that they are treated differently from their local Shanghai peers.

### **Three Processes of Validation**

The particular way that migrants understand their life circumstances and future prospects is validated by three processes: recognition of certain views by authorities, corroboration of these views by daily experiences, and resonance with past experiences.

#### ***Recognition by Authority***

According to Glaeser (2011:168-183), recognition by authority is the most important process that validates understanding. Three authorities have precedence in this study: school teachers, social workers, and the media. All three contribute to formulating understandings of the policy.

The school teachers, as authority figures to both the students and parents, have the central role in confirming the legitimacy of the policy. They often have a higher socioeconomic status (Ming 2014: 227-229) and are usually the first to inform the migrant students of this policy. They use the official discourse as justification and reassure students that the policy will not affect them as long as they study hard. In the interviews, a few teachers admitted that the local district

government requested that they inform the students about the policy and persuade them to leave as early as the seventh grade. Their influence is evident:

At first I thought that it's unfair...But my teacher said...the opportunities are there...Shanghai students may have better life chances, but if I believe in myself and work hard, I can still succeed...The policy won't affect me. (Case 9, 9<sup>th</sup> grader, 14 years in Shanghai)

Although the students may feel that the policy is unfair, they accept its necessity and legitimacy because their teachers legitimize it. Then they relay the information to their parents and inevitably, most of the parents concur with the teachers because this information largely affirms the information obtained from other sources.

For those who decide to stay in Shanghai, especially the 9<sup>th</sup> graders (because they are almost high school age), the teachers try to convince them that vocational schools are also a good option by providing them with related pamphlets and organizing field trips to visit vocational schools. They also provide advice on fields of study that they consider a good fit for the students.

The students who had been briefly schooled in their own hometown especially felt that the teachers in Shanghai are more responsible and approachable, with better teaching skills.

The thing that I like best about Shanghai is my school. The teachers are really good...(they) communicate with us...The teachers in my hometown hit students...did not care about the students at all. (Case 1, 7<sup>th</sup> grader, 5 years in Shanghai)

All the interviewed students liked their teachers, and therefore listened to their advice. A student described how his teacher changed his mind toward the policy:

At first I felt that it was unfair. But then Teacher Cao... very nice to students...we all like her...talked to us about ways of looking at this policy. She said, we need to treat everything...with a calm and peaceful heart (*xintai ping he*). And everyone needs to seize their own opportunities. As long as someone works hard, s/he can be successful. I was very moved... Ever since then, I never complain...It's useless...The key...is that we need to be self-reliant. As long as I work hard, and have the skills, the sky is the limit. (Case 9, 9<sup>th</sup> grader, 14 years in Shanghai)

The parents also held the same view about Shanghai teachers. One of the mothers was originally dissatisfied about an issue but did not pursue it because of her positive feelings toward the teachers:

In the past, the non-local students were taught the national curriculum. But since last year (2005), they use Shanghai textbooks for non-local students as well. If we go back, my child will have to learn the national curriculum again. So I asked them to teach the non-local students the national curriculum ...the teachers said no... because there are no qualified teachers in Shanghai to teach the national curriculum....her teachers are...very nice to her...all very fond of her...So I did not say anything else. (Case 17, Mother, hotel staff, 7 years in Shanghai)

This mother then tried to purchase the national textbooks and asked her daughter to learn on her own. The teachers again dissuaded her by claiming that this would negatively affect the learning development of her child. In fact, their intent is to persuade the migrants to return back to their hometown as early as possible. During the teacher interviews, several admitted that the school stopped teaching the national curriculum to non-local students because if they did teach it, the

non-local students would be less likely to eventually leave, and would remain in Shanghai longer.

Social workers also play an important role. Many social work organizations provide services to the migrant students and have thus established a good relationship with the students and a good reputation accordingly. During interactions, migrant children are exposed to their views, which include downplaying the importance of a formal education and emphasizing the value of holistic development.

For example, one of the social work organizations in this study often provides sessions on topics that target migrant students, and organizes volunteer opportunities for them. The most popular program is on career development. Many career development workshops have been provided specifically for migrant students in middle school, including those that discuss life choices after middle school graduation. They also emphasize the importance of interests, hobbies, and happiness, and in particular, emotional and spiritual “fulfillment”.

One of the social workers critically reflected on her role as well as that of her colleagues in shaping how migrant families understand their situation. She is very aware that the current policy “sacrifices” migrant families. Instead of suggesting resistance, she chooses to appropriate postmodern discourses about happiness, thus obscuring reality, downplaying the life challenges of the migrants, and “mak(ing) them feel better”.

We often tell the migrant families that it’s okay...to not go to university but vocational school...that it’s more important to be...happy...rather than make a lot of money or get a prestigious job...We cannot change reality...They are the underprivileged...sacrificed in the modernization process of China. We can only try to make them feel better. For example, the international schools in Shanghai [private schools for foreigners and well

off families] provide volunteer opportunities for their students. So we do the same for the migrant students. (Social Worker/Head of Organization)

The school teachers and social workers use soft persuasion to dissipate the discontent and frustration of the students, but simultaneously, obscure their understanding of how their circumstances are a direct consequence of social inequality (see also Li 2015). After spending time with an NGO volunteer homework tutor, a student said:

I tried to talk to (my tutor) about...my future. But she wasn't able to help much...she's from the Sichuan province, took the exam in her hometown and went to Beijing for university. Although she is a university student herself, she never says how great it is to go to university. She always tells me that working hard and becoming self-reliant is most important. (Case 30, 7<sup>th</sup> grader, 9 years in Shanghai)

During my participant observation of the migrant children, especially during the workshops and other activities provided by the social work organizations, I saw that they were very engaged in the activities, and paid close attention to the advice given by the social workers. They were intrigued that they could succeed, and if not, at least remain happy, even though they are not given the same opportunities as local students. By internalizing these discourses, the migrant children unwittingly accept the “alternative routes to success”. As a result, they feel that they should “face reality” and aim for vocational schooling instead of a tertiary education (see also, Koo 2012, p. 559).

It is important to note that the local district government encourages both the school teachers and social workers to promote such alternate life routes. In fact, social work services in Shanghai are mostly funded by the local government. Therefore, the local government supports the discourses produced and circulated by the teachers and social workers. Such authorities prefer

migrants return back to their hometown because if they stay, they become a burden on the local government if they stay.<sup>10</sup>

Another source of authority for migrant families is the mass media. It has been well-documented that in modern society, the mass media has greatly influenced perception (Shrum 2002; Valkenburg, Peter, & Walther 2016). The vast majority of migrant workers do not have higher education themselves, so their understanding of the importance of a university education largely stems from the media. In recent years, however, there has been extensive media coverage about the difficulties that university graduates face in finding a job. “Failure” stories have also been popular in both national and local media, which range from graduates who fail to secure a good job to cases in which university students commit crimes. During interviews, many of the migrant families referred to such headlines to justify the early termination of schooling:

I read from the newspaper that many rural families go into debt after paying for their children’s university tuition. But after they graduate, they can’t find a job...So I figure that it’s better to send my child to a vocational school so that he can find a job afterwards.  
(Case 25, Father, truck driver, 13 years in Shanghai)

Taken together, these immediate sources of authority for the migrants have convinced migrant parents and students that a college degree does not serve a very important or necessarily instrumental purpose. Since these authorities support the policy, they influence the migrants to also adopt the official account of the policy. Even though the migrants initially might have held different views, only this positive view is recognized by the authorities and therefore becomes consolidated. Consequently, this view influences their course of action: obey instead of resisting the policy.



### *Corroboration of Daily Reality*

The understandings of the migrants are not only influenced by the authorities but also corroborated by daily experiences, including the material, emotional, and sensory experiences of living in the city. They tend to believe what they observe, feel, and hear. Moreover, their daily emotional and kinetic experiences significantly influence their perceptions, such as the value of living in Shanghai or whether the policy negatively impacts their life.

First, the attitude of the migrants toward the policy is tied to their view of the local Shanghainese, as well as the overall assessment of their gains and losses since relocating.

I've been in Shanghai for such a long time... I have many good friends who are Shanghainese. They are nice and very helpful... (Therefore) I would not oppose the policy. (Case 13, Father, driver, 13 years in Shanghai)

Another major theme that emerged from the interviews is that the migrants consider life in Shanghai good, especially in comparison to rural life.

Transportation is convenient here...Life is so much more convenient than in my hometown. It's easy to do grocery shopping...we can go to the supermarkets. My hometown doesn't have many stores. (Case 1, Father, business owner, 9 years in Shanghai)

Since Shanghai has improved their quality of life, the respondents felt that their future would be bright. These positive daily experiences have an important influence on their perception.

In addition to material and sensory experiences, emotional experiences are also influential, especially when assessing their losses and gains in Shanghai. For example, an

education in Shanghai is considered better because, living in the city, their children are more civilized, clean, and polite than their rural peers. They are happier in comparison to their rural counterparts, who “study to death”. The students like school and participate in extracurricular activities, and enjoy school outings and fieldtrips. A father who is doing well financially (monthly income of 20,000RMB in 2008) said:

...I do not need my child to study too hard... In my hometown, students study all day long... do not take part in sports.... have no hobbies. They study to death to get into universities... I don't want that for my children...In Shanghai, (it's)...more fun...playing and being happy are also important. If they study all day, they have no time for other things. (Case 6, Father, small transportation business owner, 11 years in Shanghai)

The children also like Shanghai for similar reasons.

The buildings are so tall in Shanghai...Shanghai is beautiful...Shanghai and my hometown are like heaven and earth. Everything...is much more convenient...people also talk different in Shanghai... (they) are cultured and polite...(Case 18, 8<sup>th</sup> grader, 11 years in Shanghai)

Many of the students also indicated that Shanghai schools are superior to those in their hometown because they are better equipped and provide electronic equipment, sports facilities, and libraries.

The migrant workers expressed little discontent about their current situation, despite the education policy. The majority feel that their quality of life has greatly improved, and are confident that their future will be just as exceptional. This optimism is closely related to their daily experiences in Shanghai; the corroboration of daily material and emotional experiences has

led to the perception that even though the policy poses a barrier to education, overall, they have gained culture and convenience since relocating to Shanghai.

### ***Resonance with Past Knowledge***

The third important process that validates the understandings of the migrants is resonance with their past experience or knowledge. In this aspect, the two generations are quite different. The first generation has rural experience; they migrated to the city in search of a better life—specifically, better standards of living—which most of them have found. When they first arrived in Shanghai, they already knew that they would be different from the locals due to their lack of Shanghai *hukou*, which is just a fact of life.

The first generation's perception of the policy is also shaped by past experiences of policy changes in China. Many of the parents expressed reluctance to leave Shanghai because they are hopeful that the policy might change.

The policies in China change every day. You never know if this policy will change tomorrow, right? ...*Hukou* has no other use now, other than allowing children to go to school. With my ID card now, I can go anywhere. (Case 13, Father, driver, 13 years in Shanghai)

Their past experience informs them that the *hukou* system is becoming more lax. In fact, in recent years, *hukou* has lost its importance in affecting life chances and access to various social welfare benefits (for example, Zhan 2011).

Every year, the government has a new policy about migrant workers. And every year, the policy benefits migrant workers more. Even if they could not solve the problem once and

for all, they kind of compensate us...for example, a subsidy for retirement and medical insurance. (Case 11, Father, sales representative, 11 years in Shanghai)

Even the education policy has improved for migrant students; previously, they were prohibited from attending any urban public school or had to pay extra fees to do so (Lan 2014). These developments have created hope that the restrictions on higher education will also be relaxed soon.

The past experience of these migrant children is quite different from that of their parents because these children grew up in the city and have little rural experience (see Kwong 2011). Their reference group is other local and nonlocal youths in Shanghai rather than rural people. They rarely compare themselves with their rural peers.<sup>11</sup> Thus, their understanding of life in Shanghai differs from that of their parents. They are very conscious of the unfair treatment and feel that they are discriminated as “second-class citizens”.

The Shanghainese have more money than us. They look down on us...My Shanghainese classmates hate the nonlocals. I don't like the Shanghainese...People in my hometown are jealous of me, but I don't get along with the kids there either. (Case 17, 7<sup>th</sup> grader, 6 years in Shanghai)

In addition, many are dismayed by their segregation from the local students and different treatment by the teachers.

Ever since we became eighth graders...the teachers don't care about us. They're much stricter with the local students. My English teacher once said: “you're going back to your hometown. So if you understand (the school work), that's fine. If not, just leave it”...We...don't feel as motivated...(or) respected... (Case 15, 8<sup>th</sup> grader, 12 years in Shanghai)

Although this complaint expresses discontent, it is more about the treatment by the teachers, rather than the policy per se. Therefore, immediate experience is more likely to evoke emotions, rather than increase understanding of an abstract policy.

In sum, how individuals understand their present situation is shaped by their past experiences and knowledge. The past experiences of the migrant parents have shaped their view that life is better in Shanghai, and the policy might change in the future. As the *hukou* system has long been in place, the ineligibility of migrant children for higher education is an accepted reality. Therefore, they do not question the legitimacy of the policy. However, their children are more likely to feel discontent due to different past experiences. They have not experienced life in a rural area so they do not see the situation in Shanghai as an improvement over anything. Their education is similar to that of their Shanghainese peers up to a certain point; therefore, they feel that their differentiation from the Shanghainese after middle school is a loss in terms of equal status with the locals.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

In contemporary China, there is a policy that significantly limits the educational opportunities of migrant students in the cities. However, many migrant parents acknowledge its legitimacy, and do not believe that it will impact the future of their children. This perception is formed and sustained by three processes of validation as delineated by a theory in the sociology of understanding (Glaeser2011). First, their perceptions that the policy is legitimate and formal education is irrelevant are recognized by authorities. Second, the convenience of modern city life convinces them that their life is better after migrating. Third, their past experiences support the belief that their quality of life has vastly improved, and instill hope that the policy might

eventually change. The immediate physical surrounding of the urban landscape, and the social surroundings, such as their local Shanghainese contacts and immediate authorities, constantly validate their understanding of the policy as legitimate. These directly shape their understanding of daily life experiences, which includes not only evaluation of their losses and gains, but also their emotional feelings. Given that the migrants perceive a positive overall experience in Shanghai, it is unlikely that they will challenge the legitimacy of the policy.

The youth respondents share largely similar perceptions as those of their parents, but there are important differences. There are similarities because the parents are important authority figures and therefore serve the function of recognition for them, and because they share similar experiences of modern material culture in the city. However, the children are segregated from local students at school, and feel discriminated and discontent. Most importantly, their lack of rural experience means that their past knowledge significantly differs from that of their parents. The mixed experiences of the children, in terms of a rural *hukou* status and urban life experience, provide them with different perceptions. Yet they rarely engage in any collective action, even on social media, and do not encourage their parents to react. They are apathetic precisely because the recognition and corroboration processes have convinced them that the policy is legitimate, and they can still be successful or happy through individual effort.

By demonstrating the subjective understandings of these two generations of migrants, this article examines how subordination to an unfair policy is achieved at the micro-level. The findings provide a nuanced explanation for why individuals who have been living in the city for over a decade, on average, still do not feel relatively deprived by an unfair policy. Their perceptions are largely shaped by the immediate authorities, who use soft persuasion to direct them to an individualist discourse and obscure structural inequality. Moreover, their exposure to

modern urban life leads to a positive overall evaluation of their experiences in the city. Finally, urbanites, not peers in their hometown, are their reference group. In this vein, this research contributes to understanding how the theory of relative deprivation works at the cognitive level.

This study asserts the importance of the immediate context in which individuals are situated, which influences how they understand their life circumstances. While the prevalence and role of mass media have shaped public opinions, as extensively discussed in the literature, this study adds to the existing research by demonstrating that immediate authorities who have close relationships with people who trust and respect them also have an important role in legitimizing and shaping their perceptions of policy. These rural migrants do not realize that behind these social agents is the local government with its own agenda of encouraging the migrants to return to their hometown as early as possible, or otherwise, conform to the policy so that their children become qualified second-generation migrants (Woronov 2012).

It is important to note that the migrants in China are very diverse. This study focuses on rural migrants in Shanghai with relatively low socioeconomic status. While the argument about how immediate context and life experiences influence the way people perceive a particular event or policy can help understand migrants from other backgrounds as well, the specific findings here may not be generalizable to other migrants in Shanghai or other cities. For example, the restrictions on the right of non-local students to take higher education exams are most stringent in Beijing and Shanghai. Moreover, different from Shanghai, in Beijing many of the migrant students and their families live a segregated life in city or urban ghettos at the city outskirts. Many migrant students in Beijing study in schools that only enroll migrant students, so they rarely compare their own circumstances with those of Beijing locals (Jiang et al. 2008). In Shanghai, many of the parents tend to have more contact with the locals because they are “doing

business” with them, and migrant students study in public schools with local students. Another major difference is that Shanghai has a relatively liberal policy on incorporating migrant students into public or government-subsidized schools, so that most can enjoy 9 years of compulsory schooling. In Beijing, the ability of migrant students to attend public schools is much more limited, so many either stay in their hometown for schooling (thus becoming “left-behind” children), or return for middle school when they fail to gain entry into a local middle school. It is possible that those migrants in Beijing perceive the policy as less legitimate or protest against it more than the Shanghai migrants here. How migrants of different backgrounds and therefore face different immediate contexts perceive this policy or other issues related to the *hukou* system, of course, could be direction for future research.

## Notes

1. Migrant children: children of migrant workers (0-18 years old) who have relocated to a city to live with one or both of their parents.

2. The curriculums are different. Knowledge from urban schools does not transfer well to the continuing education in their hometown.

3. For example, Professor Zhang Qianfan at Peking University has been actively advocating for the educational rights of migrant children. See Pan Xutao and Feng Shuangqing, “Professor Zhang Qianfan scored zero for the policy on non-local students’ college entrance exams in Beijing” *nandu.com*, last modified December 20, 2012.

<http://news.nandu.com/html/201301/10/15282.html>.



4. In 2014, the college enrollment rate (一本录取率) in Beijing and Shanghai was 24.87% and 21.92% respectively, compared to for instance, 11.38% in Anhui and 9.38% in Jiangsu. Data source: <http://edu.people.com.cn/n/2015/0709/c367001-27279464.html>.

5. Since 2012, the Ministry of Education of China requires all provinces to issue policies on post-middle school education for migrant students. Shanghai publicized its regulations in 2012; however, they were based on the same point system for *hukou* permits.

6. At the time of this research (2006-2008), resistance was an extremely rare phenomenon. However, since March 2010, some of the parents in large cities began to organize activities to demand the right for their children to participate in college entrance exams, and since July 2010, some have petitioned to the Ministry of Education every month to appeal the restrictions of *hukou*.

7. In 2012, Zhan Haite, a fifteen-year-old migrant student in Shanghai, openly protested against *hukou* on her page in *Weibo* (a micro-blogging site, the Chinese version of Twitter) after she was not allowed to take the high school entrance examination. This is the only protest that attracted national attention. The responses to her case were mixed: while some praised her courage, many others accused her of being naïve or unreasonable. Both Zhan and her father were strictly controlled by authorities and were not allowed to take further actions of protests. (see reports <http://news.163.com/12/1201/15/8HLB69Q500011229.html#from=relevant>).

8. In the past decade, higher education has been considered an investment with low or even negative return rates, a popular view among rural families and one that is circulated in the media.

9. There is much empirical evidence that suggests education is one of the most important factors in determining life chances in post-reform China. See, for example, Jansen and Wu 2012, p. 19.

10. Since migrant students are not allowed to attend high school in Shanghai, many become loafers after middle school and account for the majority of youth crime. See Xiong 2015, p. 5-6.

11. A survey also found that second generation migrant workers are more likely to self-compare with urbanites. See National Statistical Bureau, 2011 “The number, Composition and Characteristics of the New Generation of Migrant Workers.”

[http://www.stats.gov.cn/zjtj/ztfx/fxbg/201103/t20110310\\_16148.html](http://www.stats.gov.cn/zjtj/ztfx/fxbg/201103/t20110310_16148.html)

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