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Class Consciousness of Rural Migrant Children in China

Abstract

The state of class consciousness of working class children has hardly received any attention in current China studies. This study examines the class consciousness of rural migrant children as they are about to join their migrant parents and become 'China's new workers'. Qualitative investigations were carried out in two primary schools in Beijing. Focus-group and individual interviews were conducted with 87 fifth- and sixth-grade migrant children in the two case schools and 324 valid student questionnaires collected. The findings reveal that migrant children were aware of the unequal class relationships suffered by migrant workers; however, their interpretations of class-based injustices exhibited false consciousness, shadowed by individualism, meritocracy, and the duality of images. Family and school may play vital roles in shaping migrant children's class consciousness.

Keywords: class consciousness; working class; rural migrant children; primary school; China

Introduction

China's economic reforms since the late 1970s have been a dramatic negation of the country's former socialist economic system.[1] The mid-1990s witnessed the large-scale privatization of state-owned enterprises, which resulted in the layoffs of 26.8 million state workers.[2] Meanwhile, sweatshops have mushroomed in urban coastal regions, attracting millions of rural migrant workers from the near-bankrupt countryside.[3]

As China's urban economy continued to boom, its rural migrant population experienced unprecedented expansion, growing from 79 million in 2000[4] to 281.71 million in 2016[5], becoming the dominant portion of China's working class population. Among the 169 million going-out rural migrants (*waichu nongonggong* 外出农民工) in 2016, over 80 percent worked in urban areas, who predominantly engaged in manual labour, with 50.2 percent being employed in manufacturing and construction and 46.7 percent in service industries.[6] To distinguish them from workers under the old socialist system, some scholars call these migrant workers 'China's new workers.'[7]

[1] Putterman 1995; Walder 1994.
[2] Lin 2006.
[3] Chan 2009; Tuan and Ng 2001.
[4] Liang and Ma 2004.
[5] NBSC 2014, 2017.
[6] NBSC 2017. According to the definition given by National Bureau of Statistics of China [NBSC] (2017), rural migrant workers (*nongmingong* 农民工) refers as to people with rural *hukou* status who are currently working in non-agricultural industries within the jurisdiction of *hukou* location or migrating outside for over six months. The former refers to as local rural migrants, and the latter refers to as going-out rural migrants, representing 112.37 million and 169.34 million people respectively in 2016.
[7] Lv 2013.

They are 'new' workers because—unlike the 'old' socialist workers, who were entitled to a full range of protection in healthcare, housing, education, and political power—rural migrant workers enjoy little labour protection and endure long working hours, subsistence-level wages, and harsh working conditions.[8] These 'new workers' have made significant contributions to China's reform and growing competitiveness in the global market, but are locked near the bottom of the production chain.[9] The term 'China's new workers' belies the bitter struggles these rural migrant workers face.

Despite their mass population, rural migrant workers rarely take collective actions against the injustices they experience; instead, their ways of resistance are usually individualistic, such as changing jobs. Yet, collective action is the central element for class formation, as Chan and Pan concluded in their study of migrant industrial workers in south China.[10] Although an increasing number of rural migrants choose legal approaches and labour movements to protect their rights and interests, passive reactions towards social inequalities are still prevalent among migrant workers,[11] demonstrating a lack of consciousness of their collective class fate.[12]

This phenomenon calls for attention to the formation of migrant workers' class consciousness. This study attends to this issue; however, it does not focus directly on migrant workers, but on the state of class consciousness among migrant children.

[8] CLB 2011, 2012; Huang 2009; Lv 2013.
[9] CLB 2012; Solinger 1999.
[10] Chan and Pun 2010.
[11] CLB 2012; Wang, Xingzhou 2008.
[12] Lv 2013.

Research shows that the formation of one's consciousness of class structure can begin long before one enters workplace.[13] Children of five to eight years of age are already aware of the inequities between rich and poor and associate having wealth with having a good education, good job, good luck, and personal merit.[14] From eight years old onwards, children can classify and order social classes based on their understanding of occupational hierarchy.[15] The older children grow, the more they attribute social stratification and economic inequality to personal traits, such as education, ability, and effort.[16] Beyond 12 years of age, children are able to build a moderately elaborate picture of the whole society and of the relationships between individuals and social structures.[17] The images of society and class structure constructed in one's childhood can be fundamental elements of the more explicit forms of one's class consciousness.

Most importantly, children of rural migrant workers in China are highly likely to reproduce their parents' working class position when they join the workforce.[18] In Song, Zeng, and Zhang's five-year longitudinal study of 1886 junior secondary school students in 50 migrant schools in Beijing, less than 40 percent went on to high schools or vocational schools, and less than six percent were admitted to university; most remained in Beijing, working for a pittance or merely walking the streets.[19] Therefore, it is of great importance to understand the state of class consciousness of

[13] Connell 1970; Danziger 1958; Davis 1979.
[14] Hazelbaker et al. 2018; Mistry et al. 2016.
[15] Connell 1970.
[16] Flanagan et al. 2014; Sigelman 2012, 2013.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Li 2015; Song, Zeng and Zhang 2016.
[19] Song, Zeng and Zhang 2016.

migrant children, as they will become the new generation of migrant workers in a few years' time and their mindsets are malleable and open to new possibilities of class construction. Inquiries into migrant children's social consciousness could offer a window on the genesis of adult migrant workers' class consciousness.

Literature on rural migrant children

The booming number of rural migrant children makes it a group China cannot afford to ignore. In 2015, there were 34.26 million migrant children (aged 17 or younger) in China, accounting for 12.6 percent of all children aged 0–17 years.[20] Much research has documented the hardships they encounter, including unequal access to urban public education[21], discrimination in urban schools (if ever admitted)[22], and various forms of social marginalization in host cities.[23]

Most extant literature identifies the *hukou* (household registration, 户口) system as the primary cause of the miseries endured by migrant children and families.[24] The *hukou* system mediates the distribution of public goods and entitles citizens to social welfare provision strictly based on their registered place of legal residence, rather than the location of their current home; the change of one's hukou status is not impossible but hardly to be achieved for most rural people.[25] Therefore, most rural migrant workers and their families are not eligible for urban *hukou* status and associated social

[20] NBSC and UNICEF China, and UNEPA China 2017.
[21] Lai et al. 2014; 2nd Author 2016.
[22] Shi, Changhui 2010;Wang, Lu 2008.
[23] Goodburn 2009; Lan 2014; Xiong 2010.
[24] for example, Lai et al. 2014; Li, Nan and Placier 2015.
[25] More details can be seen in Chan 2009; Chan and Zhang 1999; Cheng and Selden 1994; Lin 2006.

welfare services, despite their living and working in urban centres. Thus, *hukou* status greatly disadvantages the migrant population, severely limiting their access to local public resources in host cities, including school education. Without local *hukou* status, rural migrant families must overcome formidable institutional hurdles – e.g., the five-certificate (*wuzheng*, 五证) policy[26] in Beijing and the point-based school enrolment (*jifen ruxue*, 积分入学)[27] system in Shanghai – to enrol their children into public schools. *Hukou* status appears to be the biggest obstacle preventing rural migrant children from accessing public education in cities.

However, a closer examination of school enrolment requirements demonstrates a clear shift from exclusion by *hukou* to discrimination by class. Under these policies, educational opportunities for migrant children are no longer restricted by *hukou* per se, but are contingent on migrant parents' educational level, employment condition, and economic affordability.

In Beijing, for example, some documents (e.g., proof of employment and residency or temporary residence permits) require the individual to have stable employment that provides a decent income and the social insurance needed to afford stable housing; however, most employers of migrant labour fail to provide such packages. In 2007, only 10 percent of migrant workers were provided medical insurance, 11 percent unemployment insurance, 12.5 percent legal labour contracts,

[26] Five kinds of certificates are required, including a temporary residence permit, household registration booklet (*hukouben* 户口本), certificate verifying a lack of guardianship in their place of origin, proof of parental employment, and proof of residency—to enroll their children in public schools.
[27] The Shanghai municipal government implemented the point-based system in September 2013 for *hukou* reform. The non-local migrants could be graded based on their age, educational level, living residency, labor contract, Shanghai social insurance records, and entrepreneurial ability and so forth.

and 18 percent pensions.[28] By 2016, 61.8 percent of rural migrant workers were still found to be working without legal labour contracts with their employers, and 2.4 million of rural workers had wage arrears amounting to 270.9 billion RMB – an average unpaid wage of 12,000 RMB per person.[29] Also, in Shanghai's point-based *hukou* system, applicants who receive 120 points are qualified to apply for one public school place. Within this system, having a doctoral degree earns 110 points, while each year of social insurance payment is worth three points.[30] Clearly, such a point structure favours middle- or upper-class migrants with higher education credentials, stable employment, and legal labour contracts; however, lower class migrant workers' stringent employment conditions prevent them from accessing Shanghai's public resources and are clearly inadequate to satisfy the prerequisites for their children attending public schools.

Rural migrant children are indeed caught in a double bind, excluded from urban public schools by both *hukou* status and family socioeconomic status. Labour market status functions as a replacement for *hukou* and a less overt barrier to migrant children's education. The complexity of this new scenario poses challenges to the explanatory power of the *hukou* discourse, which loses sight of the critical class effects in rural migrant children's adversities.

Moreover, the predominant *hukou* discourse confines rural migrant children to the rural-urban dichotomy when explain these children's social consciousness. Much

[28] Shi, Li 2010.
[29] NBSC 2017.
[30] Shanghai Municipal Government 2017.

effort has been invested to document migrant children's identity crisis, as they are trapped between urban and rural societies.[31] Rural migrant children inherit their parents' rural origins, but most have weak attachment to the rural life.[32] Living in cities for years or even since birth, they identify much more with the urban lifestyle, but feel unaccepted by urban society, due to various discriminations.[33] In these studies, rural or urban identity are the only markers available for rural migrant children and the main conflicts are conceived as being between migrants and locals. This binary view of migrant children's subjective world largely ignores their daily exposure to the class-based inequalities experienced by their families. Research is greatly needed to expand concepts of rural migrant children's identity, especially to include the important dimension of class.

In sum, *hukou* or the rural-urban distinction tells half of the story of rural migrant children, and the prevalence of the *hukou* discourse conceals rural migrants' lived experiences of class conflicts. It is therefore of paramount importance to include class in migrant education research, to expand the narrow, yet dominant framework of the rural-urban binary.

False state *versus* critical state of social consciousness

This study borrows Freire's framework of false and critical consciousness.[34] The state of false consciousness contributes to the reproduction of the exploitative

[31] Geng, Zhou and Hu 2012; Li, Miao 2015; Xiong 2009.
[32] Shi, Changhui 2010.
[33] Geng, Zhou and Hu 2012; Xiong 2009.
[34] Freire 1970a, 1970b.

relationship between the capitalist and working classes. With false consciousness, workers fail to recognize their exploited situation and the possibility of transforming the social structure and therefore tend to adopt accommodative strategies in reaction to class inequalities and social oppression.[35] The state of critical consciousness, in contrast, enables people to penetrate the systematic mechanisms of exploitation and domination and identify common interests within their own class. With critical consciousness, oppressed workers transform their individualistic resistance into collective actions that embed individuals' futures into the shared destiny of their class.[36]

Freire constructed four dimensions to distinguish the critical consciousness from the false one (see Table 1).[37] The first dimension, *Awareness,* refers to people's understanding of their current situations and whether they can realize the problems in their current social reality. The second, *Attribution,* refers to how people perceive the social, economic, and political causes that perpetuate the inequalities and injustice they face in society. The third dimension, *Self-efficacy*, involves whether people believe in their ability to bring changes to social and political conditions, while the fourth dimension, *Intended action*, concerns people's beliefs about how to act to make changes.

<Table 1 here>

These four dimensions set up important parameters for understanding the state of

[35] Freire 1970a, 1970b.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Freire 1972, 1973, 1985, c1998.

migrant children's class consciousness. Grounded in this four-dimensional framework, this study seeks to answer three research questions: (1) Are migrant children aware of the class position of rural migrant workers? (2) To what causes do they attribute the injustice encountered by migrant workers? and, (3) Whom do they see as change makers and what do they see as feasible ways of changing their fate?

Methods

This study chose Beijing as its research site. Beijing, as China's capital and one of its mega-cities, has a large migrant population and a large migrant child population, with 38.1 percent of Beijing's 21.5 million residents (8.2 million) being migrants in 2014,[38] including over 480,000 compulsory-education-age rural migrant children.[39]

Qualitative investigations were conducted in two primary schools—one migrant school and one public school—in the Sun District (pseudonym) of Beijing between June 2014 and January 2015. The migrant school was in a predominantly migrant community and offered affordable education for 484 migrant children who had been shut out of public schools in Beijing. In the public school, 90.1 percent of all students were rural migrant children whose families had somehow succeeded in presenting the five required documents for enrolment. The public school was staffed by certified teachers, whereas the migrant school could only hire temporary teachers, most of whom were without professional training.

[38] BMBS 2016.
[39] Zhao and Wei 2017.

Student participants were recruited from the two schools' fifth and sixth grades, the highest two primary school grades in China. Grade Five and Six students in China are usually 10 to 12 years old and can, according to psychologists, construct a moderately elaborate conception of class structure.[40]

Data were drawn from questionnaires, interviews, and school observations conducted in the two sample schools. Informed consent was obtained from principals, fifth- and sixth-grade teachers, parents, and the children before the investigation began. First, a student questionnaire was distributed to children to garner information on their family backgrounds and perceptions about their lives in the family, school, and community contexts. A total of 324 of the 382 returned student questionnaires were valid[41] (see Table 2 for respondents' characteristics). Data generated from the questionnaire helped identify and reduce idiosyncratic findings from interviews, serving as an effective means of triangulation.

<Table 2 here>

A total of 87 fifth- and sixth-grader students (44 from the public school and 43 from the migrant school) participated in the interviews. The interviews followed a semi-structured protocol to explore in depth the children's beliefs, values, and attitudes toward social problems, class-related issues, and school education. To ensure they felt safe when discussing issues and sharing their opinions, students could either

[40] Connell 1970; Danziger 1958; Davis 1979; Hazelbaker et al. 2018.
[41] 43 of 382 were considered invalid, as they had no responses to over one-third of the questions; another 15 students from the public school were identified as Beijing local students, and their questionnaire data were therefore excluded. Questions for which most rural migrant children had different response criteria were further excluded; for instance, when asked the "number of family members", some students included all family members including grandparents, while others excluded those not currently living in the same house.

nominate the students with whom they would be interviewed in a focus group, or choose to be interviewed individually. Based on the children's choices, seven individual and 25 focus group interviews were conducted at the schools by one of the authors. The interviews lasted from 45-90 minutes, depending on group size. Focus group interviews enable participants to listen to others' opinions and allow the researcher to observe how participants respond to and utilize others' ideas and understandings to form their own.[42] In this study, the focus group activated multiple peer inputs on the same topic, stimulating richer and deeper conversations among the migrant children. It proved to be a more efficient approach to data collection than the individual interview.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Earlier transcripts, field notes, and documents were coded and analysed throughout the data collection process to inform subsequent interviews/observations. Patterns of children's perceptions were explored using Friere's four constructs of social consciousness (awareness, attribution, self-efficacy, and intended action). 'Self-efficacy' and 'intended action' were combined into one section ('Possibility of Changes'), owing to the high degree of overlap between the two dimensions in the children's responses.

Results

Awareness of class position

To understand their perceptions of migrant workers' social positioning, the

[42] Marshall and Rossman 1995.

interviewed rural migrant children were to define the word, *gongren* (worker, 工人), and describe their parents' occupations. Of the 87 migrant children, 69 perceived *gongren* as people engaging in physical labour, including manual workers (carpenters, construction workers, plumbers), service and sales (cashiers, salespersons, drivers, cooks) or even small bosses (street peddlers, corner shop owners, leaders of construction groups); per the survey, over 60% of these migrant children's fathers fell into these categories. The children described these jobs as 'tiring,' 'working from dawn till sundown', and 'dirty,' featuring 'low wages' or 'wage arrears' and 'being looked down upon.'

In addition to defining the nature of work, the migrant children also naturally paired the concept of 'workers' with the concept of 'bosses' (*laoban*, 老板). Workers were seen as *mai liqi* (selling physical efforts, 卖力气) and bosses as spending money to hire workers, indicating that the migrant children had, at ages 10-12, already identified major categories of class.

The migrant children were fully aware of the power relationship between workers and bosses, perceiving the former as inferior to the latter: '[The] worker and the boss are like the superior and the subordinate. The boss has many people on hand and urges them to work (student no.2)'; '[Workers] have to do whatever the boss asks them to do (student no. 68)'; '[Workers' jobs are] very tiring, and I always feel workers depend on bosses for a living (student no.77)'; 'Workers work for the boss, [and must be] obedient to the boss (student no.80).'

The rural migrant children also observed instances of injustice in the employment

relationship. Student no. 86, for example, recounted his mother's experience:

> '[Workers] are bullied [by the bosses], [who] hire workers and ask them to work. After that, [bosses] no longer take care of [the workers]... My mum has done woodwork every day for five or six months. But the boss [of the factory] does not pay her anything. [The boss] sold the products but paid nothing to workers… [My mum] keeps working there… [and so] did the other workers.'

Another girl (student no.78) mentioned an incident she had seen on TV:

> 'A man got hurt at work, but his boss would not pay him his wages and denied him any compensation. At last, the man went to the hospital himself and when he asked his boss to pay his wages, the boss ran away.'

Of the 324 questionnaire respondents, 56.2 percent reported that their parents sometimes or often told them about conflicts in the workplace, while 22 interviewees confirmed that they had seen or heard about unfair incidents happening to their parents or relatives. This implies that such labour rights violations were daily experiences lived by some migrant children; inequality and injustice in labour relations were so prevalent in migrant children' lives that awareness of their parents' class position was simply a part of their growing up.

Attribution of workers' inferior position

In the questionnaire, migrant children were presented with a scenario in which an imagined worker working in a shoe factory had a salary so low that he could barely feed his family and raise his child. The migrant children were asked to select one of five options as the primary reason for the adversities in this worker's life. The result

disclosed a conspicuous divide among the children, with close to half (46.6%) attributing the shoe worker's hardship to his 'not studying hard enough at school' and almost as many (46.1%) identifying 'the boss failing to pay enough' as the chief cause.[43] Individuals' qualifications and the employment relationship were seen as the top two reasons for workers' disadvantaged class position.

The interviewed children articulated the same two primary causes. First, over half of the 87 student interviewees attributed workers' being manual laborers to their earlier educational failures. As student no.19 from the migrant school said, 'workers' jobs are tough. [They end up being workers] because they didn't study well in school and have low educational attainment.' People without educational credentials were seen as unqualified for high-skilled jobs; thus, manual laborers were considered 'not as smart as their bosses (student no.86)' and 'uneducated (student no.69)' – or, as students no.31 and no.87 put it, 'workers do not have the [same ability as] the bosses, who use their minds' and 'if workers had done well in school, they would not have ended up doing manual jobs like [they do] now.' In other words, workers' education failure resulted in their being trapped in manual labour positions. Ultimately, in their view, the root cause of working-class' economic plight was their being limited to doing manual labour, which could be avoided by school success. Their responses placed the blame for class inequality squarely on the workers themselves.

The children also attributed workers' hardships to their employers; however,

[43] The other three options were "not working hard enough" (1.6%), "not obedient enough to the boss" (1.0%), and "not smart enough" (4.9%).

rather than blaming the exploitative employment regime *per se,* rural migrant children in this study saw two kinds of bosses – good ones and bad ones – blaming the latter for their poor treatment of employees and regarding workers as unlucky for having fallen into the hands of such bosses. From their perspective, workers could choose to change jobs until they were 'lucky enough' to find a good boss:

> 'Some bosses are really kind people… But there are some bosses who are rich but are really bad. They have so much money but are still mean to others.' (Student no.28, from the public school)
> 'Workers… can choose to work for you or not. They can decide to quit this job and work in another factory. At last, they will find a factory somewhere not like this place [with wage arrears and poor working conditions].' (Student no.54, from the migrant school)

Per their belief in the 'good boss' concept, wage arrears were deemed the result of employers' having a funding shortage. Accordingly, workers with wage arrears issues should understand their employers' difficulties and give them time to find money for their workers' wages:

> 'If the boss does not have money now, not receiving wages for a while is fine.' (Student no. 26, from the public school)
> 'It is definitely not because the boss does not want to pay workers' wages on time. It must be a fund shortage problem... They will pay the wage immediately when they have enough money.' (Student no.40, from the public school)

In short, the causes of the social injustices encountered by migrant workers were seen as individual factors. Placing blame on bosses' personal morals precluded criticisms of the systematically exploitive employment relationship. Workers ended up in manual labour jobs due to their personal schooling failure and it was only their own

bad luck if they came across 'bad bosses' who violated their labour rights. These migrant children developed an emerging interpretation of social classes that was overwhelmed by the ideology of meritocracy and individualism.

Worth noting also is the migrant children's strong sense of rural-urban distinction in urban society. According to student no.9, a girl from the migrant school, 'many people, like my neighbours, always say that the locals look down upon migrants, and bully them.' Once, she witnessed a man coming into her parents' convenient shop and begging for a free beer, because his boss had not paid anything to him for almost two months. Although 'he did not say whether he was local or migrant,' she believed the man was a rural migrant who was being bullied by his Beijing employer. Student no.78 angrily described having witnessed street peddlers being expelled from an area by a rude city inspector, even though the peddlers had done nothing wrong. The students' common experience of being marginalized in urban society reinforced their collective identity as migrants, highlighting local-migrant boundaries but clouding their burgeoning class awareness.

Possibility of changes

Seeing manual work as the root cause of poverty and inferiority, the children in this study rarely aspired to work as manual workers, which constituted majority of their parents' jobs. To some children, being a worker is shameful and a loss of face. As two boys from the public school replied in their interviews:

'If I finally do not have any other choices, I may be [a worker]...

> [Then,] I will keep my mouth shut, wear a mask … [I] do not want other people to see me [doing it].' (Student no.31)
> 'Being a worker, you may be looked down upon sometimes. And then, your friends may laugh at you when gathering together at a party.' (Student no.43)

Refusing to repeat their parents' paths, the rural migrant children stated they wanted to change their fate by working as professionals, company owners, and government officers—mental-work positions that would generally require university credentials (see Table 3).

<Table 3 here>

Conscious of the significance of education, rural migrant children presented a strong desire to pursue tertiary education and a firm belief in individual meritocracy. For instance, student no.15 shared:

> '[S]tudying is for our own future. Learning well can help me enter into the key point middle school, then key point high school, then first-class university … it will be easy for me to find a job with my university degree and get a high salary.'

From the survey, 65.9 percent of 308 students expected to enter a university in the future. These migrant children considered education a main avenue for changing their fate and avoiding reproducing what they saw as the pitiful, shameful lives led by their manual-labouring parents. However, over 30 percent of the survey respondents had lost hope of receiving a higher education, as early as in primary school, and instead planned to either enter the job market directly or attend vocational school after middle school.

In addition, migrant children hoped employers, particularly good ones, would

make the difference in their future, if they eventually join the manual worker troop. Their top strategies for success were 'enduring hardship' and 'pleasing employers through hard work.' Sometimes, 'accepting [wage arrears]' may not be enough; some students, like student no.83, said they would 'endure' [their] superior's hitting and cursing,' expecting 'the boss would trust us and be happy. If [the bosses] are pleased, they may promote us and raise our salaries.' Moreover, some migrant children expected their future employers to be open to negotiation on working conditions. Student no.77 imagined suggesting that her future boss set up a suggestion box to collect workers' views:

> 'After seeing lots of suggestions [on the same issue], the boss may know the problem and decide to increase [our] salary. [Otherwise], if [the boss] disagrees with our [wage] request and thinks we are dispensable [to the company], we cannot do anything but endure the hardship.'

These children imagined that their future employers could be persuaded to improve workers' employment conditions. Failing that, they stressed 'voting with their feet' as an alternative – i.e., leaving bad bosses in search of nice employers who would offer better treatment:

> 'If my boss failed to pay my salary on time, I think I would quit the job and seek another company.' (Student no.39, from the public school)
>
> '[Workers] can choose to work for you or not. They can decide not to do one job and to work for another factory. Eventually, they will find a better factory somewhere else.' (Student No. 54, from the migrant school)

The children's responses indicate that the bosses were the change makers, not the

workers. Thus, for some migrant children, getting fair treatment as workers or employees was not their goal; instead, they saw becoming bosses as the best way to change their fate. In interviews, 29 students mentioned having a 'boss dream'; for example, in describing his future, student no.48 said, 'I would like to open my own company… Actually, we all want to be the boss because the boss doesn't have to live a tough life.' The work done by 'the boss' was perceived to be the polar opposite of their parents' manual labour. Bosses would be 'sitting in the office' (student no.63), 'watching TV, drinking tea, making phone calls' (student no.35), 'signing [documents], then earning 10,000 *yuan'* (student no.36), or 'writing something or typing on the computer (student no.31),' while 'just collecting money and asking others to work for them (student no.68).' In the children's eyes, the boss was more powerful and smarter than the workers, but the 'boss dream' could only be realized through individuals' hard work.

The children placed high expectations on bosses; however, it would be wrong to assume they were ignorant of alternative resistance or bargaining strategies. They did mention other possible workers' reactions to labour conflicts, including slacking off while working (five students), violence and sabotage (nine students), and seeking help from lawyers and police (25 students). Nineteen students mentioned collective actions like strikes and protests, suggesting a budding awareness of collective actions among the migrant children. However, 37 of the 87 interviewed migrant children explicitly disapproved of striking for higher wages, because strikes cause troubles for 'good bosses' and irritate the 'bad ones':

> 'I think we should not go on [strike or protest]. Bosses have their reasons for not paying wages [on time], like a shortage of funds. If you go on a strike, you will add more burden to the employer…' (Student no. 40, from the public school)
>
> 'It is completely wrong [to request salary raise through strikes]. [B]ig bosses are always nice and generous. They will not be mean to [workers]. I will not participate in strikes.' (Student no.46, from the migrant school)

Some students even perceived workers' protests and strikes as 'violence' that 'disrupted' the social order and jeopardized public safety. This prevalent rejection of collective actions emphasizes the popular view among migrant children that workers owe their wellbeing to the mercy of their bosses and are dependent on them for their living. Their awareness of workers' constraints and dependence reinforced each other to encourage worker obedience and tolerance of injustices. Their rejection of workers' collective action revealed that the migrant students had yet to develop critical consciousness.

In sum, the migrant children subscribe firmly to the ideologies of individualism and meritocracy, which confirms the trend of rising individualization in China with personal efforts and self-reliance as its hallmarks.[44] Blaming on individual characteristics of workers or bosses, such individual discourses conceal the exploitative structure from the children's awareness.

Discussion: Family and school influences

The false consciousness presented by the children's responses might be disappointing

[44] Hansen 2013; Yan 2010.

but is by no means surprising. Rural migrant children have been naturally exposed to cases of labour exploitation and oppression by directly observing their parents, relatives as well as neighbours living in surrounding migrant communities; hence, they are aware of the unequal class relationship. However, knowing of the relationship is one thing; a critical analysis thereof is another. For critical consciousness to emerge, children need opportunities to access critical interpretations that debunk the myths of meritocracy and separate systematic exploitation from individual morality. Such opportunities are, unfortunately, scarce for or even entirely unavailable to rural migrant children. Instead, the dominant ideologies of individualism, meritocracy, and devaluation of physical labour prevail in their family and school environments.

At home, migrant parents' passive acceptance of their bosses' labour abuses – e.g., when student no. 86's mother saw her salary arrears as 'normal' and continued working – could send their children the message that workers are weak and have no choice but to swallow their bitterness and endure.[45] Workers' obedience is probably a carefully weighed action selected from limited alternatives; the costs of legal or collective action are too high for them to afford.[46] Unskilled or semi-skilled workers, situated at the bottom of the labour marker, are left to choose between salary arrears or no salary at all. The low efficacy of the migrant parents betrays the massive political and legal machineries behind the exploitative labour relations that force

[45] Chan and Siu, 2012; CLB 2012.
[46] CLB 2009.

labourers to 'voluntarily' accept unfair work terms. Through their passive attitude, the migrant parents pass along a strong sense of constraint to their children, eroding their children's self-efficacy from a young age.

Unlikely to change their own social positions, migrant workers, like many other Chinese parents, pin their hopes on their children.[47] Most rural migrant parents in this study had attained no more than a secondary education (79.3 percent for fathers; 82.8 percent for mothers), but made every effort to enrol their children in Beijing schools with the expectation that better education in cities, compared with rural areas, would allow their children to avoid reproducing their own paths to physical labour. The children confessed:

> '[Our parents] hope we study well. My parents want me to attend a good university and then find a good job, not work as hard as them.' (Student no.33, from the public school)
>
> 'My mum keeps telling me every night [that] I have to study well. Otherwise, I will be like mum and dad, doing hard manual labour.' (Student no.87, from the migrant school)

With no collective action in view, education is perhaps the best chance migrant children have.[48] Nevertheless, echoing previous research,[49] such parental expectations in this study affirmed the myth of meritocracy and prejudices against physical labour in the minds of migrant children.

Outside the family, schools play a pivotal role in shaping children's social consciousness.[50] The author has discussed elsewhere that teachers at the two case

[47] Kipnis 2001.
[48] Kim and Choi 2016.
[49] Lardier et al. 2019; Young 1958.
[50] Freire, 1970b, 1973.

schools approached inequality issues differently, but were all committed to the ideology that 'education changes destiny.'[51]

The public school was reluctant to address inequality topics with its students, as its principal thought 'children should grow up in a pure environment' and that the dark side of society should be filtered out of the formal school curriculum. Despite this good intention, teachers in the public school admitted it was impossible to entirely hide harsh social realities from the children. Occasionally, problems like wage arrears, public school exclusion, and protest among rural migrants were raised in school by the students themselves. Some teachers responded that these hardships were part of the cost of migration. Accepting marginalization and exploitation was articulated as a necessary sacrifice migrant workers had to make when choosing to come to Beijing. Again, many labour issues were viewed from the perspective of the migrant-local/rural-urban dichotomy. In general, the rural migrant children in the public school were unlikely to lend themselves to a critical analysis of their own lives.

In contrast, the migrant school's teachers were active in discussing inequality issues. Class teachers were encouraged to lead student discussions on topics like 'documents needed for public school enrolment in Beijing' and 'lack of Beijing student status in the school.' Unfortunately, the analyses were also dominated by the *hukou* discourse; for instance, the lesson on 'documents needed for public school enrolment in Beijing' centred exclusively on discriminatory government policies based on *hukou* identity, failing to note how unfair labour conditions constrained

[51] More details can be seen in 1st Author, 2020.

migrant families' capacities to obtain the documents. In both the public and migrant schools, students more readily adopted the rural-urban or local/non-local discourse for causal attribution.

Labour issues were rarely addressed in either school, save for a few exceptions in the migrant school. Once, a volunteer teacher took a special interest in migrant workers' labour conditions, sharing news with students about a series of worker suicides in Foxconn, a leading manufacturer of hand-held electronic devices in Asia. To his disappointment, the students were indifferent and asked why the workers had to work for others instead of starting their own businesses. The teacher had no good way to respond and so dropped the discussion. In other cases, some teachers used students' parents, who were small business owners, as positive examples to persuade the class to study hard. Although the migrant teachers in Beijing were found suffering from the same precarious, poor work conditions as rural migrant workers, they lacked the perspective of class either to analyse their own labour situation[52] or to enlighten the children. These cases indicate that the teaching force in general may be ill-prepared to address class issues in their teaching.

Further, both schools inculcated in students the hierarchical conception of occupations and emphasized education as the path to individual mobility. Good academic performance was perceived as the stepping-stone to decent, professional work in the future and an escape from manual labour. As one class teacher from the migrant school said in an interview:

[52] Friedman 2017.

> '[I said to my students] you can choose. Would you choose to study hard and then find an easy job, or would you want to get a manual labour job just like you parents'... You know, our poor children ... have to perform well. It is because education is our only way out. ... So, I said [to them], you have to work harder.'

Like the migrant parents, the teachers saw studying hard as the only conceivable way for migrant children to climb the social ladder, even though they knew only a token number of the migrant students would ever enter universities and white-collar professions.[53] When the students failed in their schooling, the teachers mostly blamed them for lacking effort or motivation[54], ignoring the subprime labour conditions that made it difficult for migrant parents to support their children's proper education. Thus, the tenet of educational meritocracy was a perfect self-sustaining teleology, effectively impeding the formation of a truly critical understanding of class inequality.

Family and school are the two most important institutions in shaping children's social consciousness. The false class consciousness held by the migrant children did not develop in a vacuum, but was deeply rooted in both the migrant families and the schools, as the above discussions attest.

Conclusions

The state of class consciousness of working class children has received hardly any attention in current China studies. This study has examined the class consciousness of rural migrant children who are soon to join their migrant parents and become 'China's

[53] Song, Zeng and Zhang 2016.
[54] More details were discussed in 1st Author 2020.

new workers'.[55]

The study shows that children in upper grades of primary school have already formed important constructs on social class. Living on the margins – both geographically and socially – of Beijing, many of the rural migrant children in this study observed their parents' and neighbours' sufferings, were sharp enough to identify the employment regime as the key mechanism of exploitation, and saw 'workers' and 'bosses' as the essential parties in labour conflicts. Even at their young age, they had already developed a sober awareness of the distinction between manual and mental labour and quite firmly subscribed to the superiority of the latter. These findings suggest the existence of a burgeoning class conscious in their young minds.

Rural migrant children also actively interpreted the adversities confronting their parents and fellow migrant workers, seeing educational failure as the main reason for workers falling into and being limited to physical labour. Moreover, the migrant children tended to attribute unjust employment relationships to the moral quality of individual bosses and workers' bad luck. In short, education, morals, and luck, rather than class structure *per se*, were considered the causes of workers' misfortune. Such attribution features self-blame and passive acceptance of inequalities as fate, making it unlikely the students would mobilize or take collective actions to improve their future employment relations. Indeed, many of the children rejected collective action, instead hoping that education will change their destiny. They saw workers as weak and dependent to their bosses' mercy to improve their lives; as such, they expected

[55] Lv, 2013; Song, Zeng, & Zhang, 2016; Woronov 2011.

their future bosses to be caring, open-minded, and willing to listen to workers' voices. Many admired the work and lifestyle of 'bosses' and dreamt of becoming one in the future. As Freire said, there is a duality in the oppressed mind, as oppressed people simultaneously submit themselves to the oppressor, while internalizing the image of the oppressor as their role model.[56] This is indeed the case with the migrant children under study. Their interpretations of the class-based inequality showed false consciousness overshadowed by individualism, meritocracy, and the duality of images.

These views are not plucked from the air, but rather are shaped by and emerge from the social milieu.[57] Educational meritocracy and prejudices against manual labour were strongly embraced by both the migrant families and the schools in this study. Nevertheless, labour issues were mostly left untouched in school, while the *hukou* discourse dominated school efforts to account for the injustices plaguing the migrant population. On those occasions when labour issues were discussed, teachers were ill-prepared to address them. Public school teachers try to remain "apolitical" while migrant school teachers, who hardly engage collective actions to fight for their own labour rights[58], are unlikely to introduce to the children a critical reading of the labour issues. It is evident that neither the children nor the adults and institutions

[56] Freire 1973.
[57] The fact that some migrant children succeeded in obtaining access to public schools indicates possible class stratification within the migrant population. Also, such class heterogeneity may be implied in the range of categories of parental occupations in both case schools shown in Table 2. This division within the migrant group further suggests the inadequacy of the *hukou* discourse as well as the necessity of the class perspective. Nevertheless, the current study fails to identify noticeable differences in class consciousness between migrant children in the public and the private migrant school, and among children with different parental occupations. We tend to explain this similarity by the overall political culture in the larger society that permeates into the education system and across all classes.
[58] Friedman 2017.

surrounding them had enough exposure to conceptual resources to form critical views of class issues.

The false consciousness found among the migrant children in this study reflects the overall political culture in Chinese society. On the one hand, with the rising culture of individualization, structural inequalities tend to be reduced to differences in personal efforts and qualities.[59] On the other hand, despite unprecedentedly large numbers of 'new workers' and increasing levels of class conflict, the vocabulary of class has ironically been muted,[60] replaced by differences in identity[61] in the public media, educational institutions, and even among the working class itself.[62] Identity politics of *hukou* is prominent in China's political culture and blocks people from seeing the deeper, more covert exploitation intrinsic to capitalist labour regimes. Migrant children' lack of critical consciousness results from the paucity of China's larger political culture. Thus, it is imperative to move beyond the identity politics of *hukou* and reinsert the class perspective into scholarship on rural migrant population in China.

[59] Hansen 2013; Yan 2010.
[60] Pun and Chan 2008.
[61] Lu 2004; Qiu and Zhao 2013; Shi, Xiuyin and Xu 2005.
[62] CLB 2009; Pun et al. 2009.

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Table 1. Dimensions of social consciousness construction based on Freire's false/critical consciousness theory

Dimensions	False Consciousness	Critical Consciousness
Awareness	Consciousness of inevitability (fatalistic attitude; taken for granted)	Awareness of problematic situation
Attribution	Meritocracy (without questioning the structural constraints, self-blaming) Mystification of reality (everyone is free to make choices)	Consciousness of resistance (questioning the social order)
Self-efficacy	Fear of freedom/change (lack of self-confidence, reliance upon others not themselves to make change)	Belief in transformation (being confident in making changes) Consciousness of autonomy (being confident in initiating changes)
Intended action	Belief in adaptation (compliance) Meritocracy (individual efforts) Duality in the oppressed mindset Culture of silence (endurance and no resistance)	Sense of social responsibility (taking actions) Belief of collective power (initiating/participating in collective actions)

Table 2. Demographic information of student questionnaire respondents

		Migrant School	Public School
Gender	Female	11.1%	24.4%
	Male	22.8%	41.0%
Place of birth	Beijing	9.0%	13.6%
	Outside Beijing	24.7%	51.2%
Years in Beijing[a]	2 years and below	6.5%	0.3%
	2 ~ 7 years	11.4%	11.4%
	Over 8 years	14.2%	50.9%
Family monthly income[b]	Below 3000 RMB	11.1%	16.0%
	3000 ~ 5000 RMB	10.8%	29.0%
	Over 5000 RMB	10.5%	18.5%
Father's occupation	Company owners	0%	4.0%
	Managerial position	1.5%	4.3%
	Professional employees [c]	3.4%	14.2%
	Manual workers	**13.3%**	**16.7%**
	Self-employed occupations[d]	**9.9%**	**22.5%**
	Unemployed	4.0%	1.2%
Mother's occupation	Company owners	0%	0.9%
	Managerial position	0.3%	2.2%
	Professional employees	2.8%	18.5%
	Manual workers	8.3%	11.7%
	Self-employed occupations	8.6%	9.6%
	Unemployed	**10.5%**	**20.4%**
Total (324 students)		**110 (34.0%)**	**214 (66.0%)**

Notes. [a] The data for this question maybe show discrepancies from the actual length of time they spent in Beijing (probably higher than the real data).

[b] Student interviews revealed that the income of parents doing self-employed occupations usually fluctuates steeply in reality.

[c] Professional employees include highly educated professionals, technicians, and skilled workers.

[d] Self-employed occupations refer to as people who are not involved in a formal, traditional employer-employee relationship, and being self-employed, such as small business owners, street peddlers, individual-contracting workers, garbage collectors and so forth.

Table 3. Student interviewees' expectations of future occupation

Occupational Category	Student percentage
Company owners	10.4%
Company managers	3.4%
Government staff	6.7%
Professional employees	52.8%
Skilled workers (clerical support workers; service and sales workers)	12.0%
Manual workers	3.0%
Self-employed occupations	1.9%
Haven't thought /decided	10.0%
Total	100% (269 students)