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Review of Minhua Ling's *The Inconvenient Generation: Migrant Youth Coming of Age on Shanghai's Edge* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019)

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Drawing on multiyear ethnographic research, Minhua Ling offers an incisive account of the segmented inclusion and unequal citizenship facing millions of migrant youths in fast-changing Shanghai. She explains the historical and institutional factors that shape the “in-betweenness” of migrant youth (p. 16), who are caught in the deep divide between aspiration and reality in late socialism. Specifically, despite the ongoing reform of China’s migration policy, internal migrants continue to be considered “peasant workers” in formal classification. This second or even third generation of youths—“the inconvenient generation,” as Ling calls them—is condemned to live with shifting structures of inequality from childhood to adulthood, making for an uncertain transience.

The book opens with a stunning scene of “noncitizens” in cosmopolitan Shanghai. Without a fixed home address, long-settled migrant families, along with other nonlocals, cluster in cheaply rented quarters on the city’s margin. There, even basic amenities are unavailable. Door-to-door express delivery services are not possible, and not even government administrators care to pay a visit. In such an unregistered place, working-class migrants flexibly incorporate public spaces into private use, yet their creative making of an informal economy further reinforces the image of chaos, uncivility, and social disorganization that surrounds them.

Not all of the fifty migrant households that Ling has carefully studied over the past decade are pitifully poor. They are heterogeneous, comprising recycling collectors, street vendors, and micro-entrepreneurs. Rural-to-urban migration can be understood as a strategy to achieve upward mobility, but many still fail to transgress the sociocultural boundaries that separate them from becoming qualified urban citizens. In Shanghai, as in many megacities, the municipality has tightened rules to combat the overpopulation problem amid rapid urbanization. As rural “Others,” migrant traders and service providers are indispensable for fueling the city’s growth and its economic transformation. However, they are also considered undesirable subjects with low “human quality,” designated as the “low-end” population in official terminology. They risk being evicted by the public security, who strive to maintain “social order” and protect the welfare entitlements of the Shanghainese. As Ling makes clear, the tiered citizenship regime in Shanghai has not been dismantled but is instead being reinforced in a more polarized society.

Ling’s perceptive understanding of Shanghai’s durable inequality takes her into the heart of the contemporary Chinese education system. Since the late 2000s, Shanghai has been among the pioneers bringing migrant students to public middle schools. For the first time, rural migrants can enjoy equal learning opportunities as their urban counterparts. Yet, upon looking closer, Ling reveals that nonelite schools—let alone highly reputable elite schools—are only partially open to migrant teens whose parents possess stable jobs and incomes. Further down the road, migrant candidates are channeled into semiskilled manufacturing and service sector jobs by the visible

hands of the state, as they are not permitted to take the national university entrance exam in the city in which they live.

The rightful claim to fair education, as advocated by aspiring students in chapter after chapter, is not realized. Fundamentally, both employers and the government are interested in recruiting low-cost, moderately trained youthful labor from the pool of middle school and vocational school graduates to drive the economy. In this sense, segmentation does not take place in the job market but at a much earlier stage at school, a key site of social stratification.

Based on longitudinal and multisite research, Ling further reveals the profound contradictions confronting the migrant students, particularly those who were born and raised in Shanghai. Their “return” to their registered hometowns to try to test into a tier-one university turns out to be extremely difficult. To many emigrant youths who have adapted to urban consumption and city lifestyles, the socioeconomic and cultural “backwardness” in the countryside is intolerable, alienating, and agonizing. Before long, many move back to periurban Shanghai. Between rural and urban spheres, this post-1990 cohort of migrant youth struggles to find a place to which they can belong.

Importantly, the book closes with cautious optimism about the resilience and agency of liminal migrant subjects. Through useful networks of their peers, parents, schools, and nongovernmental organizations, a score of migrant interviewees successfully pursued their higher education at home and abroad, got access to meaningful internships, built their careers, married, and had children. But the institutional barriers are insurmountable for many. In Shanghai, as in other global cities outside China, migratory lives are invariably precarious. The state’s development plan often preserves the rights and interests of the privileged class while perpetuating the plights of the old and new generation of migrants. The deprivation of full citizenship rights to all is inherently a source of sociopolitical instability and economic injustice.

By skilfully interweaving qualitative data with fresh analysis, Ling invites readers to reflect on the long-standing mechanisms of social inequality and their direct impact on the people. Young migrants’ responses, or their “social edginess,” as Erik Harms described it (p. 14), must be multidimensional. The target of mobilization should not be confined to the state but must also address capital, which has forcefully pushed migrant laborers and other marginal groups out of the highly commodified housing market and privatized social and educational service sectors.