Self-abandonment or seeking an alternative way out: Understanding Chinese rural migrant children's resistance to schooling

This study explores the complexity of school resistance by Chinese rural migrant children (RMC), which may contribute to their educational failure, as well as the school conditions informing their resistance. This study categorizes migrant children's school resistance into three patterns, based on their rationale for school behaviors: conformist learner, education abandoner, and nascent transformative resister. All three groups were initially believers in pursuing academic success for upward social mobility, as promoted at school. However, some gradually determined such educational pursuit was untenable and became education abandoners. Teachers' predicting RMC's academic failure and highlighting the individual's responsibility for that failure contributed to that abandonment. While findings of this study indicate that migrant children may develop transformative resistance, this possibility is challenged by the dominant ideology of meritocracy and a teaching agenda that legitimizes social inequality.

Keywords: rural migrant children; student resistance; educational failure; schooling; China

Introduction

Since the late 1980s, the breakup of communes in rural China has released surplus labor from the land (Lin 2006). Because of the rapid urbanization, industrialization, and significant economic success in urban areas, unprecedented numbers of rural people have flocked to cities seeking work, creating an extensive urban manual labor force (Chan and Pun 2010; Shi 2010; F. Wang 1998). By 2016, the total population of rural migrant workers[1] in China had reached 281.71 million (NBSC 2017). Yet, because of the *hukou* (household registration 户口) system[2], these rural migrants are deemed 'non-local' or 'rural residents' in urban areas, effectively excluding them from the urban welfare system, including public education for their children (Lai et al. 2014).

In 2010, there were an estimated 35.81 million migrant children (aged 17 or younger) in China (AWF 2013). Researchers have found migrant children are more likely to fail in their schooling, and to be tracked into vocational schools[3] or directly into the manual labor market (M. Li 2015; Ling 2015; Song, Zeng and Zhang 2017). This phenomenon has drawn public attention, leading to increased research into the

reasons for migrant children's academic failure. Previous studies have mainly blamed China's *hukou* system for the difficulties rural migrant children (RMC) facing in accessing urban schooling and their being forced to attend private migrant schools (Chen and Feng 2013; Kwong 2011; Lai et al. 2014; N. Li and Placier 2015). Some researchers have recently argued that migrant children also play an active role in reproducing their migrant parents' low social-economic status, through resisting schooling (Xiong 2015; Zhou 2011). However, few studies have examined the complexity of migrant children's resistance, especially the complex meanings embedded in resistant behaviors, which are essential for understanding student agency (Giroux 1983; Lanas and Corbett 2011). This article bridges this research gap.

Literature Review

Education for Rural Migrant Children: A Loop of Social Reproduction

Migrant children have lately become a significant component of the child population in urban areas. This is especially true in such megacities as Beijing and Shanghai, in which around 30% and 40%, respectively, of the child population are migrants (AWF 2013). However, despite their numbers, RMC have long faced unequal access to the

public education system in cities and have mainly been fated to reproduce their parents' migrant working-class status (Chen and Feng 2013; Lai et al. 2014; N. Li and Placier 2015; Song, Zeng and Zhang 2017; Lu Wang 2008; Wu 2010). As of 2010, an estimated 31% of school-aged RMC were excluded from public schools in cities (NCP 2014) and forced to attend poorly maintained (and mostly illegal), low-quality private migrant schools in cities or return to their hometown for education (Lihua Wang and Holland 2011; Woronov 2004). Previous studies have found that while migrant children in private migrant schools might outperform their rural counterparts, they were in turn outperformed by their urban peers who received public schooling (Chen and Feng 2013; Lai et al. 2014). Thus, many researchers have criticized the *hukou* system for putting RMC at a disadvantage in educational competition with their urban peers.

However, recent research has shown that RMC play an active role in engineering their academic failure. Some researchers have noted that most RMC present rebellious behaviors at school, such as dropping out, being disruptive in the classroom, and showing little desire to learn (Xiong 2015; Zhou 2011). Even those

who study hard, Xiong (2015) discovered, often give up on pursuing academic learning in higher grades after seeing the barriers to their social mobility. This small body of literature goes beyond blaming the *hukou* system and highlights the mutual interaction between RMC and the broader social structure. However, in previous studies, RMC seemed to push themselves away from mainstream schooling, thus ensuring their future reproduction of the migrant working class. There is still a dearth of studies exploring the role of schooling in incubating such self-defeating resistance.

Student Resistance to Schooling

Social and cultural reproduction theorists have discussed extensively how schooling contributes to social reproduction rather than social mobility, with working-class students being tracked to working-class jobs and socialized to accept political and economic arrangements determined by the dominant class (Anyon 1980; Apple 1979; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Lareau 1987). However, the deterministic structuralism of reproduction theories has been challenged for simplifying the dynamics between student agency and the wider society (Giroux 1981; Levinson and Holland 1996).

Resistance theories perceive students as active agents who construct their meanings of social life, rather than passive recipients of the knowledge and ideologies selected by and legitimated in their schooling (Alpert 1991; Giroux 1983; MacLeod 1987; Munns and McFadden 2000; Willis 1977). Willis (1977) found, in his study of English working-class students, that certain students ('lads') resisted mainstream schooling by interrupting the class, showing negative attitudes towards learning and teachers, and eventually withdrawing from school to take up working-class jobs. This counter-school culture, intersecting with their internalized masculinity of working-class culture, was the 'lads'' means of rejecting a school system that is de facto reproducing the existing social structure (Willis 1977). Moreover, as Fordham and Ogbu (1986) discovered when studying African-American students, performance problems may stem not only from resistance to the limited opportunity structure of schooling that prevents disadvantaged students' upward social mobility, but also from the burden of learning to act like their white peers.

Recent researchers have highlighted the complexity of student resistance (Kipnis 2001a; Lanas and Corbett 2011; Solorzano and Bernal 2001). Solorzano and

Bernal (2001) categorized Chicana/o students' oppositional behaviors into four types. The first type, *reactionary behavior*, involved students' engaging in disruptive behaviors at school "just for kicks" or "to see the teacher sweat" (Solorzano and Bernal 2001, 317), rather than to enact a real resistance and make changes to their social conditions. The second and third types are traditional, previously-discovered forms of student resistance: *self-defeating resistance* and *conformist resistance* (MacLeod 1987; Willis 1977). The former refers to students holding a critique of the school system, but their resistant behaviors (e.g. dropping out) eventually facilitate their further oppression rather than transforming the oppressive conditions. Students' pursuit of improvements motivates conformist resisters to follow current societal rules; however, without critiques of social oppression, they are likely to blame themselves and their underprivileged families for their eventual failure. Although some resisters may achieve upward social mobility, conformist resistance will not lead to greater social justice.

The fourth type, *transformational resistance*, is stimulated by both students' critique of social oppression and their desire for social justice (Giroux 1983;

Solorzano and Bernal 2001). However, this type of resistance need not always involve overt behaviors, such as boycotts and demonstrations, that externally resist the norms and values embedded in school culture. Some students appear to perform internal transformational resistance, conforming to the mainstream school culture while consciously pursuing a social justice agenda; for instance, a student may commit to learning and pursuing higher education, but may plan to devote his or her professional skills to the community in the future as a teacher or a lawyer (Solorzano and Bernal 2001). Lanas and Corbett (2011) further discovered that, although student agency may appear to challenge the school system, children have other underlying goals than social justice, such as psychological restoration to survive the school, the need of trust relationships with teachers, and pursuit of knowledge in the long run. These studies, therefore, suggest the significance of being sensitive to the diverse meanings that students give to their behaviors.

As researchers have argued, student resistance emerges from the discrepancy between norms and values carried by marginalized children and the meritocracy legitimated in their schooling (Alpert 1991; Conchas and Vigil 2010; Hendrickson

2012; Lanas and Corbett 2011; Munns and McFadden 2000; Willis 1977). Santoro and Forghani-Arani (2015) further revealed how the ideologies of school curricula and teaching practices could shape Muslim girls' cultural values as resistance to schooling. Moreover, Hendrickson (2012) discovered that rural American children's resistance to the school system and negative attitude towards pursuing higher education were both primarily to please their parents, who preferred their children not to leave their rural homes.

Nevertheless, Chinese society differs in that Chinese people believe, in common, schooling has a role in realizing upward social mobility, which may explain why Chinese students are less opposed to schooling that reproduces social inequalities than are their peers in Western countries (Kipnis 2001a, 2001b). Lou (2011) suggested it was students' perceptions of social problems in their surroundings (the downside of urbanization in her study) that stimulated rural youth in China to rethink their relationship to schooling, rather than their questioning of the rural-urban divide reproduced by schooling.

Beyond promoting meritocracy, while recognizing problematic surroundings and marginalized children's cultures as content critical to the learning process, the school system could also serve to lead children to analyze and understand social realities critically, and to take transformative actions (Chavarria 2017; Freire, 1970, 1973). To that end, mutual open dialogues between teachers and students are essential (Chavarria 2017; Freire 1973; Santoro and Forghani-Arani 2015).

The extant literature thus implies the importance of exploring the diverse forms and meanings of student resistance within the dynamic interactions between student agency and the school. However, few studies have explored Chinese RMC's diversity and the possibility of presenting resistance with a critique of social inequality, which is the focus of this study. This study tackles two main research questions: (1) Are there different forms of RMC's resistance to schooling; and, (2) How is RMC's resistance shaped within the schooling process?

Methods

Qualitative investigations were conducted in two primary schools in the Sun District (pseudonym) of Beijing from June 2014 to January 2015. Beijing was selected as the

research site due to its high RMC population. In 2014, the number of migrant children receiving compulsory education in Beijing exceeded 0.47 million, representing 41.7% of the city's student population at the compulsory education level (BMBS 2015). Moreover, due to Beijing's high requirements for migrant children's public school access[4], RMC in Beijing may be more aware of the unjust rural-urban differentiation and social oppression they face. In 2010, nearly 95,000 RMC were disqualified from public school access and instead had to attend private migrant schools in Beijing (NCP 2014).

In this study, one private migrant school, pseudonymously named Heart School (HS), and one public school, pseudonymously named Card School (CS), were selected for data collection. HS is in a predominantly migrant community located far from Beijing's city center. It is an unlicensed private migrant school that is mainly opposed, rather than supported, by the local education authority. Only around one-quarter of private migrant schools (56 out of 239 in 2006) were granted a school license from the Beijing Education Committee (BEC 2005; BMG 2006). Only licensed ones could receive student subsidies from district education committees,

while unlicensed ones received nothing but threats of closure. With a non-profit nature, HS keeps a low student tuition fee but still relies heavily on this income for survival. In this study, HS was selected for its non-governmental organization (NGO) background. It was established by an NGO committed to serving migrant workers and promoting migrant working-class culture in Beijing. Thus, HS is expected to present illustrations of social realities and societal beliefs from a more critical perspective than that in mainstream public schools.

CS is an ordinary public school located in the same district as HS. In the 2013–2014 school year, 90.1% of CS's 960 students were migrants. Like all the other public schools in Beijing, CS is fully supported and supervised by the local education authority administratively, financially and academically[5]; therefore, CS's school conditions are much better than those of HS and many other licensed private migrant schools.

This research is mainly based on semi-structured interviews with students and teachers and classroom observations in the two schools. School principals were consulted before data collection began. Consent forms for all teachers, fifth- and

sixth-graders and their parents were distributed to solicit their participation. Of the 388 distributed parental consent forms, 382 were returned signed; 11 class teachers in fifth- and sixth- grades (eight in CS and three in HS) agreed to participate in classroom observations.

Thirty-one lessons (nine in HS and 22 in CS) and eight class meetings (four in each case school) were observed and audio-recorded. Field notes were taken during or immediately after the observations on four issues: teacher-student interactions, peer interactions, student behaviors, and teachers' reactions to student misbehaviors.

Students could participate in individual or two- to six-person group interviews; the latter type was based on students' preferred co-interviewees. In total, 87 fifth- and sixth-grade RMC (between 10 and 12 years of age[6]) participated in interviews (seven individual and 25 group interviews) (see Table 1). Interviews were conducted at school during breaks, PE lessons, and self-study sessions. Individual interviews lasted around 45 minutes; group interviews lasted from 60 to 90 minutes, depending on group size[7].

[Table 1 here]

As for this study, individual interview data with twenty-three teachers (11 from HS and 12 from CS) were analyzed, including five in managerial positions (one in HS), 12 class teachers (six in each school) and six subject teachers (four in HS); three were male teachers (all from HS); eight with less than three years' teaching experience (six in HS), and eight with over ten years' teaching experience (one in HS). All teacher interviewees from CS were Beijing locals, while ten out of 11 HS teacher interviewees were migrants. Each teacher was interviewed once or twice in-depth, with each interview lasting 60–90 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Chinese and then translated into English afterwards.

Results

Rural Migrant Children's School Resistance

Three patterns of RMC's school behavior emerged from the analysis of interview data and observations: *conformist learner*, *education abandoner*, and *nascent transformative resister*. These patterns were not absolutes, and RMC might change categories while interacting with the school system.

Conformist Learner

Most, if not all, RMC under study had strong expectations of bettering their and their families' futures through individual efforts. A *conformist learner* is someone for whom pursuing education is the preferred means of achieving this desired betterment. Xi, for example, a sixth-grade male CS student, was one of the top students in teacher Ting's class. Too active to be ignored, Xi volunteered an answer every time Ting raised a question. Xi clearly expressed high educational expectations in his interview, saying 'studying well can help me enter a key point middle school, then a key point high school, then a first-class university' and eventually a Master's program. He believed a high-level educational credential would command a high salary in the labor market, meaning a bright future for him.

Other RMC offered similar replies, but not all were top students. For instance, Hui and Yu, two fifth-grade female students from HS teacher Rang's class, stated that studying hard to get admitted to university was crucial for their future; as such, they believed they should 'listen to the teacher, and learn the knowledge taught in class carefully'. Yet, both found study difficult and lessons barely understandable. Even

teachers' repeated explanations did not help them improve. Ultimately, Yu said, 'the class teacher [Rang] said he has taught [this one point] many times. So stop asking!' Seeking help from classmates was not an option since many of them were in a similar position. Therefore, they usually ranked in the middle or even below in their class and were reproved for being unable to answer the teacher's questions; however, they still listened carefully in class, took notes, and wrote exercises. Yu commented, in a depressed tone, 'If I do not study hard [*haohao xuexi* 好好学习], I will be like [my and my fellow migrants'] father[s]'. To most RMC in this study, studying hard was the final straw at which to clutch to avoid a future of manual labor.

Education Abandoner

However, many RMC did not feel they were capable of achieving educational success and so were less inclined to pursue it. Some became *education abandoners,* dismissing education as irrelevant to their future betterment. Miao, a male HS sixth-grader from teacher Yung's class, sat at the back of the class and always failed his exams (i.e., scored under 60 out of 100 points). When observing Yung's class, I noticed the following: when Yung delivered the lesson upfront, Miao chatted, played,

or even fought with nearby friends, acting as if the class had nothing to do with him. When Yung found Miao's disruptive behaviors intolerable and disciplined him, Miao sometimes responded with crude language and discourtesy. Some other education abandoners performed less aggressive than Miao. They commonly whispered with friends, played with their belongings, read storybooks, slept, or merely stared into space. Some student interviewees stated they just 'pretended to be listening to the teacher in class, but we were not learning anything.'

What these education abandoners resisted was not the learning process, the school system, or even the teacher. Education abandoners like Miao and Ge (HS female sixth-grader) were similar to Hui and Yu from conformist learner group, in that all four believed in the significance of educational pursuit but found learning highly difficult; as Miao said, 'Going to university—I want it too... [but] sometimes if you cannot perform well in exams, you just cannot go'. Also, Miao did not deliberately disturb the class; as long as the teacher left him alone, he would leave the teacher and others in class alone. In fact, Miao was even helpful when it came to helping teachers discipline others and cleaning up the campus. However, they were

also different in that, while Hui and Yu persisted in their educational pursuit, Miao's and Ge's self-efficacy in achieving academic success was reduced, and they perceived their hopes of pursuing higher education as gradually extinguishing. Ge once told me that, before transferring to HS from her hometown school (in the fourth grade), she felt 'learning is useless' and was 'not interested in learning at all'. Though she changed her mind somewhat and started paying attention in her Chinese class (*yuweke* 语文课) after joining Yung's class, she barely scored 60% on any subject in the sixth-grade mid-term exam; 'I have no idea what my math teacher [Yung] was talking about', she said to me during a ten-minute break after one math lesson, then added, 'Sometimes, I still have the dream of going to university. However, on the second thought, I feel disheartened... because I do not study well'.

Upon education abandonment, they began searching for alternative opportunities to advance their future social positions. Miao knew going to university could help him 'become a boss [and help him to] walk my way out of peasant life and towards the city life', but he felt that he had little possibility of succeeding in school education. Thus, his best option, he felt, was to 'work as a worker at first, [to] earn

and save some money. Then open my own company, [and] become the boss myself'. He believed that 'for those not good at studying, they can take time and work hard for their future. Although it would be slow, they might still eventually succeed'. As for Ge, she would stay at school for a few years more waiting to be 'old enough to be independent'. Then she 'will leave my parents' custody and work alone'. In her case, staying at school was no longer for learning; instead, it was waiting for the right time to leave for work. Enduring hardship and individual hard work in a manual labor position then became an alternative strategy for education abandoners to attain future social improvement.

Nascent Transformative Resister

Many RMC in this study had already shown their awareness of social inequalities. Indeed, it was hard for them not to, as inequality was a daily experience in their lives. Ge's mother had earlier personally experienced a wage arrear issue. Xin, a fifth-grade female student from CS, narrated a similar story in the group interview:

> There was a man, bare-armed, coming to my parents' [convenience] shop one night. He wanted to buy a bottle of beer. It costs seven RMB [around 1 dollar].

> However, he did not have money. He was beaten up by his boss... He worked in Beijing for two months. His boss should have paid him 3,000 RMB. However, he received nothing, just the boss's cursing... My dad gave him a beer, and just let him go.

Their stories showed that many migrant children in this study have already perceived inequality and injustice in their daily lives. Conformist learners, therefore, chose to study hard for a university degree so that they could find better jobs, earn a higher salary, and improve the living conditions of the whole family. Education abandoners, by contrast, gave up pursuing academic success and decided to enter the labor market as long-game players. Both were searching for opportunities for self-improvement to the best of their ability but lacked a social justice agenda.

Yet, a small group of migrant children in HS were found to present the potential of developing transformational resistance. HS student Le (male sixth-grader) is an example. He was one of the students sometimes chatting, playing, and (maybe) fighting with Miao, but he had not wholly given up on his academic learning. Le believed that 'we acquire knowledge and ability here at school'; therefore, 'studying is the only way that we can go outside, from villages to cities'. Le was not the first

interviewee expecting to work as a government officer. However, he was the only one mainly saying that he wanted to be the one supervising the Education Bureau. So, I asked him why. However, he was a bit shy and remained silent at first. Then, his co-interviewee Miao struck up a conversation about this with him, which helped me understand his reasoning further:

> Miao: What about those students with no student status [xueji 学籍]?
>
> Le (nodding his head): They do not have student status and cannot go to school [public school] ... we are just like them, have nowhere [to go] for schooling.
>
> Miao: Then you have to be the head of the Education Bureau.

Le's aim of pursuing a position at the Education Bureau was not merely to improve his living conditions. Instead, it was one step towards a further agenda of changing the education policy for RMC, so that other RMC need not face the same dilemma as he does. Another two HS male students from the same fifth-grade class, Yang and Hao, also shared their dreams of becoming their own bosses through studying hard and their initial agenda of changing the working conditions of those under their authority: '[after becoming a boss] I will treat [those who work for me] well (Hao); [I will not make] them do very exhausting work (Yang)'. These children's educational

aspirations with a social justice agenda to benefit others indicated they were developing the type of internal transformational resistance, as defined in Solorzano and Bernal's study (2001).

Nevertheless, the reason for considering them as only nascent resisters is that they still seem confused about who or what is to blame for social inequalities and how to act; it remains uncertain, therefore, whether their transformative resistance will flower or wither. Le was worried that he would feel lonely if he were to return, alone, to his hometown for middle school and have to care for himself without his parents. Yet, he did not blame the local government's political choices for his future separation from his parents: 'There are too many migrants here. Also, state leaders cannot expel Beijing people [from Beijing]'. Putting aside whether Le will realize his dream, this perception may weaken his determination to making changes to education policy even if he does manage his stated goal.

As for Yang and Hao, while they aimed to improve workers' working conditions after becoming the bosses, their top priority was still to avoid manual labor work and achieve their own social improvement. Yang also expressed, 'the boss is the

upper class (*shangdengren* 上等人), and the workers are the underclass (*xiadengren* 下等人)'; as he perceived the boss-worker relationship as one between superiors and inferiors, it is difficult to say whether he would, in the future, persist in his transformative intention to alter this perceived oppressed relation or merely take it for granted.

The Influence of Schooling on Student Resistance

This study reveals the influence of schooling in affecting and reinforcing migrant children's forms of resistance from three aspects. First, the school's emphasis on the significance of education for migrant children's future pursuit reinforced children's belief in a meritocracy. Second, there is cultural support at school for RMC's educational abandonment that encourages them to seek out an alternative path outside of schooling. Third, while teacher-student discussions about social oppressions rural migrants facing in urban society could benefit students' development of transformative resistance, this is challenged by school's dominant ideology of meritocracy and a teaching agenda that legitimizes social inequality.

Emphasis on the Significance of Education

Teachers in both schools emphasized the significance of education in providing a better future for students. CS teachers perceived that one of their key roles was to convince students to attach more significance to academic studies and pursue tertiary education. As class teacher Li emphasized, 'it is important for us teachers to encourage [students] to focus on their learning... [We] need to explain to them that [learning] is important for their future'. Most HS teachers perceive the same. HS class teacher Rang has discussed with his fifth-grade students differences in working and living conditions between well-educated (i.e. doctors, researchers, and office clerks) and poorly-educated people (i.e. garbage collectors, street fruit traders, and construction workers), to encourage them to study hard to 'find a decent job, and to avoid a manual labor job like their parents'. In this discourse, studying hard to achieve academic success became imperative for RMC to pursue their desirable future.

Cultural Support for Education Abandonment

While teachers shared with students the benefits of pursuing academic success, they also emphasized students' individual responsibility for their academic results. For example, CS class teacher Chun analyzed reasons for her fifth-grade students' low academic performance, noting they 'did not attach enough attention to academic learning'. Also, I observed that most students were not listening to HS class teacher Na's math lessons. Na seemed to neglect this and continued teaching. Teacher-student interactions only took place between Na and several students sitting in the front rows. She explained later that 'most of my students just do not learn... [so] I only focus on [some students] who follow my lessons and who understand what I am teaching'; as to other students who do not learn, Na once advised Rang in the office to 'just leave them alone'.

Moreover, many teachers predicted their migrant students' academic failure. As HS teacher Rang commented:

> [O]nly a few students in my class show an active attitude towards learning, and only they can go to the university... most students here [in HS] will be like their [migrant] parents.

Also, CS teacher Xia (sixth-grade, class teacher), who has 17 years' teaching experience, replied:

> [W]ith four classes of [my] graduates, a part of them went back to their hometown ... however, a lot of them stayed in Beijing attending vocational schools and then worked later ... After all, most of them did not perform well in academic studies.

Teachers' prediction of students' academic failure, intersecting with the emphasis on students' responsibility for such failure in schooling, constructed the cultural support for RMC's self-blaming for personal academic failure and eventual educational abandonment.

Nevertheless, in contrast to CS teachers, HS teachers tended to express explicitly their low educational expectation to students. Teacher Na suggested to her students that 'maybe you are just not good at learning. However, you can be good at doing manual tasks (*laodong* 劳动)'. Yung also told her students that she did not expect all of them to attend university in the future. As this cultural support is particularly explicit in HS, students there showed a higher tendency to become educational abandoners than CS students.

Teacher's Explanation for Social Inequality

This study discovered that initiating open dialogues on social realities to incubate migrant children's transformative resistance, while not impossible, was challenging to achieve in the current schooling situation. In CS, reducing social conflicts and maintaining social harmony were considered significant roles of schooling. Thus, rural migrants' oppressive social conditions and the problems facing the working class were not often challenged, nor were the reasons for them well explained at school. As CS principal Qiao noted, 'we do not have to ... reinforce these things. If the school does so, we may create new contradictions for the society'; although the school itself was essential 'a small society', social problems — as the downside of society — needed to be filtered out of the schooling to present students a 'healthier and more positive image of society'.

Teachers could hardly avoid questions from migrant children. CS teacher Ling mentioned one student asking, in her Ideology and Morality (*sixiang pinde* 思想品德) lesson, about the reasons for restrictions on car purchase and limited access to the social welfare system that migrants face in Beijing. Ling said, she replied the student:

> You cannot allow... all the people to come to Beijing... Beijing is just this size, but its population is increasing dramatically like an almost blown-out balloon.

Besides, some CS teachers, as Beijing locals themselves, present an individualistic ideology in reasoning about rural migrants' social disadvantages. For instance, teacher Ting said that she explained the issue to her students in this way:

> You [migrants] choose to live in a comfortable environment [in Beijing] and to strive for yourself. So, working hard and enduring hardships are quite common. You [migrants] should not complain about the bitterness ... No one begged you to come to Beijing. It was your decision.

Many of HS teachers also cited similar reasons for rural migrants' social inequalities. Teacher Yung had told the class why policy for rural migrants seemed unfriendly: 'Too many migrants here [in Beijing] ... if you [students would] stand in the shoes of the government, you will choose the same'. These cases imply that teachers tended to legitimize migrants' social disadvantages as a reasonable result of city development and the inevitable situation arising from their personal choice of moving to an urban area.

Nevertheless, HS was different, in that it also had a small group of teachers to problematize rural migrants' social disadvantages in schooling. Supported by principal Xiao, HS replaced the original Ideology and Morality subject with a Social Studies course (*shehui ke* 社会课), taught in all classes from third to sixth grade. This course aims to encourage migrant children to understand rural migrants' life experiences better, so they can reflect upon the social problems they either have faced or will face in society. For instance, principal Xiao held a regular discussion for students on the topic, how to obtain the *jieduzheng* (transient study permit 借读证) in Beijing, discussing the role of the local government in creating unequal school access for migrant children. Besides, teacher Pang shared with his sixth-grade students the story of suicidal migrant workers in Shenzhen. He highlighted employers' responsibility towards taking good care of employees in terms of their salary, social welfare, and working and living conditions, noting that it was something most employers failed to do. Such kinds of confrontation of social inequality in HS might help students develop a critical understanding of social oppression, which could explain the discovery of nascent transformative resisters in HS rather than in CS.

However, HS's school agenda of developing migrant children's critical understandings were constrained by the prevailing belief in a meritocracy in schooling. Teacher Pang found that most students in his sixth-grade class were 'indifferent' (*lengmo* 冷漠) to his sharing of such social tragedies as suicidal migrant workers. When Pang asked about students' feelings about such issues, some students dismissed his concerns, saying, 'I will study hard, and I will not be like them'. Some others even laughed at these migrant workers for being stupid enough to commit suicide, asking why they killed themselves instead of doing small business themselves and wondering why they had not gone to work for others. Besides, teachers' poor teaching skills could further limit the teaching goal of the Social Studies course—most teachers responsible for this course were new to teaching.

Thus, open dialogues intentionally addressing migrant children's awareness of social problems would force them to re-examine their educational aspirations and relations with schooling, which could possibly foster students' transformative resistance. However, there are three impeding factors, the ideology of meritocracy,

teachers' legitimization of social inequalities, and the limited number and limited teaching ability of willing initiators of open dialogues at school.

Discussion

In previous studies, Chinese RMC were found to present a self-defeating resistance pushing themselves towards academic failure and social reproduction of a migrant working class (Xiong 2015; Zhou 2011). This study took a step further by revealing the complexity in RMC's school behaviors, based on the embedded meanings that students attribute to these behaviors, and explored the school conditions giving rise to migrant children's school resistance.

As Kipnis (2001a) has argued, Chinese society has traditionally featured a widely held and strong belief in schooling for upward social mobility. While teachers also kept emphasizing the significance of academic pursuit, RMC successfully internalized the ideology of meritocracy. Therefore, most migrant children in this study were initially conformist learners. However, some of them gradually determined that such an educational pursuit was untenable for them, and they then became education abandoners. Both Lou (2011) and Xiong (2015) also discovered a

similar change process in underprivileged students.

This change process reflects the ongoing decrease in migrant children's self-efficacy in achieving academic success throughout their education. Even if migrant children's resistant behaviors might initially have been driven by desires for attaining psychological restoration from learning difficulties or for pursuing knowledge in the long term (Lanas and Corbett 2011), they were unable to achieve these aims. This can be attributed to the school's promotion of educational pursuit always going hand-in-hand with a highlight on students' alleged responsibility for their academic failure.

Besides, this study also reveals that teachers' anticipation of migrant students' academic failure could become vital cultural support for their education abandonment (Munns and McFadden 2000). As migrant children's ambitions in educational pursuit were undermined, they were distracted towards an alternative path of taking up manual work in the labor market. However, these migrant children perceived their entering the world of manual labor as a strategic move towards the pursuit of a higher social position, such as becoming 'the boss', with no intention of doing low-paying, low-ranked manual working jobs henceforth. Thus, migrant children's resistance to

schooling was distinct from that of Willis' lads, for they neither questioned the school system nor embraced the masculinity of working-class culture (Willis 1977; Xiong 2015; Zhou 2011).

A small group of students presenting a nascent stage of internal transformative resistance discovered in Heart School were similar to the reformers identified in Lou's (2011) study of rural youth, but usually missing in previous studies on migrant children. Their educational expectations with a social justice agenda encouraged them to persist in learning longer than education abandoners and indicated a desire to overcome social inequalities beyond individual improvements. The potential of RMC in developing transformative resistance was based on their personal experience and awareness of the social inequality caused by both an oppressive employment relationship and rural-urban differentiation in the broader society.

Nevertheless, the vulnerable pursuit of social justice among nascent resisters indicates the difficulty of transferring children's initial awareness into critical reflection. As this study implies, in most conditions, migrant children's awareness of social inequalities was perceived as not only a hindrance to schooling but also a threat

to social harmony, thus usually de-legitimized by teachers in public school CS. Also, many teachers in the private migrant school HS take a similar position to CS teachers in reasoning migrants' social disadvantages as an unavoidable result of city development. HS's agenda of initiating open dialogues on perceived social inequalities through the school-based curriculum is significant for fostering migrant children's critical reflections and transformative resistance (Chavarria 2017; Freire 1973; Santoro and Forghani-Arani 2015); however, its influence was still limited in this study by the dominant ideology of meritocracy in schooling and teachers' poor teaching skills.

Conclusion

To conclude, this study examined the diverse forms of RMC's school resistance in their interactions with the school system and with surrounding social inequalities in urban society. This study suggests that migrant children's school resistance should not be considered as a developed group culture, stemming from their migrant family culture in contradiction with mainstream culture in the schooling (Conchas and Vigil 2010; Hendrickson 2012; Lanas and Corbett 2011; MacLeod 1987; Xiong 2015; Zhou

2011). Rather, migrant children's school resistance reflects their perceptions of social realities, which are still open to change while the children are interacting with the school system. Therefore, the analysis of Chinese RMC's educational failure should go beyond children's self-defeating resistance to mainstream schooling.

As a qualitative study, this study is limited in its capacity to represent RMC in other schools. It is only one piece towards solving the puzzle; its primary focus is on the complex characteristics of migrant children's school resistance in the two schools under study. The gender difference in migrant children's school behaviors and interpretations was not the focus of this study; yet it could be a significant factor and warrants further study. Also, future research with case studies would be imperative for capturing the change process of Chinese RMC's school resistance and reasons for differences within their group. Finally, the school's potential for promoting transformative resistance even though it more often suppresses children's critical reflections discovered in this study still needs to be further addressed in future research.

Endnotes

1. Rural migrant workers (*waichu nongmin gong* 外出农民工) are defined as rural laborers who work and live in areas outside the towns or townships of their residential registration for a period longer than six months.

2. The *hukou* (household registration 户口) system divides China's population into two identities, peasants, and urban dwellers, generating the rural-urban segregation in public goods provision in China (Lin 2006).

3. In China, Senior Secondary School Entrance Examination (*zhongkao* 中考) tracks students to ordinary or vocational high schools. Only ordinary ones are the academic track leading towards tertiary education. RMC in such megacities as Beijing can only attend vocational high schools if they choose to stay in Beijing after compulsory education; otherwise, they need to go back to the hometown for high schools.

4. To enrol in public schools in Beijing at compulsory education, migrant parents are required to submit 'five certificates' (*fuzheng* 五证) for their children, including (1) temporary residence permit; (2) household registration booklet; (3) proof of parental employment; (4) proof of residency; and (5) certificate verifying a lack of guardianship in the place of origin.

5. District education committees allocate funds for public schools primarily based on the number of students, teachers, and school activities, and school performance, not on whether it enrols migrant children. Despite relative differences across schools and districts, public schools have a generally higher quality of education, in terms of the school facility, teacher qualification, and school activities, than most (if not all) private migrant schools.

6. In China, first grade commonly begins at six years of age. However, some migrant children in this study were one or two years older than their counterparts because of late school enrolment or frequent school transfers.

7. Each student interview started with a warming-up session (10 minutes for an individual interview, 15-20 minutes for group interview) for the student(s) to introduce family members, hobbies, favourite teachers, academic performance, and their future dream.

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