The Allure of Being Modern: Relative Social Status among Rural Migrants in Urban China

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Abstract:

The importance of subjective social status and the acquisition of higher status by adopting upper class practices and beliefs have been examined by scholars in Western contexts; however, there is a lack of research in the context of rural migrants in China. In this study, I examine the reasons why Chinese rural migrants choose to stay in large cities, even though if they stay, their children are deprived of the opportunity to attend high school and college. Findings reveal that the decision to stay is related to their careful calculation of the chances of upward mobility. By

staying in Shanghai, these rural migrants believe that both they and their children are in a more advantageous position because they believe exposure to modern lifestyles in a cosmopolitan city makes them become a "modern person." Consequently, their social standing will rise compared to peers in their rural hometown. Although current literature on stratification considers education to be the most important channel for upward mobility, these individuals will forsake formal education if their chances of gaining upward mobility through education are low, and choose alternative means to maximize their relative social status among their own reference groups.

Keywords: social mobility, education, relative social status, internal migration, China

Education, or formal degree credentials, has long been recognized by sociologists as the most important mechanism for upward mobility (higher economic rewards and occupational prestige) in modern societies (Squires 1977, Brown 2001). Education as essential in the process of attaining status has been supported by solid empirical evidence (e.g. Blau and Duncan 1967; Vallet 2004; Breen and Jonsson 2007; Torche 2011). However, many migrant workers in large cities in China have decided to stay in their cities, despite the fact that if they stay, their children will not be able to attend high school or college. If migrant workers go to the city to seek higher income and better jobs, why would they give up the most important channel for their children to gain upward mobility—higher education?

In large Chinese cities like Beijing or Shanghai, millions of migrant families have to make the decision to stay in or leave the city that they might have settled in for over a decade because migrant children without local household registration (*hukou*) are not allowed to

participate in city high school or college entrance exams[1]. To many of these rural migrants, higher education seems to be the only means for their children to achieve intergenerational upward mobility, but in order to receive this education, workers would have to send their children back to their hometown. Although some families have done so, the majority choose to forgo their children's education to stay in the city.

To explain this puzzling phenomenon, I interviewed both migrant workers and their children in two waves across 10 years. The investigation focuses on Shanghai, a city that is considered to be the most modern place in China (Chan 2012). Although migrant children are now incorporated into urban mandatory education in Shanghai (Lan 2014; Ling 2015), as of 2015, children of migrant workers with low social-economic status are still not allowed to participate in the high school or college entrance examination in Shanghai (Li 2014)

While both the migrant parents and children tend to think that attending college is very important, most migrant parents are reluctant to send their children back to their hometown and want to stay in Shanghai for as long as possible. They justify their decision by saying that living in Shanghai means they have become more "modern" and "cultured" than their rural hometown peers. To them, being "modern" means being accustomed to the urban life style, such as modern mannerisms, better personal hygiene, and indoor activities. They also believe that their children are better off in Shanghai even if they cannot attend high school. They want their children to stay with them in Shanghai due to the increased exposure to a "modern" lifestyle that nurtures "modern" virtues, such as having broader horizons, being polite and stylish, etc. By becoming

[1] According to China's sixth census, there are 221 million migrants in 2010. Many have chosen to bring their children with them, giving rise to an estimated 20 million migrant children (under 18 years old) by 2010. Up to 2010 there are 8.98 million non-local *hukou* migrants in Shanghai. That means, two out of five residents in Shanghai are migrants without local Shanghai *hukou*. See The Population Census Office. 2011. Tabulation on the 2010 Population Census of the People's Republic of China, http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/pcsj/rkpc/6rp/indexch.htm; http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/newsandcomingevents/t20110428_402722237.htm, accessed March 10th 2015.

"modernized," they believe their relative social standing increases among others in their rural hometown.

Indeed, social stratification not only involves objective inequality in terms of income, power and status, but also subjective beliefs and attitudes about social status (Grusky 2011). Income and power account for only a moderate amount of variations in people's subjective understandings of their social status (Jackman and Jackman 1973). The existing literature on subjective social standings has largely been based on Western contexts. This study extends this line of thinking by examining a society with unique institutional constraints for social mobility (the household registration system in China) and historical contexts (the "human modernization" program, or improving people's personal qualities, advocated by Chinese states).

Moreover, social stratification has important consequences for both the "life chances" (improved quality of life) and "life style" (way of life) of individuals. However, the empirical studies of migrant workers' motivations have almost exclusively focused on better life chances in cities (e.g. Zhao 1999; Zhan 2011). Little research has been done on how they perceive their daily life and what they perceive to have gained or lost by coming to the city, i.e. the changes of their life styles. To fill this gap, this study focuses on how migrant workers' decision-making strategies about staying or leaving the city are based on their subjective understandings of both life chances and life style.

In the sections that follow, I first discuss the relevant literature on social stratification and status attainment, and the rural-urban divide in China. After detailing the methodology and means of data collection, I then show how rural migrants and their children understand their chances of gaining upward mobility through formal education. Next, I discuss their adaptation of

"modern" qualities by staying in Shanghai, and how this internalization of modern values and lifestyle influence their understanding of their relative social status. I argue that their understanding of upward mobility is related to the evaluation of relative social status, which is used as a form of self-comparison to those in their rural hometown and other migrant workers in Shanghai.

This study contributes to literature on stratification and social mobility by showing that social status is not just determined by economic capital, educational attainments, or occupational prestige, but also cultural values of quality life styles, behavior, and personal virtues. In the Chinese case, modernity is regarded as an essential defining factor that distributes different social groups into a higher or lower status. It is the allure of being modern, a project historically promoted by modern Chinese states, that is underlying the rural migrants' rationale.

STRATIFICATION AND SOCIAL STATUS ATTAINMENT

Status is usually defined as the collectively shared assessments of relative social standing, and evaluated on the basis of individual characteristics such as gender, age, income, etc. (e.g., Wagner, Ford, and Ford 1986; Webster and Hysom, 1998; Mark, Smith-Lovin, and Ridgeway 2009). It impacts how people are evaluated, rewarded, and accorded influence in daily life (Ridgeway and Walker 1995; Correll and Ridgeway 2003; Hodge and Treiman 1968; Nock and Rossi 1978). In current literature, there are two main approaches of status attainment: education and upward comparison, as I will discuss in this section.

Education as a Channel for Upward Mobility

Despite debates on the primary mechanisms of how education might influence upward mobility, sociologists from different camps agree that in industrialized societies, especially modern

America, education has become central in the process that differentiates societal population into different status hierarchies (Moore 1968; Bourdieu [1979] 1984, Collins 1971; Brown 2001; Kerckhoff 2001). The importance of education to status is so highly regarded that in many studies, education has been used as a measure of status along with income (Campbell and Henretta 1980).

Although the results are not as consistent as those from studies on industrialized countries, educational attainment has been found to directly affect occupational attainment in non-Western/developing countries (for a review, see Buchmann and Hannum 2001). In China, empirical evidence suggests that the returns to education (human capital) have increased in the post-reform era (see Nee and Matthews 1996; Zhou 2000).

Even though education is important for upward mobility, existing research has also indicated that educational attainments often depend on many other macro and micro level factors such as family income, education level of the parents, and most importantly, students' aspirations and expectations for higher education (Bohon et al. 2006; Desmond and Turley 2009). In particular, existing research has found that students of underprivileged social groups, such as Latino immigrants and African Americans in the U. S., suffered from unfavorable neighborhood context (Stewart and Stewart 2007); unauthorized or insecure legal status and racial stereotypes (Portes and Rivas 2011), as well as discrimination (Perreira et al. 2010), etc. Therefore, we cannot assume that gaining more education is the best strategy for upward mobility for all social groups. Rather, we need to consider the specific social conditions within which the subjects live.

Furthermore, one preliminary condition for education to become an important channel of upward mobility is that the society must have an open stratification system. Then, how do people in societies with less open stratification systems, such as the caste system or a society with strict

institutional constraints, gain upward mobility? Also, even in open stratification systems, there might be other constraints of status attainment that are hard to break such as stigmatized identities. How do people achieve higher status under those conditions? Next I will respond to these issues along the lines of the subjective understanding of status and passing.

Subjective social status and upward comparison

Sociologists have long noticed that stratification and social inequality are regulated by value consensus generally agreed upon by members of a society (Parsons 1940) or a dominant ideology (Marx and Engels 1932/1998). In a particular society, the hierarchy of social status is usually well defined and acknowledged by most of its members. Yet status hierarchies in a society are not only recognized and supported by high-status actors who benefit from their position, but also by lower status actors who do not benefit or even suffer because of the hierarchies (see for e.g., Jost et al. 2003; Lee and Fiske 2006; Sutphin and Simpson 2009; Hahl and Zuckerman 2014). Since the lower social class acknowledges the status hierarchies, those of lower social class tend to show strong out-group favoritism towards higher-status groups (expressing evaluative preference for members of a group to which one does not belong), and they tend to identify with these out-groups (Jost, Banaji and Nosek 2004).

Related to out-group favoritism is upward comparison: the constant comparison of one's own values and life style with those of the upper class. In doing so, individuals feel assimilated with the higher-status groups, which in turn, enhances their self-evaluation and make them think their own position has changed (Alicke et al. 1995; Collins 1996). That is to say, instead of directly responding to the structural inequality, people have their own subjective understanding of their relative social standing in accordance with the meaning that is construed from daily performance information.

This process of seeking upward mobility through upward comparison and self-assimilation is best illustrated with the sociological notion called "passing." Passing is the act of putting on cultural performances so that the individual presents themselves in order to be regarded as a member of social groups other than his or her own, usually with the purpose of pretending to be of a higher social status such as a different race, class, age, or gender (Drake and Cayton 1945; Goffman 1963; Renfrow 2004). Passing is especially common when there is a strong stigma against a particular social group, and it usually involves imitating accents, clothing, behaviors, and other life style and performance-related elements of the higher class.

In the practice of passing, the social groups with prestige in a given society serve as the model for the disadvantaged groups; the attitudes, customs and rituals of the perceived higher social groups are used as standards to evaluate behavior. Non-members try to adopt their norms and also develop the characteristic attitude of their more prestigious counterparts while aspiring to gain entry as members into those groups. The concept of passing is relevant to the context of China in this study, where the rural-urban divide has bestowed urban dwellers with prestige while rural people are on the lower rungs of the status hierarchy.

RURAL-URBAN HIERARCHY AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN CHINA

In order to understand social mobility, especially intergenerational occupational mobility in China, scholars of stratification in China have pointed out the importance of *hukou* (household registration) and the resultant rural-urban divide (see for e.g., Cheng and Dai 1995, Wu and Treiman 2004, 2007). Developed in the 1950s, the *hukou* system requires all households in China to register in the place they live and be classified as either rural or urban (Cheng and Dai 1995; Cheng and Selden 1994). An individual's *hukou* status is assigned at birth on the basis of mother's registration status (Chan and Zhang 1999). The *hukou* system redistributes resources,

determines life chances, and provides urbanites with various resources and opportunities, such as housing, medical insurance, educational opportunities, etc., but the system also limits the opportunities, mobility, and welfare of rural dwellers (Wu and Treiman 2007). As a result, the *hukou* system is the largest contributor to structural inequality between those in the city and countryside (Whyte 2010).

Urban-rural inequality is economic, with an urban-rural income ratio as high as 3:1 (Whyte 2010), as well as cultural. In daily social life, rural dwellers are negatively regarded in relation to all attributes including mannerism, mental ability, attitude, physical appearance and mindsets. This devaluation of rural people is promoted by the powerful discourse on *suzhi* (personal quality) (Lan 2014), a discourse that became popular in post-reform China. The term "*suzhi*" refers to "the innate and nurtured physical, intellectual and ideological characteristics of a *person*" (Murphy 2004, p.2). More specifically, *suzhi* as personal quality refers to human modernization, a modernized way of thinking and living.

In *suzhi* modernization discourse, rural people are devalued by urban dwellers and state elite as those who lack education, culture and civility (Yi 2011; Ling 2015). Many urban residents, including urban school teachers, consider rural people to be "rusty," "impolite," "unhygienic," "narrow-minded," "backward" and "dark-skinned" (Yi 2011). It is believed by many urbanites that rural people need to transform their mind and behavior if they were to fit in the modern life in the cities.

After the market reform in 1978, the government lifted the ban against rural-urban migration, and large numbers of migrant workers went to the cities in the early 1980s. However, rural individuals who migrated to urban areas still retained their rural household registrations and

were thus ineligible for most high status urban jobs. They were also ineligible for the full citizenship rights and benefits enjoyed by urbanites (Whyte 2010).

Most importantly, the children of rural migrants were deprived of the right to attend public schools in the cities (Solinger 1999). Although a large proportion of the migrant children who came to cities to live with their migrant parents were born in the city, and many others have resided in the city while growing up, they are still considered "rural" according to their *hukou* (Ming 2014). After decades of efforts, migrant children are now able to attend public primary (1-6 grades) and middle-schools (7-9 grades)[2] in cities (Lan 2014), but in large cities like Shanghai and Beijing, they are still required to return to the location of their *hukou* for high school and college entrance exams. If they stay in the city, they can choose to either attend vocational schools, or enter the job market immediately after their nine years of compulsory education. Neither choice results in high status jobs, or urban *hukou* (Ling 2015). Instead, they perpetuate the underclass, reifying the social hierarchies in which migrant workers are at the bottom (Woronov 2011; Xiong 2015).

Existing studies on the education of migrant children in China focused on structural constraints and how the policy on *hukou* restrictions made it impossible to break the inequality (Lan 2014; Ling 2015, Xiong 2015). These studies seldom look at the subjective understandings of migrant workers. To be sure, educational attainment is the most important channel to obtain *hukou* (Wu and Treiman 2004), especially for acquiring the *hukou* of Beijing and Shanghai. To do that, the children of rural migrants need to return back to their hometown, take the relevant exams, and attend university. However, a large number of migrant families do not exercise this

[2] Primary and secondary education (1-9 grades) is compulsory education in China.

option even though they are well aware of the implications. Consequently, I will examine why these migrant families choose to forgo their children's opportunity for getting higher education.

DATA AND METHOD

The fieldwork in this study is mainly conducted in the *Minhang* district of Shanghai. Even though Shanghai has launched various educational reforms for students without local *hukou*, up to 2015 returning to their hometown is still the only option for children of migrant workers with low social-economic status if they want to continue with high school (Li 2014). I chose as the main research site a public middle school with an average selectivity that admits both migrant and local children. Most (90%) of the interviews were conducted with students and parents of this school, while the rest (10%) came from occasional encounters with migrant students from other schools. The middle school, located in the outskirts of Shanghai, has been established for 44 years with about 320 students currently. About half of the students are migrant children, and the rest are locals. The migrant and local children learn in segregated classrooms and the school facilities are typical of a Shanghai public school. With a few exceptions, all of the teachers are local Shanghainese and have college degrees.

The first wave of semi-structured, in-depth interviews was conducted between March 2006 and January 2008. The respondents are 62 people from 25 families, and half were interviewed twice. Thirty informants are members of the second generation (sometimes more than one child in one family), and the rest are one or both of their parents. Different from findings in other cities like Beijing, where many migrants are largely segregated from the local residents (Ming 2014), participants of this research tend to have frequent contacts with the local Shanghainese because they own businesses of various sizes. Out of the 25 respondent families, 16 own their business and the rest work in service sectors as cab driving, sales, or logistics.

Interviews lasted one hour and were usually conducted at an informant's residence, with separate interviews for the students and their parents, so that responses would not be overheard. During the interviews, data were obtained on their everyday life, learnings, behavior patterns, family background, education, migration experiences, and career and education aspirations. The interviews were transcribed by research assistants and double-blind coded by the author.

After the interviews, I got involved in a local non-government organization that provides services for migrant children, which allowed me to conduct multiple follow-up visits to several of the selected families in the first round of interviews. Through long-term interactions facilitated through our involvement with the organization, such as participating the various programs and activities for migrant children, I not only gained their trust, but also had the chance to further observe their daily life and interactions within the family, with other migrant workers and with the local Shanghainese.

From December 2014 to March 2015, I conducted the second wave of interviews. I interviewed 26 individuals from 12 families (parents and children). Half of the families are from our previous sample; the other half are new families. The purpose of these interviews is twofold: first, to determine whether the attitude and strategies of the migrant families have changed given the recent changes in Shanghai's policy toward the college entrance examination.[3] Second, to examine in more detail their views on relative social status in comparison to different groups, and the evaluative criteria they used to make the judgment on social status, such as how they valued themselves, and how they perceived others valued them.

[3] The main change of policy is that Shanghai now has an accumulative points system to decide whether students without local *hukou* can attend high school and college entrance exams in Shanghai. Under this new policy effective from 2014, if their parents achieve a certain number of "points" based on merits such as educational levels, occupations, and investments in Shanghai, students without local Shanghai *hukou* can attend Shanghai high school and college entrance exams. This new policy makes it possible for students from higher social economic status to obtain higher education in Shanghai, but non-local students from low social status are still strictly excluded from the educational benefits (Li 2014).

EDUCATION AS A DESIRABLE BUT UNREALISTIC CHANNEL FOR UPWARD MOBILITY

The migrant parents know that education is the most important means for their children to escape poverty and gain respect and higher status (see also Kwong 2004), and during the interviews, many of the parents stated they would be willing to do anything within their means so that their children could attend college. However, in order to receive this education, workers would have to send their children back to their registered rural hometowns to prepare for and take the entrance exams. Consequently, many migrant parents elect not to move, with as little as 5% to 13% of migrant children in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou returning to their hometown (Yang and Wang 2009; Li 2014).

The migrant workers in this study considered the option of sending their children back to their hometown, but they believed such a move was unrealistic for many reasons: financial obstacles, low college admission rates in their hometown, low quality rural schools, fear of the "backwards" rural mindset, and their belief that regardless of education, greater economic opportunities exist in Shanghai.

First, for many migrant families, moving back home is not financially feasible. One parent would need to quit his/her job to accompany the child back, but many migrant families cannot afford the loss of income.

Second, given the current policy, gaining admission into a college, especially one in Shanghai, is often considered unrealistic because the college admission rate in their hometown is very low (Ling 2015). The low admission rate is the product of various factors including the quality of schools in different rural areas, the low quota of college entrance from their own province, and different curricula. Since each province has different curricula and exam papers,

students who attended elementary and middle school in an independent and progressive urban school system, such as Shanghai and Beijing, may not be competent enough to perform well on the high school or college entrance exam in their rural hometown.[4]

Third, while financial difficulties and students' academic performance are reasonable considerations that have been pointed out in previous studies (e.g. Lan 2014; Ming 2014; Ling 2015), findings from this research reveals that even those who have the financial ability, or those with excellent academic performance, are still reluctant to go back, mainly because they perceive that rural schools lack the quality of those in Shanghai. Almost all of the participants, both parents and students alike, emphasized that Shanghai schools are better because they are equipped with electronic equipment and different facilities such as projectors and computers, or basketball courts and libraries. Most importantly, they emphasized the importance of music education, sports, arts, and field trips, which constitute the so-called *suzhi* (personal quality) education that aims to improve personal quality of the citizenry in order to enhance the competitiveness of the nation (Yi 2011). *Suzhi* education is a coherent part of education in Shanghai, but it is usually unavailable in rural schools. A mother commented:

> In Shanghai, my daughter has learned to dance, play music, sing, and draw at school. But the children in our hometown don't do any of these things. They can't compare to my daughter (Wave 1, Case 8).

The lack of extra-curricular activities in rural schools is also regarded as a major disadvantage. Many parents felt that these activities, such as outings to the famous sightseeing sites of Shanghai organized by the school, provided life experience and knowledge for their children,

[4] Among the 31 provinces in China that participate in the national college examination, 16 have their own exam paper (10 use their own exam paper for all of the subjects) and 6 use the provincial exam paper for a part of the subjects. The 10 who use their own tend to be economically more advanced regions, such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangdong.

and broadened their horizons. However, extra-curricular activities are irrelevant if the goal is to do well for high school and college entrance examinations. Consequently, schools in smaller cities and rural areas focus solely on high exam scores. The so-called quality education (*suzhi jiaoyu*) is considered relevant only in metro cities like Beijing and Shanghai.

If the goal is to obtain a high exam score and receive admission to a good university, migrant students, one would think, should not "waste time" on extra-curricular activities but act like their rural counterparts whose only goal is to pass the exams. However, both migrant parents and students emphasized the importance of a more modern *suzhi* education and considered this "well-roundedness" as one of the major advantages of going to school in Shanghai.

Fourth, the parents were very reluctant to send their children back because they do not want their children to live in the countryside, fearing that they would become "backwards" again. One of the fathers echoed this sentiment:

> I'm afraid to send her back. I grew up in my hometown and I know how it works... (the) quality…is terrible…the worst thing is the social environment…certain environments breed certain types of people. My hometown produces savage and uncivilized people. I don't want my daughter to be like that (Wave 1, Case 16).

Both the parents and children felt that daily life is more civilized in Shanghai when compared to rural life. They enjoyed the convenience of modern life in a modern city, such as clean streets and good transportation. One of the students expressed his appreciation of life in Shanghai:

> The buildings are so tall… there are many cars… Shanghai and my hometown are like heaven and earth. Everything…is much more convenient in Shanghai…the language and

> the way that people talk are also different. Shanghainese are refined, polite and soft-spoken. (Wave 1, Case 18).

Like the student above, many interviewees indicated a preference for Shanghai and greatly appreciated the offerings of a city that symbolizes modern civilization, such as tall buildings and shopping malls, in addition to the higher income potential.

Finally, many felt that their children will have more job opportunities in Shanghai, regardless of education level. One of the mothers expressed this expectation of her son:

> I want (my son) to stay in Shanghai. There are more job opportunities…and the wages are higher. Shanghai is the most modern city in China. Even if you do not have a college degree, there are more opportunities of finding a better job…than in other cities (Wave 2, Case 7).

To be sure, the migrants know that a higher education is the pathway to an urban *hukou* and jobs with higher prestige. But they all became very reluctant when it comes to the decision of whether they should leave Shanghai now or soon, to prepare for their children's high school entrance exams. Enrollment in a provincial university does not provide enough incentive to give up their residence in Shanghai, which is their top priority, and thus many want their children to only attend Shanghai universities. Compared to attending college, staying in Shanghai is considered more important because the ultimate goal is for the children to gain a higher social status, which does not necessarily have to be achieved through higher education alone.

In sum, there are both immediate constraints, such as finances, and long-term returns, such as the possibility of college admission, if the migrants returned home. These constraints have been discussed by previous research (Lan 2014, Ling 2015; Ming 2014). However, previous

research ignored another important reason why they choose to stay: the importance of extra-curricular activities and *suzhi* education in Shanghai, one that aims to improve the overall quality of the individual, even though these are not relevant to passing the college entrance exam. In fact, migrant workers consider staying in Shanghai an advantage and a priority. In the next section I further explain why staying in Shanghai is important to the migrant workers.

ACHIEVING UPWARD MOBILITY BY BECOMING A MODERN PERSON

Parent and children respondents both felt that remaining in Shanghai meant self-improvement. In Shanghai, they are exposed to modern civilization, become assimilated with the local Shanghainese in style, behavior, and attitudes, and therefore, they themselves are improved and have become a modern person.

The parents emphasized the advantages of staying in Shanghai in terms of self-improvement: they and their children will be modern and cultured – individuals with caliber. They believe that having modern qualities is important and they have much to learn from the locals, as stated by this woman:

> My biggest achievement in Shanghai is that I have broadened my horizons. I only met farmers back in my hometown...here I meet all kinds of people. When I visit other people at their home...the setup and furniture...(are) stylish …For example, I visited a teacher at her home…she has a really nice cabinet which inspired me. When I have my own place, I will get the same thing…My hometown has got nothing like that. (Wave 2, Case 6, Mother)

The migrants believed that through exposure to a modern lifestyle in Shanghai, and imitation of the Shanghainese who are considered the epiphany of the modern citizen, they have improved their taste, interpersonal skills, and behaviors.

This desire to learn from the Shanghainese is because the respondents believe that they are a better quality human, who exhibit characteristics such as politeness and a sophisticated manner of speech. They show more confidence during social interactions, are rule abiding and less prone to littering, as well as courteous. The children also expressed the same sentiments:

> Local students are very different from the non-local students. They are very polite…don't litter, and…are thrifty. I like them more…Maybe it's easier to make friends with non-locals, but I'd rather be friends with locals so that I can learn from them (Wave 1, Case 13, Child).

This student admitted that although it was easier to make friends with non-locals, he preferred to be associated with local students because he can improve his quality by learning from them.

The respondents also expressed admiration of the life style in Shanghai; an urban, more civilized life style.

> The Shanghainese have colorful lives. They're not like us. We do nothing but work. But they go to movies and bars…take their kids to…movies. I don't want my kids to be like me. Whatever they [the Shanghainese] have, I also want for my children…such as more education in the arts and music…a quality education. (Wave 1, Case 5, Father)

This father appreciated and tried to imitate the life style of the Shanghainese. He disliked his own life style ("nothing but work") and wanted something better for his children. That's why

many of our parent respondents emphasized the education in arts, music, and sports for their children.

In addition to mannerism and personal hygiene, many respondents also reflected on their inter-personal relationships back in the village and indicated appreciation of the less close-knit relationships found in a modern city.

> When I go back (to my hometown), I don't like the way they talk or behave…they're loud and do not care much about personal hygiene... I feel like it's a waste of time and money to visit my relatives…Life is much simpler in Shanghai…we don't gossip. Nobody cares about your private life. The thing that I hate most about rural life is wasting time. They just stand there and talk all the time about nothing important…they have a lot of time (Wave 2, Case 7, Father).

To the migrants, city life is not only more convenient, but also free from the frustrations of closely tied inter-personal relationships found in a rural society. They emulate a modern style, and internalize the modern cultural values.

They have adopted not only the values, clothing, and conduct of the Shanghainese, but also their views and standpoints. This hierarchy of modernity, or the justification of the superiority of the Shanghainese, is even used to justify the discrimination in Shanghai. Shanghai is widely known for its discrimination against non-locals (Lan 2014). However, surprisingly, the majority of the parent interviewees expressed positive views of the Shanghainese and denied the existence of discrimination.

> I have met the local Shanghainese…...and...never felt discriminated. That's because I behave myself and so others wouldn't have the chance to say something bad about me. I think that the Shanghainese are smart, diligent and capable (Wave 1, Case 9, Father).

According to many migrant workers, even if the Shanghainese discriminated against non-locals, or if non-locals were treated poorly by the locals, this is because the non-locals were inadequate or showed bad behavior, and did not measure up to being a resident of this modern civilized city. A respondent who is currently working as an illegal cab driver in Shanghai was vocal on the issue of discrimination:

> The non-locals are not doing well enough and need to change their bad habits. That's why they're being called country bumpkins. The Shanghainese say that non-locals lack hygiene…In the rural villages, the kids poop on the streets and sometimes they do that after they come to Shanghai…But you know, it's wrong to poop in public. They say non-locals have a lot of children...but the more children you have, the poorer your family becomes… (Wave 2, Case 1, Father).

He felt that unhygienic behavior and the number of children in one's family are good reasons for the discrimination[5], all of which support locals view that migrants are not as modern or civilized as urban people, and imply that the discrimination is justified.

As shown, the migrant interviewees were sensitive to the behaviors that constituted a lack of social etiquette that warranted a lack of social acceptance, and therefore strived to the level of the locals. They sought acceptance as someone who has risen above being a "country bumpkin."

[5] Because of the goal to promote the one-child policy in China, having more children, especially the preference for a son, has been perceived as a backward perception related to the agricultural mode of production and the backward life in rural areas. This man clearly indicated that after living in Shanghai for years, he is now modern in perception because he did not strive for a son or more children, despite the fact that he has only one daughter.

Consequently, one not only passes as a respectable and dignified individual, but also as one who has taken the standpoints of the urbanites to become a modernized urban person.

Since the migrant workers and their children are all ethnic Chinese, there are no physical differences with the locals, except for their clothing style. It is possible to pass as locals if they perform the role well. Many of the interviewed parents and children proudly said that sometimes other people, especially their hometown peers, saw them as Shanghainese locals. They also indicated that they immediately denied that they are locals, but in actuality, their ability to "pass" constituted a source of pride.

RELATIVE SOCIAL STATUS AMONG REFERENCE GROUPS

The parents hailed from the rural countryside, and their goal is to obtain better living standards, which most of them have already achieved. When they went to Shanghai, they were aware of their "other" status because they do not have the *hukou*: "I usually only compare myself with other migrants or non-locals. You can't compare with the Shanghainese" (Wave 2, Case 9, Father).

The reference group for the migrant parents is the people in their own hometown. Now that they live in Shanghai, their fellow villagers look at them differently and show respect. They are more privileged and have a higher social status than those back home.

> In my hometown, not many have a lifestyle that is better than mine. They call my kids little Shanghainese and treat us with respect. (Wave 1, Case 19, Father)

The fellow villagers' perception of higher social status is especially evident when the respondents return back for the Chinese New Year. The respect from their fellow villagers made them feel that they have improved their social standing.

Additionally, the migrant parents use modern standards to evaluate the life style in their rural hometown, and come to the conclusion that both the Shanghainese and they are superior to the rural dwellers.

> I think that the social status of rural people is lower than that of the Shanghainese… In my hometown, people…fight over small things. The Shanghainese rarely do that. People in the countryside gossip ...they speak loudly and are abrupt…when I go back…they pass me stuff and I say "thank you," which makes them laugh. They'll say "so you are a Shanghainese now…saying thank you." That's just not done in my hometown. Now that I've lived in Shanghai…I've become a much better person… (people in my hometown) call me a Shanghainese…I'm different now…and I'm embarrassed of them (people in my hometown) because they are usually rude and not hygienic. (Wave 2, Case 10, Mother)

To these migrant workers, the key difference between them and their rural peers is not only income, but also behavior, life style, and personal quality. Rural people speak loudly, spit, and never say "thank you" or "please," all of which are considered to be virtues by the respondent parents.

These differences are most obvious during the occasional trips back to the village. The interviewed children echoed the opinion of their parents on what constitutes civil behavior:

> When I went back to my hometown with my parents for Chinese New Year, I saw people spitting everywhere. We never do that in Shanghai. We're much more civilized than them. (Wave 1, Case 23, Child)

After finding out that people in her rural hometown spit in streets, this migrant child comes to the conclusion that people living in Shanghai, including herself, are more civilized than those in the countryside.

Many of the migrant parents indicated that negative peer influence is the most important reason that they want their children to stay in Shanghai for as long as possible rather than going back to their hometown. They also felt that their children outshine those in their hometown in all aspects:

> In my hometown, the children that are the same age as my son all look like hoodlums. They cuss and swear. My son is educated here so he is much more civilized and polite…The children in my hometown know nothing about quality or brands. They spend their spare time on mindless things, like climbing trees or swimming in the river. But my son knows how to play and use electronic devices and the computer… he would choose to use brand name products made by large companies... (Wave 2, Case 2, Father)

In addition to better manners and more knowledge on brands, this father pointed out another major theme that frequently came up during the interviews: rural children play outdoors all the time, but the migrant children rarely venture out, which is the same for Shanghainese children: "After going back to our hometown, our children get tanned, so we can't go back" (wave 1, Case 17, father). Pale untanned skin is another symbol of being urban and modern. Therefore, playing outside is undesirable because that is equal to being wild and undisciplined.

Broader horizons cultivated by living in the cities and having more exposure to modern civilization is considered another major advantage of children brought up and educated in the city:

> Kids are much better off here. Their horizons are broader because the schools organize a lot of field trips like going to the zoo. My son is exposed to a lot of new things [which is] very different from kids in my hometown...when rural kids see things that unfamiliar…they just keep staring. But my son wouldn't be fazed…he's seen stuff like that many times. (Wave 2, Case 5, Mother)

Indeed, many parents said that even though their children may not be able to attend high school in Shanghai, it is still worthwhile for them to receive the nine years of compulsory education in Shanghai, just for the sake of gaining broader horizons in the city.

The respondents were not only comparing themselves with their villager counterparts, but also to other non-locals in Shanghai. One young woman who worked as an assistant in a beauty salon commented that she has a higher status in comparison to rural people and also to other migrant workers who are working in restaurants because they have less knowledge in terms of modern lifestyles and values. She said:

> All of my customers are high class and high quality humans. They are very polite when they talk to me…they always say "thank you." But when I go back to my rural hometown, I find that everyone is so rude...even the girls swear all the time and cuss a lot. But here in our beauty salon, we're trained to talk gently and softly, to be polite and tidy. We also know about popular brand names…we may not be able to afford them, but we know about them, and rural people do not. We're also better than those who are working in

> restaurants because they don't know anything about cosmetics and brand names. (Wave 2, case 6)

This young woman believes that her status is higher than many other migrant workers. The main reason for this confidence is her manner and her knowledge about brand names. She admitted that she might not be able to afford those brand name products, but the exposure to the knowledge itself is regarded as a symbol of status.

To many migrants, the status hierarchy is clear (in order of modernization level): rural areas, small cities, capital cities and then large cities (Shanghai and Beijing). A mother compared Shanghai with other capital cities and made it very clear that she felt Shanghai excels:

> I don't want my younger son to work in another city. Our whole family is in Shanghai. So he has to stay here. My elder son went to work in Hefei[6] last year because his girlfriend is there. I was so mad. Hefei is…nothing compared to Shanghai. How could he sacrifice his own future just for a girl? After living in Shanghai, Hefei is such a step backwards. (Wave 2, case 9)

If someone is already in Shanghai, leaving for a smaller city would mean a step down in relative social standing.

In sum, rural migrants, especially migrant parents, tend to think that they have gained much after arriving in Shanghai: better living conditions, more opportunities for economic development, and better human qualities. They consciously use "personal quality" as an evaluative criterion to judge relative social status. When they do so, they consider themselves

[6] Hefei is the capital city of Anhui province in China.

higher in social status than their relatives, friends, and other villagers in their hometown, lower only to the local Shanghainese. Therefore, their relative social standing has been greatly improved by just living and working in Shanghai.

While the migrant children shared many perspectives that are similar to those of their parents, there is an important difference: their reference group is the local Shanghai students and other migrant students, rather than those in their rural hometown. Most of the migrant students grew up in the city, and have minimal rural experience (Guang and Zheng 2005). To gain a relatively higher social status, they have to compete with locals in the college entrance exams, and enroll in a good university. During the interviews, many of the students indicated they prefer to return back to their hometown for schooling, and a desire for higher-education, even more so than their parents. To the migrant students, the most ideal situation would be to return to their hometown as early as possible and prepare for the high school entrance exams, as this is the only way for them to compete with their local Shanghai friends.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Chinese migrants venture to the cities to seek upward mobility. The decision of migrant workers to stay or leave is determined by their own evaluation of their life chances and the potential downward or upward placement in the status hierarchy. Even though formal education and college degrees are important means to gaining a higher social status (that is, an urban *hukou*, higher income, and prestigious jobs) and becoming modernized individuals, the current policy makes it an ambiguous choice for these migrant families. Hence almost 90% of the parents have already made the decision to let their children stay in the city as long as possible. In fact, only

those children whose families have excellent financial means and great academic performance would choose to go back because if the child can get into a Shanghai university, they achieve upward mobility. Even if the child fails to do so, they can still come back to Shanghai after high school. In this case, they could maximize their opportunity of achieving higher status in the future. But other families, especially those children without good academic performance, will definitely remain.

This study illustrates the importance of the subjective understanding of social status. Even though income and educational attainment are important measures of social status, as recognized by the migrant workers in this study, the ultimate goal is to achieve relative social status among their own reference groups. To these migrant workers, the best way to do so is to have the whole family stay in the city. If they stay, they may eventually pass as Shanghainese, or their status will be higher than those of their rural peers, and perhaps even higher than the urbanites in their province of origin. However, if they return back to their hometown, both they and their children will become "backwards" again and thus lower their relative social status. Therefore, staying becomes the optimal choice, even though their children will not have a high school education and/or a college degree.

In this sense, this study is in agreement with many of the previous studies that have pointed out the importance of relative social status in people's decision-making and social behavior (for example, Hamilton 1977; Wolff et al. 2010). The process of imitating the life style of urbanites in order to gain higher status as described in this paper is also similar to Sanskritization in the Indian caste system. Sanskritization is the process in which those who are lower on the caste hierarchy collectively try to adopt the customs, practices and beliefs of the upper caste, and give

up some of their own customs shunned by the higher castes in order to seek upward mobility (Srinivas 1952). Indeed, the strict institutional constraint of the *hukou* system in China is comparable to the Indian caste system (Whyte 2010). But the difference is, in the Chinese case, the unit of upward mobility is individual or family, while Sanskritization is a collective effort of the caste for group mobility. In China, migrant workers have little interest or consciousness in improving the collective status of migrant workers as a social group. They embrace the value of "being modern" and believe that people who have qualities of being modern are higher on the social ladder than those who are otherwise.

Indeed, the cultivation of citizens with modern qualities has always been part of the agenda of the Chinese states, which dates back to the Republican era in the early 20th century and was carried on by later state reigns (Kipnis 2011). In post-reform China, human modernization is an important element of the socioeconomic modernization project (Yi 2011). Even outside of mainland China and in global Chinese communities, being modern has been an essential element of being Chinese since the 19th century (Wang 1999). Thus, people's upward mobility strategies are shaped by the historical and cultural context of China.

Given the huge disparity between rural and urban China in economic domain, culture, values, and life style, migration to urban areas (particularly Shanghai which is considered the most modern place in China) might be seen not only as instrumental but also as status enhancing in itself. The migration from rural to urban China has led to economic changes for both migrants and society in general, as well as changes in life style and social values towards a more modern citizen. Their embrace of modern life is not restricted to participation in the modern production process. It includes identification with modern values, lifestyle, and behaviors.

The migrant worker respondents wholly accept the modernization discourse that characterizes rural people as inferior to urbanites. They highly regard components of modern lifestyles, such as playing music and sports, and modern mannerisms, such as talking in a soft voice and in a civilized manner, better personal hygiene, less closely knitted relationships, untanned skin, indoor activities, etc. They not only imitate and try to pass as a modern person, but also use those "modern" virtues as evaluative criteria to make judgements about others. In this way, they accept the current power hierarchy, that is, the social order. The most important consequence of this, of course, is the reproduction of social inequality because migrant children remain disadvantaged. So just like passing, individuals might achieve higher social status by imitating the performance of the upper social groups, but this process involves no structural change.

Even though many of the migrant families live in segregated neighborhoods, our respondents have had exposure to "superior" urban culture and many have close contacts with the locals. This might be attributed to the fact that many of them work in small businesses. The situation might be different in other places where their children only attend migrant schools or parents are employed in other industrial sectors such as construction and manufacturing, and are therefore largely segregated from the local urban life. Nevertheless, the basic argument here still holds: decision-making for upward mobility is contingent on the consideration of relative social status, and becoming modern is an important aspect of social status in contemporary China.

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