Critical Education

China's Hidden Curriculum
Hukou, Floating Labour, and Children Left Behind

Yanming Ren
Zhuhai College, Jilin University, China

Saville Kushner
Edge Hill University, UK

John Hope
University of Auckland

Abstract

This is a case study of the impact of rapid industrialization on Chinese school, with the experience of left-behind children at its core. Much of China's remarkable economic success in recent years owes to its policy of 'floating labour', allowing for the largest domestic migration in global history. Workers are allowed to migrate from areas of low- to high-work intensity. Mobility is for individual workers and not families, leading to the creation of a generation of around 60 million 'left-behind children'. Using case methods allied to sociological theory this article reports the phenomenon and the experience of a left-behind child in a secondary school in central China, placed within the context of the impact of rapid industrialization on school practices.

The Problem and Literature Review

China's recent economic and social development has been eye-catching. Behind the stunning growth are about 250 million migrant workers, who pour into cities from rural areas and help keep the country's manufacturing engine supplied with cheap labor. Their children, however, rarely move due to restrictions of institutional policies including Hukou[1] set by the government decades ago to control the flow of people across the country; hence, the emergence of about 61 million Chinese 'left behind children (LBC)—one of every five in the world's most populous nation—who have not seen one or both parents for at least three months, according to the All-China Women's Federation (2013).

Several LBC tragedies in BiJie[2] County, Gui Zhou province caused a stir and demanded more attention towards the wrenching consequences from the biggest domestic migration in human history. Chinese scholars have been looking into this social phenomenon from diverse perspectives using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Some observations indicate that LBC are at a higher risk for problematic behaviours at the two extremes, being either withdrawn or excessively aggressive (Yang, 2005). A study of 250 middle-school students left behind in a rural area in Hubei Province found that more than half of them experienced difficulties in adapting to parents' emigration, and approximately half of them performed poorly in school (Li & Wen, 2009). A group of scholars, using a self-administered questionnaire, compared the health status and health-related behaviours of left-behind adolescent school children and their counterparts in a rural area in Southern China (Gao, Li, Kim, Congdon, Lau, & Griffiths, 2010). Through a community based cross-sectional study on a representative sample in rural China, a research study by Jia and Tian (2010) concluded that the LBC are at significant risk of loneliness.

Other researchers have looked at the deep impacts of rural parents' migration on the care giving and nurturing of LBC. One study highlights the fact that the LBC have been the unfortunate outcome of China's urbanisation, disproportionately bearing the cost for China's rapid industrialisation (Jingzhong & Lu, 2011). Others have examined the associations between internet addiction and depression in migrant children (MC) and LBC and found that that internet addiction might be associated with an increased risk of depression in LBC. Migration was an important risk factor for child depression (Guo, Chen, Wang, Liu, Chui, He, & Tian, 2012). A further study, using

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[1] Hukou/户口: Hukou is a record in the Chinese government system of household registration required by law in mainland China. It determines where citizens are allowed to live. Because of its entrenchment of social strata, especially as between rural and urban residency status, the hukou system is often regarded as a form of caste system (Bell, 2010, p. 86; Marková & Gillespie 2008, p. 63; Perry & Selden, 2003, p. 90). Having one's household registration coincide with one's place of residency is very important as it determines one's access to economic, social and political opportunities and rights.

[2] LBC events in BiJie: One chilly night in late 2012 in a village near Bijie, five left-behind boys clambered into a large bin, lit a fire and closed the lid for warmth. A rubbish picker found their bodies the next morning; they died of carbon monoxide poisoning. Leaving a note behind thought to be to his parents that read: "Thanks for your kindness. I know you mean well for us, but we should go now. Death had been my dream for years," a 12-year-old boy swigged from a bottle of pesticide and handed it to his sisters, aged five, eight and nine, who did the same (news.sina.com.cn, 2015, Jun 11th; Tang, bbc.com, 2015, 11 June).

a structured questionnaire that included questions about socio-demographic characteristics, social anxiety, family function, quality of life, neglect and physical abuse, concluded that LBC have a relatively higher level of social anxiety and poorer living conditions than non-LBC (Zhao, Chen, Chen, Lv, Jiang & Sun, 2014).

While many researchers reported negative effects of parental migration on LBC outcomes (Meyerhoefer and Chen 2011; Wen and Lin, 2012; Zhao et al. 2014; Zhou, Murphy, and Tao 2014; Zhang et al. 2014) due to absence of parental care (Lahaie et al., 2009; Ye and Lu, 2011) or increased time spent doing on-farm or in-home work (Chang, Dong and MacPhai, 2011; McKenzie and Rapoport, 2011), some others have contrasting findings. Perhaps surprisingly, some researchers have found a positive relationship between parental migration and LBC outcomes (Yang, 2008; Chen et al, 2009; Roy, Singh, and Roy, 2015); these positive outcomes may result from relaxing household liquidity constraints (Du and Xiang 2005) and encouraging higher investments in LBC (Edwards and Ureta, 2003; Yang, 2008; Lu and Treiman, 2011; Antman, 2012). In the latest research by Chang and his colleagues (2019), it is suggested that it may not be necessary for policy makers to design special programs to improve educational outcomes of LBCs in general, but more attention should be paid to girls left behind with only one parent.

Chang and his colleagues (2019) reflect on these conflicting research conclusions and suggest that there might be more than one single cause contributing to the status quo. There are, for example, multiple pathways through which parental migration affects children, and methodological (or data-related) choices could affect the nature of the results of these studies. Furthermore, it is likely that the results are inconsistent given of the heterogeneous nature of the LBC population: children are left behind at different ages and with different types of caregivers in different regions in China and by parents of different ages, cultures and with different social status.

The picture still looks messy with a lack of logical consistency. But this seemingly messy situation may be the evidence for the fact that understanding this social problem demands due attention to its complexity through alternative methods focusing less on the commonality of LBC experience, more on its particularities. The study reported here is based on case study methods, spanning the range from personal childhood experience and institutional (school) life to broader socio-political contexts – case study both employs theory and theorizes on the basis of observation and data *abduction* (Swedberg, 2016, Kushner, 2017).

Theory and Routine in Curriculum Life

The focus of this study is on schooling – more specifically, curriculum in its many aspects. We are especially concerned about the concept of the 'hidden curriculum' as it relates to LBC. The case study reach from the personal to the political can be represented in theoretical terms by the range from Jackson's (1968) observations of the 'daily grind' of schooling, and the underlying curriculum (challenge) of schooling in dealing with 'crowds', to the critical, historical sweep of the curriculum sociologists (Apple, 2012; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bernstein, 1977; Young, 1976) who see the hidden curriculum located in an underlying commitment to cultural reproduction and political oppression. From the short-run empiricist to the grand theoretical, life

inside school, in China as elsewhere, is deeply embedded in personal and community experience, but also in political, economic and ideological forces beyond school which impact on daily interactions and routines of school life. Norms and values, related to, say, the world of work and to class, and gender divisions in the society inevitably become data in how students and teachers theorize about their lives and actions.

Giroux and Penna (1979, p. 26) claimed that "any curriculum designed to introduce positive changes in classrooms will fail, unless such a proposal is rooted in an understanding of those socio-political forces that strongly influence the very texture of day-to-day classroom pedagogical practices"; for these seemingly familiar "Daily Grind" may work powerfully as daily lessons for inequality. For example, the differentiated curriculum can play a large part in enabling students to internalize failure based on this sorting process as an individual problem (Apple, 2012). It is therefore important to take a close look at daily practices within the black box of schooling life in order to understand what the LBC experience in school.

Case Methods

Case study has a long history in many disciplines (Jocher, 1928, Simons, 1980; Ragin,1992; Gomm, Hammersley & Foster, 2004; Platt, 2007), and a group of Western scholars have produced a variety of definitions and descriptions pertinent to case study: Adelman, Jenkins and Kemmis, 1976; Cohen et al., 2007; Creswell, 2013; MacDonald and Walker, 1975; Nunan, 1992; Silverman, 2005; Simons, 2009, 2014; Stake, 1995, 2005; Stenhouse, 1975,1978; Yin, 2003. Throughout, case study has been a contested terrain, characterised by varying and sometimes opposing approaches espoused by many research methodologists: Yin and Hammersley, for example, are concerned with cases as generalised components of theory – a normative approach; whereas Stake, MacDonald and Kushner (2000) are proponents of the unique and intrinsic qualities of cases – an ideographic approach.

A common feature of all writings on case methods is its versatility in moving across and integrating diverse data sources. Case study can be defined by two key characteristics: one, that it aims to understand the inner workings of a bounded system – i.e. a system that has holistic properties, that can be understood in its own terms; the second, that this understanding is generated, not given or imported. And it is generated through the study of how elements interact. What makes the bounded system coherent is not a theory applied to it or some other criterion imported from elsewhere, but how elements are contingently related (Kushner, 2017). A case study is, in a sense, a mosaic with no mortar holding it together. At the centre of the mosaic is the essential place of experience and the study of persons (MacDonald, 1976; Kushner, 2014).

This is especially important where we are concerned with the impact of a 'hidden curriculum', as we are here. The nature of a hidden curriculum is that it is a construct of system, a by-product of it – not one that was pre-designed, or even articulated. It can only be known by a process of 'inference'.

This account starts with an encounter with a student that occurred during a case study of a school in China.

Meeting Jiao

A short, slim female student enters and sits in her seat, with tears falling. I recall the group of students standing outside of the classroom, fidgeting while waiting for the coming decree from the parent. The girl has long hair and is wearing a light blue school uniform. She goes straight to her seat, sits down and stays motionless. But I see the tears falling down her face, silently. She is not crying as such, not even weeping—I mean that her face, even her eyes, remain expressionless—drops of tears fall down her cheeks and she doesn't bother to wipe them. I stand up, go to her and bend down and ask, all out of a mother's instinct, as gently as I can: "Are you ok?" She nods. "Can we talk and see if I can do anything to help?" I add. She bites her lower lip and the tears suddenly increase; I give her a light hug, something I believe any mother would do in this situation.

"It is my test scores."

She murmurs, when I hold her in my arms. I feel relieved; just scores, I think to myself. "You didn't do well in your last test? Well, it happens to every student, I guess?" I try to comfort her.

"I can never do well enough, I have tried my best and I just cannot satisfy them."

"Them?", I ask.

"My parents."

Then the head teacher comes down from the front of the classroom…

Several days later we had a conversation. This girl is Jiao, a 17-year-old student of Year 10. Jiao was born in 1999 in the countryside in Hunan province. She went to primary school at the age of five, and she has an older sister and a younger brother[3]. I ask whether people in her hometown generally disparage girls, which is not uncommon, to my knowledge.

"My grandma treats me very well," she said.

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[3] The birth control policy in China before 2016 has long allowed those living in the countryside to have two children under certain conditions—if the first child is a girl, for example. Besides, ethnic minorities (less than 10% of the population) are often allowed two or more. Another situation is those who are able to pay the fines of violating the one-child policy can have more children. After 2016, the second child are allowed by the government for the increasingly severe problem of aging population.

> *Her voice trembles a bit. I mean to wait, but I cannot stand the silence, and I start asking more about her sister. Her sister is older than her by two years and is now in Year 12. Jiao was raised by her grandparents, her mother's parents, until she was 11 years old. During the first 11 years in her life she met her parents once a year, and our conversation brings us unavoidably to the topic of leaving her beloved grandmother. Her tears are now unstoppable and accompanied by violent sobs.*

It was this conversation that brought to life the experience of 'left-behind children (LBC)'. But why do their parents choose to leave them behind at the first place?

This entails a quest into the original cause of LBC. This situation requires more background information. During the initial period of reform and opening up in modern China, a time when the society was in proletarian egalitarianism but when there was a shortage of materials, the government adopted some 'tilted policies' to enable certain regions to become prosperous, on the assumption that the prosperity for the rest would follow in time (Cai, 2011). It is with the emergence of an imbalanced economic landscape that domestic migration, also known as the 'floating population' (FP), occurs in as much a market-based as a state-directed process. That is, migration streams are largely driven by economic motives as well as by a growing need for cheap labour (Bonacich, 1972; Portes & DeWind, 2004). FP has fuelled China's economic boom and, in the meantime, has also forced a re-drawing of China's social landscape: due to the state-sponsored hukou system, the FP often, upon their arrival in cities, exist as undocumented persons and suffer from social and economic discrimination (Meng, 2004). Consequently, most of the FP remain crammed into dormitories where children are not allowed (Chan, 2013). Many FP parents believe they are fulfilling their duty to raise their family's standard of living. It is common, therefore, for both parents to leave home together, as they can save faster and there are ample jobs in the city.

Hukou stands out conspicuously in this situation. Before the 1990s, hukou, this institutionalised barrier for social mobility, had received scant mention in the literature. The last two decades have seen increasing attention from scholars towards this system and the central government's efforts to reform. Kam Wing Chan (1994, 1999, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2013) has argued that the hukou system was not designed mainly as a system to block rural-urban migration, as commonly portrayed in the Western literature; instead, it was part of a larger economic and political system set up to serve multiple state interests. It functions well for China's divisive dualistic socio-economic structure and the country's two classes of citizenship, for it effectively circumscribes the peasantry's economic, social and political opportunities and rights, creating a massive pool of low-cost rural labour tied to land of very little market value (Qin, 2005; Kelly, 2008) through effectively reinforcing a kind of regional apartheid (Goodkind & West, 2002). To be specific, under this system, some 700-800 million people are in effect treated as second-class citizens, deprived of the opportunity to settle legally in cities and deprived of access to most of the basic welfare and state-provided services enjoyed by regular urban residents.

…When she calms down a bit, I ask about her parents and learn that they are now both working in factories; neither has achieved any higher education, so Jiao can get no help at home with her learning. I then assume that her sister might at least be able to help and find that the sister is still back in the hometown.

"When does your sister go back to the hometown?"

She never comes.

"Is she ok with that?" I actually feel shocked at knowing a child grows up seeing the parents yearly.

My sister is one who prefers to keep everything to herself. She might have complained in the past, I guess? But not now.

"Your parents' attitude?"

They must have tried to bring her over too. But failed. Too many requirements; they cannot make it. So, they have to leave her behind.

"Do you know anything specific regarding those conditions? Financial? Or hukou?"

Both… But I guess also out of the concern for her schooling, whether she is able to catch up in the local schooling here.

To be enrolled for most local primary schools in cities requires certain conditions. The better the school seems, the more restricted and higher the requirements for enrolment. An examination of school enrolment policies in cities may reveal more of the LBC's experience. By general term, to get enrolled into a city primary school, one's family must provide three documents: 'hukou', 'Family Planning Service Certificate (FPSC)' [4], 'property ownership certificate'[5], all of which provide the necessary context for this study.

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[4] The Family Planning Service Certificate (FPSC), together with some other documents, works in conjunction with hukou system to signify that each child is properly registered. Under the national one-child policy, in order to get the child properly registered for the hukou system, a pregnant mother was expected to notify the community Family Planning Office about her pregnancy and apply for a certificate permitting the birth of the baby. In order to register with hukou, each child, after the birth, must have proper documentation from the local Family Planning department and a medical birth certificate, which are submitted after birth registration, as well as valid identification of the parents.

[5] The school enrolment policy in M City stipulates that the children must go to the nearest school, and most state-run schools require that the family should own a property in the school zone. Most also decree the information recorded in the property ownership certificate be in congruence with one's hukou registration. Without having a property in the schooling zone, one has to go through a very cumbersome application procedure to go to school, which can make purchasing a property an ostensibly wiser choice.

Among the three requirements, I find the requirement of the property ownership certificate the easiest to understand if deploying Bourdieu's theories of 'capital' and 'field'. To unravel the nexus between schooling and the reproduction of social structure, Bourdieu expands the concept of capital and breaks it down into different species: social capital, cultural capital, economic capital and symbolic capital. The value of capital is determined by its convertibility (Bourdieu, 1986). That is, social and cultural capital will mean little if they cannot be converted to other types of capital, especially economic capital. Similarly, economic capital acquires its sociological significance only when it is converted to social and cultural capital, thus translating economic inequalities to particular social relations and cultural representations.

The theory of 'capital' and 'field' works well so far to highlight the possible pattern of how schooling helps individuals from socioeconomically advantaged families to maintain the privilege through learning in order to become socially made winners – Bernstein (1977) showed how language functions as a key element of social capital, favouring the socially privileged and their capacity for 'convertibility'.

This study focuses on the effects of hukou in particular, (the household registration) on the LBC's educational experience. Specifically, when Hukou is included as a compulsory condition for school enrolment in cities, schooling may be aiding, instead of improving, the social stratification.

Given rising inequality in the distribution of economic resources resulting from the tilted policy, the reform-era China has seen uneven distribution of educational opportunities which seems to have worsened in the context of market reforms in the educational sphere. To meet the growing demand for a skilled work force, the Chinese authorities' called for 'revitalizing China through developing science and education' (科教兴国/kejiao xingguo) within the global context of a knowledge-based economy. To cope with the huge investment in the expansion of education, the state has adopted the policy of decentralization, privatization and marketization in education in order to mobilize the non-state resources. As a consequence, financial responsibilities of education funding have been reallocated to central and local governments as well as state, social organizations and individuals. The reallocation of financial responsibilities means that a university's funding is closely related to the economic development of its region (Wang Li 2008). In the context of the rural-urban dichotomy in China, the children of people with rural-hukou status (namely, rural migrants denied urban citizens' rights) face significant disadvantages when accessing learning resources (Liang & Chen, 2012).

Hukou, unique to China, once included into schooling enrolment policies, seems to confer a role to schools, and this role, little to do with education, contributes intimately to the large group of people who are becoming losers in the modern world's meritocratic competition: the LBC and those who are not born in an economically developed area in China. Quoting a popular slogan in China here: they lose at their birthplace. This also confirms the fact that the LBC have been the unfortunate outcome of China's Urbanization, disproportionately bearing the cost for China's unprecedented transformative industrialization (Jingzhong & Lu, 2011).

At that time when I was not together with them (the parents)*, I was able to do well in schooling; I mean I can have good test scores. But they didn't seem content, bugging me that what's the use of good scores if a girl is not obedient enough.* (She sobs.) *Later my test scores are not as good as before (When I move from the country side to the city to stay together with them) and they start telling me that they see nothing good in me, or I am good for nothing.*

Though many individuals accept the notion that schooling serves to maximize the possibility of personal mobility, leading in some direct fashion to the ability to live a better life later on, little empirical evidence has showed up to support the notion of a significant trend towards meritocracy (Breen and Goldthorpe, 2001; Whelan and Layte, 2002). It is intergenerational inheritance, however, that has been persistently identified in educational and occupational attainment (Jackson, 2007; Arrow, Bowles, and Durlauf, 2000). For if meritocracy works, as Michael Apple powerfully pointed out, people can expect the relationship between test scores and measure of adult success rising over time, and the relationship between family background and adult success falling; "Neither of this is the case. Instead, current evidence seems to indicate that there has been little consistent loosening of the ties between origins and attainments through schools" (2012, p. 38).

Even so, Liu Ye in his *Meritocracy and the Gaokao*[6] shows that meritocracy has been a powerful ideology used by the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) during China's transition to a market economy, with gaokao, the means for higher education selection, an ideal vehicle (2013, p 868).

Meritocracy has its historical roots in China: gaokao in modern China was only established in the 1950s, but the long tradition of standardized national examinations in China date back to the 1400s, then under the name of Civil Service Examination in the Imperial era. A recent predecessor of gaokao was the joint college entrance examination adopted by the Kuomintang (KMT) government, which was designed to strengthen the ideological controls over intellectuals through a centralized mechanism (Chen, 2007). Since the establishment of People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the CCP has succeeded and adapted the KMT's system to the gaokao system. Gaokao has since become a standardized nationwide system for higher education admission. As the gaokao performance has been demonstrated to be a consistently strong indicator of students' chances of getting into elite universities, gaokao has been taken as meritocratic for elite opportunities.

With the permission of Mr Yu, I attend the Parents-Teacher meeting (31 December 2015)

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[6] Gaokao/高考: Gaokao, also known as The National College Entrance Examination (NCEE), is a set of nationwide joint examinations taken by high school graduates in their last year of senior high school in the People's Republic of China.

In M School, the Parents-Teacher meeting happens once a semester and usually in the week after the midterm examination. The tradition here is for the parents, for example, all the parents of Year 10, to first of all sit in the school hall to be addressed by the school leaders and then go and sit in the classroom to hear the teacher talk. Because I have been acquainted with some basic data of the parents from Class 6 (C6), I am not surprised to see some parents come in their working uniform, some in shabby shoes, and some in shoddy clothes, while one or two 'boss-like' fathers dress in very formal suits. Only half of the families in C6 have local hukou. The attendance of the meeting, I hear from one of the head teachers, shows insufficient involvement of the parents.

Three school leaders take turns to talk about what the parents are expected to do for their children's futures, the achievement the school has obtained and the gaokao policies. Back in C6, I choose to sit at the back and the parents are guided to the seat of their child, and on the top of the desk several forms are awaiting them. They are Excel forms which have been painstakingly produced following each monthly examination, showing meticulous statistical data for each student: the total score, subject score, the increased/decreased points compared to the last exam score with respect to the total and each subject, the place of that score in the class and over the whole year, and how many places this score has progressed or declined in the class and over the whole year. This form, printed, will be assuredly delivered to all parties—the students, the parents, the teachers, the team leader in charge of the whole year—ensuring all parties are clear about the individual's ranking place. This seems to be the main task for Parents-Teacher meeting…

I need to be attentive, too, as Yu wants me to help write the meeting memo. By then I have been informed that there will be 26 attending. The meeting starts with a short video showing pictures of each student in C6 during school military training, and this is followed by the theme of the meeting: Let's work together to escort our children to their futures. What follows is a lecture on how to read the forms on the table, and the names of the top five students are repeated. To effectively address the test paper scores, all levels of gaokao admission grades are presented as a parameter for the parents to envision a possible future for the student. This is when all the parents prudently examine all the figures in the forms, most sitting like the students in silence…

[…]

In this Secondary School, the class has fortnightly tests and monthly exams, on average, in addition to the mid-term and final examinations. This excludes Year 12 classes, who have a more concentrated training. The school holds Parents-Teacher meetings twice a year, immediately after the mid-term examination in each term.

Several painstakingly prepared Excel forms are produced following each monthly examination, and they show meticulous statistical data for each class, each subject and each student. Figure 1 presents data selected from the portfolio from the Parents-Teacher meeting for Class 6.

The form shows class rank in the second monthly examination from 20-22 December 2014. There are six Year 10 classes, and the form lists their rank in each subject and their final rank. The first two classes are the so-called good class.

Figure 1. One of the documents collected from the Parents-Teacher meeting, showing class rank in the second monthly examination.

Another document collected from the Parents-Teacher meeting is an example of the statistical analysis of the performance of each class in each subject (see Figure 2). It tells the rank, the progress (rise or fall) in the rank, the top score, the lowest and the average score, the passing rate and the excellence rate.

Figure 2. Form showing statistical analysis of the examination performance of each class in Year 10.

The Schooling Report for Class 6 (see Figure 3) lists the student's name, their subject score, the total score, the increased or decreased scores contrasted with the

last exam score respective of the total and each subject score, the place of that score in the class and in the whole year, how many places this score has progressed or declined in the class and in the whole year. In the portfolio there are also Schooling Reports for the other five classes.
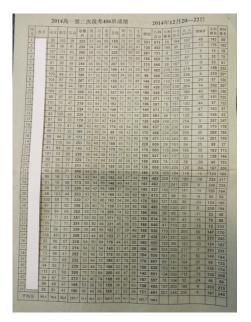
Figure 3. Form showing statistical analysis of the examination performance of each student in Class 6, Year 10.

A further document collected from the Parents-Teacher meeting is the individually personalised report (see Figure 4), which shows the individual's name and class number, the head teacher's name and mobile, followed by the individual's test score for entering the M School, the scores of the first and second monthly examination and other rankings.

Figure 4. One student's test scores and rankings from Class 6, Year 10.

The publication of these statistics is part of the school's commitment to curriculum outcomes as represented in social differentiation. The school is compliant with the

thrust of Chinese social and economic policy, the determination towards rapid industrialization – a determination that threatens to leave Jiao behind.

A Pedagogical Move: The 'Winners' and 'Losers'

A Letter to Those Unwilling to Study Hard at School is the title of the 23-slide PowerPoint Mr Yu, the head teacher of Class 6, shares with me for my research. It is this that he uses to educate both the students at the class meeting and the parents at the Parents-Teacher meeting. The PowerPoint has been carefully made and is imbued with vivid images and symbols.

It first projects an image of 'poor' students: school uniform, seemingly unconventional long hair, smoking, hanging out in small group, not reading, playing on their mobiles.

Figure 5. Slide depicting "poor" students, from the PowerPoint entitled A Letter to Those Unwilling to Study Hard at School.

This is directly linked to the image of the "loser" or "failure". By "loser" or "failure", in China, this refers to those diligent factory workers: sitting in uniform, working in straight lines, and paid by piecework (see Figure 6). For me, it implies a pathetic way of life I once read about—a life of 12 hours' work every day, with no time for anything but survival.

Figure 6. Factory workers linked to the image of 'loser'

Or a figure in a dense steel jungle in a construction site, busy working with a hammer, in simplistic security attire, which is not clean.

Figure 7. Workers in a construction site, from the PowerPoint entitled A Letter to Those Unwilling to Study Hard at School.

Then the image of the parents, who are hardworking, but in my eyes still wrongly loathed and downtrodden in Chinese society: the shirtless male manual workers sitting, crowded together, to watch a DVD on a DVD player during their leisure time, with probably two of the wives staying in one corner (see Figure 8). The dirt floor, the fans, the unwashed dishes on the table, and rubbish under the table, the inferior bedding, all indicate shabby and inhumane living conditions. This is a typical image of the 'floating population'. And this is used to indicate a future life of those who do not study hard at school, or who study hard but without attaining competitive achievement.

Figure 8. Depicting living conditions of 'floating workers', from the PowerPoint entitled A Letter to Those Unwilling to Study Hard at School.

For the opposite, 'good' student and 'successful life' has been iconised, too (see Figure 9). The 'good' student is represented by a teenage girl in neat school uniform holding a book reading. And the "successful/happy life" is represented by young people and implies company/office life: the male in a Western suit, tie and

leather shoes; the female in a white-collared blouse, suit and high-heeled shoes, striding in a sunny and spacious corridor of a modern office building.

Figure 9. A depiction of 'winners' walking in an office building, from the PowerPoint entitled Letter to Those Unwilling to Study Hard at School.

The last slide comes as the conclusion to all the previous contrasts (this is not an interpretation, but translation of the slide content):

- *You live in a society full of fierce competition and only very few can win out through studying hard and/or working hard.*

- *To those who harbour the thinking that youth is for rebellion, you had better to be reminded that you live in China, not America or Europe.*

- *The reality in China is that people believe in the law of the jungle and the survival of the fittest.*

- *The cost for a merry-seeking youth is life-long low status in the bottom of our society.*

- *I must have failed to hide my agitation, and raised my concern to Mr Yu: "What about teaching people to respect those manual labourers?"*

He looks at me and seriously asks:

Well, if you can, tell me, when have you seen those people treated respectfully? What is the consequence if we encourage our students to go after that style of life? What options do you think we, the classroom teacher can have, but to push our students to work harder? Do they have other options? We have to be realistic and they have to face this reality in our society.

Conclusion

This article emerged from research towards a doctorate. One of the principal aims of that research was to explore whether Western-derived social and educational methodologies are appropriate for a Chinese schooling context, or whether culture overwhelms knowledge transfer. Clearly, there are arguments both ways. The particularities of Hukou and Chinese policy and values, not to say basic social infrastructure such as the blurred boundaries between family and social institution, demand particular ways of looking and seeing. An implicit theme in the social differentiation function of the school we have just witnessed is the unique way that Chinese cultures cast relationships between individual and collective. 'Personhood' – no less than citizenship – has a specifically Chinese interpretation.

But, at the same time, it does appear that the key concept of Western capitalist schooling, the hidden curriculum has an equally powerful analytical capability in China – and along similar lines to those exhibited in Phillip Jackson's early studies of classrooms and the subsequent arguments of critical educational sociologists, from Michael Apple and Henry Giroux in the USA to Basil Bernstein and Michael Young in Britain. They all look beyond the veil of simple functional assumptions of schools and classrooms focused on teaching and learning, to discover more subtle aims to do with social differentiation and economic imperatives, with 'crowd control' and behaviour management. In the research reported here, the social and educational capital that LBCs can accumulate in order to take on the challenge of social mobility is limited by circumstance, especially by the economic circumstance of the family, and can barely be mitigated by school experience.

School emerges, in this case study, as subsumed under a command-and-control economy, quite different from the UK low-trust accountability system, but no less rigorous and stifling of local creativity and action. Assessment systems in both Western and Chinese contexts are elemental in the tightening of the command culture and in proscribing teaching, learning and pedagogical relationships. It supports a model of school management that is as hierarchical as the social knowledge taught in classrooms in the guise of future career planning.

Case study has been a useful instrument to reveal some of the realities – hidden and otherwise – of Chinese schools. This particular condensation of a school case study has taken us on a journey from individual experience, through school and curriculum to Chinese history and social policy. In terms of a case as 'the study of a bounded system', the boundaries are those that circumscribe Left Behind Children. We may rest comfortable with the idea that schools and classrooms draw their boundaries tightly around agendas of teaching, learning and credentialing. But such comfort is not justified in this account. We cannot confine curriculum – much less assessment – to such narrow structures. If we are to understand Jiao's predicament, we need to look beneath the extant curriculum to see the 'hidden curriculum' – and we need to look beyond classroom and school to see how Jiao is contingently linked to agendas far beyond the reach of her experience. The curriculum to which Jiao is exposed is only partially represented in school life – much of it lies well beyond her grasp and that of her teachers. In journeying to those far places of

history and policy we do not abandon Jiao. She is present all the time. Jiao has been left behind by her helpless parents: there is no cause for her to be further left behind by 'floating' theory.

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Authors

Yanming Ren is University Lecturer at Zhuhai College, Jilin University, China.

Saville Kushner is Professor Education at *Edge Hill University, UK.*

John Hope is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Learning, Development and Professional Practice at University of Auckland, New Zealand.

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