

**Segmented Incorporation:  
The Second Generation of Rural Migrants in Shanghai**

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Abstract

This paper looks at the changing frameworks for the institutional and cultural incorporation of second-generation rural migrants in Shanghai. Beginning in 2008, Shanghai launched a new policy of accepting migrant children into urban public schools in the primary and secondary levels. I show that the *hukou* (household registration) is still a critical social boundary in educational institutions, shaping uneven distribution of educational resources and opportunities, as well as hierarchical recognition of differences between urbanites and migrants. I coined the term “segmented incorporation” to characterise a new receiving context, in which systematic exclusion has given way to more subtle forms of institutional segmentation, which reproduces cultural prejudice and reinforces group boundaries.

Keywords: internal migration, peasant worker, China, second generation,  
segmented assimilation

The household registration system (*hukou* 户口) has regulated the massive flows of rural-to-urban migration in post-reform China. Rural migrants were deprived of the rights to permanent residency in the city and social benefits associated with urban citizenship, including the entitlement for their children to attend urban public schools.<sup>1</sup> Since the late 1990s, the governments on both national and local levels have carried out a variety of adjustments to the *hukou* system.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the migrant population in recent years has come to display a feature of urban settlement and family unification.

According to an official survey conducted in five metropolises in China, the majority of migrant households (67.4%) were composed of parents and children, and 70 per cent of migrant parents kept their children in the cities rather than leaving them behind in the countryside.<sup>3</sup> These children have become the second generation of rural migrants, encompassing the second generation in strict sense (born in the city) and the first and half generation (born in the countryside). Despite their birth or growing up in the cities, they are still registered as peasants in their *hukou* status. According to the 2010 census, the number of migrant population (people who have lived somewhere different from their *hukou* locations for over six months) has reached 221 million, including 22.9 million of children aged 14 years old and younger, accounting for ten per cent of the national population of children within this age range.<sup>4</sup>

The language with which the Chinese press and official documents refer to migrant children has also changed in response to the shifting patterns of migration. “Floating

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<sup>1</sup> Solinger 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Chan and Buckingham 2008; Wang 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Family Planning Commission of China 2010.

<sup>4</sup> My calculation from National State Council, Office of Census, P.R.C. 2011. These numbers exclude those who live somewhere different from their *hukou* locations within the same city (39.96 million).

children” (*liudong ertong* 流动儿童), the popular term in the 1990s with a connotation of transience and instability, has gradually been replaced by more neutral and sedentary terms like “children living with peasant workers” (*nongmingong tongju zinu* 农民工同住子女、*jincheng wugong jiuye nongmin zinu* 进城务工就业农民子女) in the early 2000s.<sup>5</sup> More recently, the Chinese press has coined terms like “second-generation peasants” (*nonerdai* 农二代) and “second-generation migrant workers” (*mingong erdai* 民工二代) to designate the younger generation as a group with an autonomous existence in the city rather than simply as an attachment to their parents’ migration.

Has the significance of the *hukou* declined, since second-generation rural migrants are no longer excluded but somewhat incorporated into the city? To investigate the changing frameworks of migration incorporation, I focus on Shanghai, a city that has launched a series of pioneer reforms in regard to *hukou* policies and migrant welfare, including incorporating migrant children into urban mandatory education. I coined the term “segmented incorporation” to characterise this new receiving context, in which second-generation migrants are incorporated into educational institutions and yet channeled into segmented paths.

### Segmented Assimilation and Incorporation

The concept of assimilation has dominated the literature on second-generation immigrants. Traditionally, the concept is defined as “a natural process by which diverse ethnic groups come to share a common culture and to gain equal access to the opportunity

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<sup>5</sup> Ling 2011.

structure of society.”<sup>6</sup> Scholars have recently challenged such view of linear assimilation by developing new conceptual tools to explore the complexity of immigrant adaptation and incorporation.

Portes and his colleagues shifted the central question from “whether the second generation will assimilate to American society” to “to what segment of that society it will assimilate.”<sup>7</sup> The heterogeneity of assimilation outcomes can be explained by the “modes of incorporation,” which consist of the “contexts of reception” defined by the policies of the host government, the conditions of the labour market, the values of the receiving society, and the characteristics of the co-ethnic community. Certain receiving contexts create vulnerability to “downward assimilation” for immigrant youth, for example, where the policies of receiving government is toward exclusion or passive acceptance, and the labour market is bifurcated and short of mobility ladders for immigrants.<sup>8</sup>

Other scholars have reformulated the concept of assimilation to see it as a process of boundary negotiation and reconstitution. Alba and Nee define assimilation as the “decline of an ethnic distinction and its corollary cultural and social differences.”<sup>9</sup> Alba also argues that the nature of the ethnic boundary—as “bright” or “blurry”—would shape the various processes involved in the incorporation of second-generation immigrants. When the boundary is “bright,” assimilation is likely to take the form of boundary crossing, such as conversion or naturalization. When the boundary is “blurry,” individuals may negotiate with ambiguous locations with respect to the boundary and develop hyphenated

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<sup>6</sup> Zhou 1997, 976.

<sup>7</sup> Portes et al. 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Portes et al. 1993.

<sup>9</sup> Alba and Nee 2003, 11.

or intermediate identities.<sup>10</sup>

The above literature has inspired my research of Chinese rural-to-urban migration. Yet, I prefer to use the notion “incorporation” instead of “assimilation” to underscore the institutionalized nature of *hukou* boundaries. I propose that it is necessary to distinguish the processes of *institutional incorporation* (the redistribution of rights, resources and opportunities) and *cultural incorporation* (the recognition of difference between host and immigrant). I coined the concept “segmented incorporation” to describe that the above two processes, often operating in different domains and involving boundaries of distinct natures, result in various modes of incorporation and segmented paths for the second generation. Figure 1 demonstrates my analytic framework that views segmented incorporation as a social space (field) structured by the coordinates of institutional incorporation (toward equality or deprivation) and cultural incorporation (toward differentiation or assimilation). The four quadrants denote various combinations of institutional and cultural boundaries.

[Figure 1]

The distinction between institutional and cultural incorporation is critical in the case of China. The barriers to adaptation faced by Chinese migrants are two-fold: on the one hand, institutional exclusion and systematic marginalization based on their lack of local *hukou*, and on the other hand, cultural prejudices and discrimination built on the urban-rural divide. The boundary between urbanites and migrants in China has a dual nature that appears to be contradictory: it is a “bright” boundary because *hukou*

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<sup>10</sup> Alba 2005.

classification involves unambiguous institutional categories enforced by the state, and yet the boundary also appears “blurry” because urbanites and migrants share racial and cultural similarities.

Most rural migrants are Han Chinese with the same racial origin and national citizenship as urban residents. The quasi-ethnic divisions between them are instead based on regional identities defined by native place. Honig’s study on the labour migration of *Subei* people in Republican-era Shanghai has demonstrated that such “ethnicity” does not involve inherent traits that people are born with, but involves a social and historical process of constructing boundaries between groups of people in specific contexts.<sup>11</sup>

In the communist period, regional boundaries were further consolidated by the *hukou* system. It is important to note that a *hukou* is categorized based on two related parts: one’s regional location (local vs. non-local) and one’s socio-economic eligibility (agricultural or non-agricultural).<sup>12</sup> The population of so-called Shanghainess actually contains vast heterogeneity: for instance, many are descendents from *Subei* immigrants, and some only recently converted their agricultural *hukou* in the *nongzhuanfei* (农转非) reform. They nevertheless share a common institutional membership, the boundary of which is marked by the exclusion of non-*hukou* migrants.

Despite the rigid categorization of institutional membership, the fuzzy boundary between urbanites and migrants is subject to symbolic struggle by which the dominant group mobilizes cultural and discursive resources to naturalize the fabricated status hierarchy. In Republican Shanghai, the locals turned the category of *Subei* (苏北) people into a class metaphor connoting poverty and backwardness. Similarly, in the post-reform

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<sup>11</sup> Honig 1992.

<sup>12</sup> Chan and Buckingham 2008.

era, the institutional exclusion of non-*hukou* migrants is justified by the powerful discourse of *suzhi* (素质quality) that marginalizes peasants as the underclass for their alleged lack of civilization.

This paper focuses on education as a major institution that defines the receiving contexts for second-generation migrants in urban China. Education is not only a means for individuals to cultivate human skills or cultural capital; it is also an institutional field highly regulated by the Chinese state and tightly coupled with the *hukou* policy. My lines of inquiry are: how does the current policy regime incorporate migrant children in terms of the redistribution of educational resources and opportunities? How do urbanites and migrants negotiate cultural differences and social boundaries between them in the context of educational incorporation? How do educational institutions channel the future of second-generation migrants into particular segments and specific paths?

### Research Methods

Shanghai is an ideal site to study second-generation migrants for several reasons. First, family settlement is a common residential pattern among rural migrants in Shanghai, because migrants are employed across various job sectors and many of them live in the city with their families on rental property rather than factory dormitory. Secondly, Shanghai has launched a series of reforms to improve the welfare of rural migrants. Most importantly, it is the first Chinese city that incorporates migrant children into public schools in the primary and secondary levels. Although Shanghai is indeed a pioneer in the domain of educational incorporation, it is not an exceptional case. Many other Chinese cities have gradually introduced similar measures in order to carry out the policy issued



by the State Council.<sup>13</sup>

In the summers of 2009 and 2010, I located migrant families in a village in Baoshang (宝山) District in northern Shanghai. I interviewed 84 persons from 44 families, including 40 women and 44 men. Thirty-six informants belonged to the second generation. Although I was unable to gain access to observe classes at public schools, I did conduct interviews with teachers, migrant worker school administrators, employers, and NGO staff members. I also collected relevant statistics, news, and opinions on internet forums.

### *Hukou* Policy Reform in Shanghai

Shanghai has accommodated a fast-growing population of non-*hukou* migrants in the reform era. The size of the migrant population was 1.55 million in 1986 and grew to 2.6 million in 1993, 3.9 million in 2000, and 8.98 million in 2010.<sup>14</sup> The 2010 census revealed that two out of five residents in Shanghai had a non-local *hukou*.<sup>15</sup> Shanghai's government, famous for its fiscal and administrative capacities, has implemented a series of new policies to reform the *hukou* system. In 1994, Shanghai ran a pilot scheme of "blue-stamp" (*lanyin* 蓝印) *hukou* to attract the moneyed and the skilled from outside provinces. In 2002, Shanghai replaced blue-stamp *hukou* with "talent (*rencai* 人才) residence permits" to attract migrants with higher education and special talents.<sup>16</sup> In 2009, the city further opened the gate by granting talent migrants with the opportunity of

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<sup>13</sup> The relevant policies of Beijing and Wenzhou were reported by Magazine.caixin.com 2012. See Ren and Yang 2012 for the cases of Beijing, Shenzhen and Hefei.

<sup>14</sup> Wang et al. 2002; Shanghai Statistics Bureau 2011a.

<sup>15</sup> Shanghai Statistics Bureau 2011b.

<sup>16</sup> Shanghai.gov.cn 2002

“naturalization.” A point system was established to evaluate the eligibility of migrant applicants for the approval of local *hukou*.<sup>17</sup> Shanghai launched this new “green card” policy to demonstrate its eagerness for competition and its determination to become a megacity of finance and trade.

Peasant migrant workers, by contrast, are not eligible on the basis of their lack of education and talent. However, their status and benefits have also improved in recent years. In 2007, Shanghai introduced a complex social insurance system for migrant workers, covering occupational injuries, basic medical insurance, and retirement pensions. The city requires employers to buy complex insurance for all migrant workers who hold a long-term residence permit and sign an employment contract. Although the migrants have improved protections and rights, they are still locked into a hierarchical scheme of social security that demonstrates “the institutionalization of differential citizenship.”<sup>18</sup>

In the 1990s, it was hardly possible for migrant children to attend public schools unless they paid exorbitant “sponsor fees” (800 yuan per semester). Instead they enrolled in unlicensed peasant worker schools, run by migrant entrepreneurs, with low quality and poor facilities. In response to rising public concerns about the education of migrant children, Premier Wen Jiabao visited one peasant worker school in Beijing in September 2003. He wrote on the blackboard: “Under the same blue sky, grow up and progress together.”<sup>19</sup> Afterwards, a policy document issued by the State Council urged local governments to take up the responsibility of providing nine-year compulsory education

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<sup>17</sup> An eligible migrant applicant must have held a Shanghai residency certificate, have been in the city's social security system for at least seven years, be taxpayers, have obtained vocational qualifications at medium or high levels, have never violated family planning policies, have good credit and no criminal record. Qian 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Wu, Jieh-Min 2010.

<sup>19</sup> All quotes are translated by the author from Chinese.

for migrant children without discriminatory charges of tuition fees.<sup>20</sup> In 2008, the State Council demanded that host governments comply with the “Compulsory Education Act”, which was revised in 2006, and provide free and accessible compulsory education to all migrant children with valid documents.

### Institutional Incorporation in the Domain of Education

Beginning in 2008, Shanghai launched a three-year campaign with the goal of incorporating at least 70 per cent of migrant children into primary education and 100 per cent into secondary education. In 2007, there were still 258 unregistered informal peasant worker schools. By the end of 2009, only 23 such schools remained. The rest were either shut down or transformed into private institutions under public subsidy (*minban gongzhu* 民办公助). The government approved the application of 151 schools to become registered schools that would only admit migrant students.<sup>21</sup> There were three ways to change over: first, those schools whose facilities and qualities met standards stipulated by the government received state funding and became registered institutions; second, the government bought out some schools and reassigned management; and third, the government introduced funding and personnel to establish new schools. A school can receive a public subsidy ranging from 2000-3000 yuan (varying by district) for the enrollment of each migrant student. Students do not have to pay tuition but they are still responsible for their own stationary, uniforms and field trips.

In addition to migrant-specific schools, public and private schools in Shanghai are legally required to accept migrant children without the charge of sponsor fees. Based on

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<sup>20</sup> gov.cn 2003.

<sup>21</sup> Shanghai City Committee. 2009.

official statistics, the proportion of migrant children admitted to public schools rose from 49 per cent in 2005 to 69 per cent in 2009; the proportion of migrant children attending unlicensed peasant worker schools dropped from 51 per cent to 3 per cent; and, in 2009, 28 per cent of migrant students were placed in state-subsidised private schools for migrant students.

[Figure 2]

The official reports of the Chinese government have a tendency to exaggerate success and should be taken with a grain of salt. For instance, the denominator of the ratio, the population of migrant children aged between six to 14 years old in Shanghai (officially reported as 421,483 in 2009), is an underestimate because migrant children under 16 years old are not legally required to register as temporary residents, and only a small proportion of migrant children born in urban areas have their births registered. Statistical numbers about migrant population, as incomplete and sometimes unreliable, only reveals the surface. In the following, I draw on interviews and field observations to explore how this policy reform trickles down to the everyday school life: Are migrant children fully incorporated into the urban education system, or are they channeled into segregated space and segmented paths?

### *Spatial Segregation*

Spatial practices, such as access to and use of public space, manifest the symbolic

marginality of peasant migrants in Chinese cities.<sup>22</sup> The spatial allocation of migrant students in public schools also demonstrates the politics of inclusion and segregation—the urban-rural boundary is spatially embodied as porous or rigid for various groups of migrant students. The first graders of migrant children, considered not yet under negative influence by peasant migrant schools, are usually placed in mixed classes and mixed schools, but those who transferred from peasant worker schools tend to be placed in separate classes, located on floors or in buildings different from local students, or even separate schools.

Spatial segregation is most tangible in examination-oriented junior high schools. A Chinese newspaper article in 2010 documented the admission of migrant children in a junior middle school in Shanghai,<sup>23</sup> where migrant and local students are completely segregated—not only are they placed in separate classes, but they even use different doorways to enter the campus, wear uniforms of different styles, and attend classes at different schedule so students would not mingle at class breaks. In short, despite attending the same school, local children avoid interactions with migrant children completely.

This school embodies what I call “the apartheid model.” Spatial segregation at other schools takes place more subtly, such as the one I call “the concession model.” Zhou is a fifth grader who was born in Shanghai by his parents from Jiangxi. His dream for the future is to become a professional athlete like those he saw in 2008 the Beijing Olympic Games. He was recently transferred from an unlicensed peasant migrant school to a local primary school that was newly opened in 2009. This school, along with many other

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<sup>22</sup> Zhang 2001; Woronov 2004.

<sup>23</sup> Wu, Shan 2010.

state-subsidised migrant-specific schools, “borrows” part of the campus from a local primary school. Zhou drew a picture for me to demonstrate the layout of the campus, which I represent as below:

[Figure 3]

The dark areas in the figure indicate the classroom building and playground allocated for migrant students, and the rest are reserved for local students. I asked Zhou what he thought of Shanghai children. He answered, “I don’t know. We never play with them.” “Even in the playground?” I asked. “Yeah, our teacher said we should not play there...Their half is bigger and they have many facilities there. They play some kind of ball I don’t know what it is,” said by Zhou, sounding slightly envious. I asked further: “Can you play there if nobody is around?” “No.” “Why not?” “I don’t know. You have to ask my teacher.” He answered as if the question never occurred to him. I wondered how the rule plays on the other side: “Can they come to your court to play?” He answered in a taken-for-granted tone: “Yes they can. It was theirs, anyway.” “Can you tell who is a Shanghainese and who is a *waidiren* (外地人 people from outside locales)?” “Sure, you can tell right away. Our faces are dark; they are white.”

Despite their common presence on the same campus, visible walls and invisible fences, guarded by school rules, divide local and migrant students. These boundaries substantiate the inferior status of migrant newcomers; the skin colour bar at the playground embodies class distinctions as well as the urban-rural hierarchy. Migrant students are confined to the leased territory, with second-class facilities, equipments, and

resources. Their teachers, many of whom transferred from shutdown peasant worker schools, receive a substantially lower salaries compared with teachers at regular public schools.

### *Barricades to Institutional Incorporation*

Why has spatial segregation, as extreme as the models of apartheid and concession, taken place to divide local and migrant students? Some school administrators defend their measures of segregation with the good intention of “protecting migrant children’s self-esteem.”<sup>24</sup> More importantly, they face pressure from local parents who request to separate local and migrant children in different classes. Some parents chose to transfer their children elsewhere when hearing the school has admitted a substantial number of migrant children.<sup>25</sup> Despite policy reform to open educational opportunities for migrant children, anti-rural prejudices in the receiving society persist to obstruct redistribution in justice.

The exclusive attitudes of parents and school administrators are rooted in institutional contexts: First, the one-child policy exacerbates the anxiety of urban parents about the future of their precious singletons and renders them calculative about educational investment and reward. Second, China’s educational system is highly competitive and examination-oriented. Schools are desperate to improve student’s academic performance because premier schools can demand higher donations and school-selection fees<sup>26</sup> from parents. The bonuses of teachers are also contingent upon

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<sup>24</sup> He 2007.

<sup>25</sup> He 2007; Gu 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Parents pay selection fees to get into elite schools in neighborhoods other than their own or to buy points to enter higher ranked schools.

their students' scores.<sup>27</sup> Migrant students are assumed academically inferior, especially those who transferred from peasant worker schools. The institutions receiving a substantial number of migrant students are seen by local parents as losing capacity to compete.

The host governments also install invisible barriers that limit the educational access of migrant children out of concern for budgets and migrant inflows. Until the requirement was somewhat relaxed in 2011, Shanghai used to request five or six documents for the eligibility of migrant children for urban education.<sup>28</sup> Beijing and many other cities continue to solicit documents like a city residency permit, proof of parent's employment and residence in the city, proof of peasant identity (household registration certificate), child's birth certificate, and sometimes one-child certificate (*jihua shengyu zheng* 计划生育证).<sup>29</sup> Such bureaucratic barricades disqualify a substantial number of migrant children because labour contracts are hardly signed for casual jobs held by migrant parents, and rental agreements are also hard to attain considering the precarious living condition of most migrants households. Furthermore, it is common that the births of migrant children in the cities are not registered due to them being illegal under the one-child policy. These "black children" may thus be deprived of education opportunities in the city given the fact many unregistered peasant worker schools are shut down already.

In addition, there are a limited number of quotas in each school for the admission of migrant children. Migrant parents have to seek schools on their own and compete for

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<sup>27</sup> Chan 2009.

<sup>28</sup> In 2012, the provision of a Shanghai residency permit (valid for at least one year) and a proof for employment and peasant identity is sufficient, according to wap.sh.gov.cn 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Ren and Yang 2012.



available slots. It is especially difficult to earn admission to junior high school because student registration at primary school is not linked with student registration at secondary school in the cases of migrant children. *Guanxi* (关系 personal networks) is still a necessary means for getting into quality schools. It is difficult for migrant parents, who are short in local social capital in the city, to acquire sufficient information and navigate the process of school selection.

Residential segregation has also contributed to the persistence of educational inequality. Rural migrants largely reside on the outskirts of the city. Statistics from the Shanghai Population Census show a trend of gentrification from 1990 to 2000: newly arrived migrants tended to cluster in central districts, but they later relocated to suburban areas. Urban renewal projects further aggravated this trend because the city government demolished most of the shantytowns in central districts.<sup>30</sup> Nowadays, migrant settlements are concentrated in suburban areas like Pudong(浦东), Minhang(闵行), Xongjian(松江), Jiading(嘉定) and Baoshan,<sup>31</sup> where quality schools and educational funds are more limited than those in central districts.

### Cultural Incorporation in the Classroom

Scholars have pointed out that the everyday term *suzhi* acts as a floating signifier to convey a variety of meanings: it marks rural migrants with the presumed lack of value and civilization, while urban middle-class children cultivate *suzhi* as the neoliberal strategy of social and global mobility.<sup>32</sup> This section explores the cultural incorporation

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<sup>30</sup> Ma 2010.

<sup>31</sup> Shanghai Statistics Bureau 2011c.

<sup>32</sup> Anagnost 2004.

of migrant children in school life, or more specifically, how the marker of *suzhi* has been used to denote cultural difference between urban and migrant children, and to differentiate various groups of migrant children. The first part demonstrates that social segregation remains to operate in the classroom of institutional incorporation. The second part shows that urban educators and citizens impose *suzhi* cultivation as a means to distinguish migrant children into those deemed worthy and unworthy.

### *Social Segregation*

At schools that mix local and migrant children in the same class, invisible yet tangible social boundaries remain to divide them. Tang, born in a village in Anhui, moved to Shanghai at the age of three. Her dream is to become a TV host and she considers Shanghai the only place to realize it. Tang is an eloquent speaker and speaks beautiful Mandarin. She can speak only a little Anhui dialect because her parents deliberately speak Mandarin at home to prevent their children from developing a hometown accent, which is considered vulgar. In 2008, after her graduation from a migrant primary school, Tang passed an exam to enter a local junior high school, which only admitted a select number of migrant children. Although her excellent school record earned her admittance, she was asked to register again for the sixth grade. She was excited and yet nervous about the new opportunity of joining local students to study. She recalled when school began:

I was thinking the Shanghai children must be good; they must sit tight and always raise their hands before talking in class; they must behave well at recess; they must listen to the teacher, and they probably have beautiful handwriting. They are students from Shanghai schools—they must be different and very very good. I was thinking,

oh, I have to study harder; otherwise I would lag behind from them. So I borrowed books and I took extra lessons. I even bought a dictionary for this! But, when I went to the school, I changed my mind completely. Their writing is worse than mine; they are real crazy, fooling around and fighting with each other; they don't behave in class, just sit there lazily or yelling "Me, Me, Me," without raising their hands at all! The class is such a mess! I was very confused at that time and felt very uncomfortable because this was not what I imagined. I thought Shanghai kids are good students, they must study hard and I must learn from them. But actually, they are not good at all.

Writing proper Chinese characters, speaking standardised Mandarin, practicing proper posture at the desk and polite behaviors towards teachers are considered essential embodiments of *suzhi* in the civilizing mission advocated by Chinese government in recent decades.<sup>33</sup> I asked Tang where she got the ideal images of Shanghai students. She said, "Teachers at peasant worker school often told us." Some of the teachers were rural migrants themselves who tried to boost up the competitive spirit of migrant pupils, while the others are retired local teacher who unconsciously delivered a sense of superiority over rural migrants.<sup>34</sup>

The reality check Tang experienced at her new school was more than naughty urban children. She also encountered hidden fences that impeded her from fitting in the local crowd:

It seems that we *waidiren* are not as rich as them, so they like to hang out with locals.

Every time we go out, locals and *waidiren* group separately...I watch them saying to

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<sup>33</sup> Kipnis 2011a.

<sup>34</sup> Yi Lin, who observed a suburban public school in Xiamen, also found that the teachers often reinforced a hierarchical and moral distinction between urbanity and rurality. Lin 2011.

each other, let's go out. They never ask us *waidiren*. I heard them saying how much money they will bring and we have no such money.

Her classmates, the children of the new rich, like to compete over the model of computer, the size of birthday cake, and the purchase of expensive sneakers. Tang, on the contrary, has no computer at home to help her with schoolwork. Urban youth not only view migrant children as the underclass without wealth and commodities, but also discriminate against them as rural others in lack of civilization, despite the fact that many of them were born and grew up in Shanghai. "Some classmates call us country bumpkins (*xianbalao* 乡巴佬)," said Tang. "To your face? How did you respond?" I asked Tang. And she calmly answered: "Nothing. I just pretend I didn't hear it.... I watch them like watching a play." Then she concluded: "Now I think *waidi* students are better. We have a common language. We are all *waidiren*. Nobody looks down at each other."

Tang's experience is shared by other migrant children. According to Xiong Yihan's study conducted in Shanghai, those migrant children who attend public schools together with local children experience discrimination and self-depreciation because their teachers at public schools look down upon them and hold preferential treatment for local students. Xiong even observed the unfortunate "ceiling effect" among some migrant children at mixed schools, who foresaw limited future prospects and gave up their studies.<sup>35</sup>

Tang adopted a strategy of distance and alienation in response to the unfriendly and sometimes hostile attitudes of her Shanghai classmates. Occasionally, she fights back by debating the definition of *suzhi* and cultural capital. For example, she told her fellow students: "Although you have KFC fried chicken and piano, but my father can play *urhu*

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<sup>35</sup> Xiong 2010.

(二胡 two-stringed Chinese fiddle) and *kuaibar* (快板 traditional Chinese rap)!”

Experiences like this have also allowed her to construct an identity of *waidiren*. In fact, rural migrants do not speak the same language but a variety of dialects. People from different provinces often discriminate other groups and label them with negative stereotypes. Her phrase “we have a common language” is metaphorical, referring to the subject position shared by rural migrants given the institutional and discursive contexts of marginalization and Otherization.

### *Suzhi Cultivation*

In the summer of 2009, when the first wave of migrant children were admitted to urban schools, I attended an elementary school meeting held for peasant migrant parents. Most parents were nervously sitting in the classroom. Many were wearing stained factory uniforms or soiled tank tops. They stood in contrast to the school staff members dressed in their well-ironed skirts and makeup. The meeting began with an hour-long speech about the importance of *suzhi* cultivation. The dean complained about the uncivilized habits of some parents—arriving late, wearing slippers and talking loud on campus. Then she went on to summon the importance of civilizing yourselves—so your children can cultivate good habits in learning, hygiene and courtesy. However, many of the “civilized habits” emphasized in the talk were vastly at odds with the actual living conditions of migrant families in the city. For example, the dean urged cleaning the bathroom on a regular basis (most of them have no private bathrooms in their rental rooms) and asked them not to wear work outfits to the meeting (assuming that they would have weekends off like most urban residents).

Peasant parents are marked as uncivilized subjects whose rural upbringing renders their bodies and minds unsuitable to the urban lifestyle. Migrant children are stigmatised as unclean bodies, and associated with rurality, poverty, and backwardness. Some parents told me that their children attending local kindergartens were asked to have a medical checkup or vaccines after returning to school from a vacation in the countryside. The purpose is to avoid the spread of contagious diseases, which urbanites assume to be prevalent in the “filthy” countryside. Surprisingly, these parents do not object to such request or consider it discriminatory. Rather, they agree with urban residents that some caution about the sanitary condition in the countryside is necessary for the protection of their urbanized offspring. Some parents encourage children to remove apparent markers of cultural differences associated with their hometown, especially dialects and accents. Some are proud that their children not only speak standardised Mandarin but also develop some literacy in the dialectic of Shanghainess.

After the implementation of educational incorporation policy, many urban parents in Shanghai have aired disagreement or grievance. A letter written from a “Shanghai mother” addressed to the mayor has been widely circulated on the Internet. The letter says, “Shanghai citizens in general have obeyed the one-child policy. Do you think it is fair for us to compete [for educational resources] with the wide population from outside provinces who have three or four children in a family?” The writer concludes by suggesting that, first, migrants with high education and one-child certificates should be allowed to enter public schools if they pay taxes and own a local housing property, and secondly, the government should establish new migrant-specific schools to accommodate other migrant children. These suggestions support the measure of spatial segregation for

migrant children with the exception of only a few selected families—those with education, talent, money, and single child.

In the Shanghai-based popular Internet forum of KDSlife, xenophobic users complain about *waidiren*<sup>36</sup> for taking over space and resources, and contributing to the rise of crime and unemployment. Zhang Li described this as a “cultural logic of migrant criminality”: “displaced people who cross spatial and social boundaries tend to be regarded as a source of danger and social pollution.”<sup>37</sup> Moreover, urbanites often criticise rural migrants for surpassing their birth quotas with denigrating terms like “over-birth guerilla” (*chaosheng youjidian* 超生游击队). These narratives justify the application of segregation toward migrant children with the alleged differential contribution of urbanites and peasants to China’s biopolitical regime: Unlike urban parents, rural migrants not only overlook their patriotic duty to comply with the national policy of reducing the *quantity* of the population, but also fail to instill in their many children the improvement of *quality*.

Some township governments have sponsored after-school programs for migrant children in recent years. When I visited one of them, the teacher told me that, in addition to academic subjects, their curriculum covered the cultivation of hygiene habits, manners, and mental ability. She described the major obstacle to the education of migrant children: “The most difficult thing to change is their learning aptitudes. They lack the capacity of self-management. They are too wild.” It is important to note that this after-school program only accepted students of the first grade who registered in public schools.

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<sup>36</sup> The forum participants utilized “WDR” as shorthand for *waidiren*, but when forum administrators began removing remarks with the term WDR, which were often discriminatory, people began using “*yingpan*” (hard drive) in association with the hard drive brand WD (Western Digital).

<sup>37</sup> Zhang 2001, 140-1.

Teachers and administrators considered these younger children more “assimilatable” because they were never exposed to unlicensed peasant worker schools prior to their entry into the track of urban education.

Despite the official categorization of peasantry, second-generation migrants born in the city have little experience in their rural hometown. Young children often become sick when returning to their hometowns because their bodies fail to adapt to the local climate or living condition (*shui tu bu fu* 水土不服). Some parents thus take home buckets of filtered water for children to drink and shower out of safety concern. These city-born migrant children are caught in the subject position of “inbetween-ness”—they are labeled as peasants in the city while the villagers back home call them “Shanghainese.” In these cases, the differences between urbanites and migrants are even harder to be identified, and the host society is more inclined to impose assimilation upon them in the scheme of segmented incorporation. Yet, their liminal status and institutional identity block their access to quality education and social mobility.

#### Channeling Effect of Educational Institutions

The opening of public education has attracted an increasing number of migrant children to live in the city with their parents.<sup>38</sup> However, statistics (see Figure 4) also reveal a substantial decline in the numbers of migrant children as their age increases. The trend of reverse migration (moving back to the countryside) is most significant when migrant children reach grade seven.

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<sup>38</sup> The number of migrant children qualifying for mandatory education in 2007 was 384,128. The number rose to 401,747 in 2008 and 421,483 in 2009. Shanghai City Committee 2009.



[Figure 4]

Migrant children studying in the city encounter a ceiling impossible to penetrate: the senior high school entrance exam. No matter where migrant children attend school, they must take the entrance exam in their *hukou* hometowns. Moreover, textbooks used at public schools in Shanghai differ from those used in the provinces of migrants. The “exam closure”<sup>39</sup> truncates the study path of migrant children, and migrant parents are concerned that urban education might hurt their children’s chance to enter a good high school and later a university.

Migrant parents constantly debate if their children should stay in the city or go home to study. My interviewees share similar opinions about the pros and cons of these two routes: urban education is considered “extensive but shallow” (*guan er qian* 广而浅) while rural education is “narrow but deep” (*zuai er shen* 窄而深). Since the late 1980s, China’s national curriculum reform has advocated “education for quality” (*suzhi jiaoyu* 素质教育) as a means to develop the moral character and innovative spirit of children, in contrast to the old model of examination-oriented education (*yingshe jiaoyu* 应试教育). The pedagogy of *suzhi* education, although loosely defined, has been better received by urban educators, while rural communities tend to resist reforms designed to decrease the importance of testing and the amount of homework.<sup>40</sup>

Migrant parents appreciate children’s exposure to versatile cultural curriculum and early learning of English at urban schools. They are proud that their children have learned

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<sup>39</sup> Ma 2010, 153.

<sup>40</sup> Kipnis 2001b.

to speak as eloquently (*hui shuohua* 会说话) as urbanities. However, they are worried that their children would not be able to catch up in rural school if returning home at a later time, because the textbook content in Shanghai is too “easy”. In other words, migrant children are forced to choose between giving up the possibility of university education in the future, and losing an education that may better prepare them for urban lifestyles and job prospects in the service sector.

These institutional prerequisites have brought about a channeling effect upon the educational trajectories of second-generation migrants. First, migrant children with better grades tend to return to their hometowns, usually one or two years before the high school entrance exam. Some children were sent back alone to attend a boarding high school in the style of boot camp at the cost of family separation. For others, one of the parents, mostly mother, must quit her life in the city to accompany children in the countryside. For those migrant families who choose to keep members united together in the city, their children face an involuntary end to their educational trajectory—they are expected to work in the city after secondary or vocational school.

### *Seeking Talent Migration*

For peasant children, university education is an essential means to social mobility—not only to improve their future chances in the labour market, but also to liberate them from the constraint of an agriculture *hukou*. College graduates, for their hard-earned degrees and marketable skills, may win a membership to become an urban citizen. The *suzhi* discourse has permeated the political rhetoric of recruiting the “new Shanghainese.” On the one hand, this indicates an institutional framework that divides

migrant children into those who have acquired proper “quality” and those who have not; on the other hand, this renders migrant children responsible for self-governance as modern citizens and neoliberal subjects.<sup>41</sup>

Yang is a 21-year-old college student with a major in engineering. Yang left her parents and brother in Shanghai and returned to Anhui Province to attend high school in their township. Yang described her expectation for the future: “I want to find a clean job, never a *dagong* job. If I didn’t go to college, my future would be hopeless.” She is determined to avoid her parents’ unfortunate path—irregular menial work and marginal status in the city. College education is also her ticket to leave the countryside. Yang described her grandfather as a hardworking farmer with skin “so dark that you could not see at night.” She religiously uses whitening skincare products and carefully avoids tanning, which embodies rurality in China and an identity she wants to dissociate with.

To prepare herself for fierce competition in the labour market, Yang has attended job fairs since she was a sophomore. She diligently studies for certificate exams in order to improve her *suzhi*. However, due to strict qualifications in this “green card policy,” very few migrants are actually able to partake in the track of “talent migration.”<sup>42</sup> Yang was worried about falling into the misfortune of “ant tribe” (*yi zu* 蚁族), a term referring to college graduates who suffer from low wage, unstable employment, and crowded housing in the fringe of the metropolis.

### *Learning to Labour*

Shanghai recently opened another door for migrant children to continue education in

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<sup>41</sup> Murphy 2004.

<sup>42</sup> Only 3,000 applicants were reportedly qualified in 2009. Qian 2010.

the city. Starting in 2009, migrant children can enroll in public vocational schools. However, there are only a limited number of subjects available for migrant students, such as hotel management, cooking, hairdressing, car repair, and electroplating.

Why does vocational education open selective channels to migrant children? When I threw this question at the vice principle of a vocational school I interviewed, she diplomatically answered that these fields were selected to meet the alleged “urgent demands” in the local labour market. However, these are low-paid, dirty, menial jobs which the local youth are not interested in. This policy aims to sooth the enrollment crisis among these vocational schools, largely due to the declining birth of local children.

The deregulation of education in China in the post-reform era has resulted in a rapid expansion of private vocational schools; many of these schools have become a medium of job brokering and a forefront of labour exploitation. The administrators can gain significant profits from sending “student workers” for internships in restaurants, hotels and factories. Based on my interviews with restaurant owners and hotel managers in 2009, for each student worker who made a monthly wage of 800 yuan (far below the then minimum wage \$960), the school extracted 100 yuan as “education feedback fees.” The government has also encouraged vocational school students to take internships so as to ease labour shortage in manufacturing.<sup>43</sup> In short, vocation education, with open access and yet restricted diversity, cannot substantially improve labour market opportunities of second-generation migrants. Moreover, it channels young migrants into exploitative and oppressive labour conditions, helping the city reproduce the next generation of migrant workers.

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<sup>43</sup> Xinhua 2010.

## Conclusion

When I asked my migrant informants if the *hukou* still mattered, most of them replied, “Not anymore,” and some added, “not as long as you have money.” Compared to the dark past characterised by the policy of total exclusion, older migrants feel content about the current situation—they can at least have a “place to stand” in the cities. One migrant told me why it was futile to complain about the *hukou* policy: “Don’t say the world is unfair to you. It is you who haven’t worked hard enough.” This echoes the prevalent discourses in post-reform China with a celebration for market freedom and individual entrepreneurship. Inequality, in this discursive frame, is seen as a lack of individual effort. However, when our conversations led to the issue of education for their children, most migrant parents became agitated by the injustice hidden in the *hukou*-based systems of school and examination. The desire for their urbanised offspring to pursue a bright future made them question the persisting inequalities and boundaries. The neoliberal myth of free market is shattered by the visible blocks and ceilings that hinder the second generation from gaining equal access to education and job opportunities in the city.

Indeed, the significance of the *hukou* as an institutional membership has diminished due to the disintegration of the planned economy and the privatization of social security. The access to urban education and the possibility of talent migration, in particular, open opportunities and promise hope for second-generation migrants. Yet, the *hukou* system is still a potent mechanism that contributes to stratified citizenship in China; it has nevertheless transformed from *exterior categories* that characterise the control strategy of total exclusion to *internal boundaries* embedded in the institutions of education and the

labour market.<sup>44</sup> In this paper, I have demonstrated a variety of ways in which the urban educational system incorporates second-generation migrants. I map these modes of incorporation in the field of segmented incorporation (see Figure 5):

[Figure 5]

In the past, migrant children were deprived of access to public education and exposed to blunt discrimination in the receiving context of *total exclusion*. Despite the recent policy reform of educational incorporation, migrant students still suffer from *spatial segregation* due to the resistance of the host society. Both conditions indicate the rigidity of institutional and cultural boundaries. Second-generation migrants are institutionally excluded as well as culturally ostracized.

In mixed schools and classes, *social segregation* shadows the daily encounters between migrant children and urban students. Boundary marking is especially salient when imposed upon those migrant children who were born in the countryside with marked differences, like dark skin or hometown accents. Despite the context of institutional incorporation, urban residents underscore their cultural difference and status distinction from migrant classmates.

Teachers and administrators are more inclined to impose *suzhi cultivation* as a means of cultural assimilation on those migrant children who were born in the city or had limited exposure to rural hometowns or migrant schools. Or, migrant children themselves are eager to cultivate and discipline themselves in order to compete for the slim chance of

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<sup>44</sup> Wang has discussed how exterior categories have transplanted into interior boundaries within work organizations in post-socialist urban China. Wang 2008.

*talent migration* in the future. These modes of incorporation assume the urbanite-migrant boundary as somewhat penetrable and offer opportunities of boundary crossing to the chosen few.

I emphasise that the regime of segmented incorporation not only involves top-down policy measures. But it also entails symbolic struggles around cultural differences and social boundaries that operate on everyday interactions between hosts and migrants. Echoing the scholarship of ethnic boundaries,<sup>45</sup> I found that inter-group encounters do not always penetrate or eradicate group boundaries, but often reinforce group differentiation. The redistribution of resources and opportunities stirs anxiety among urbanites about the loss of social privilege, and they are inclined to further enhance or differentiate the boundaries to safeguard their status quo.

In this new receiving context of “segmented incorporation,” systematic exclusion has given way to more subtle forms of segregation, channeling and segmentation. The contradiction between China’s pursuit of market capitalism and its institutional heritage of categorical inequality is revealed in the fate of second-generation migrants. Without lifting the ceiling of exam closure and the veil of cultural prejudice, the partial access to public education and the distant promise of talent migration simply obscures deep-rooted social inequalities behind the empty façade of meritocracy.

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<sup>45</sup> Barth 1996.

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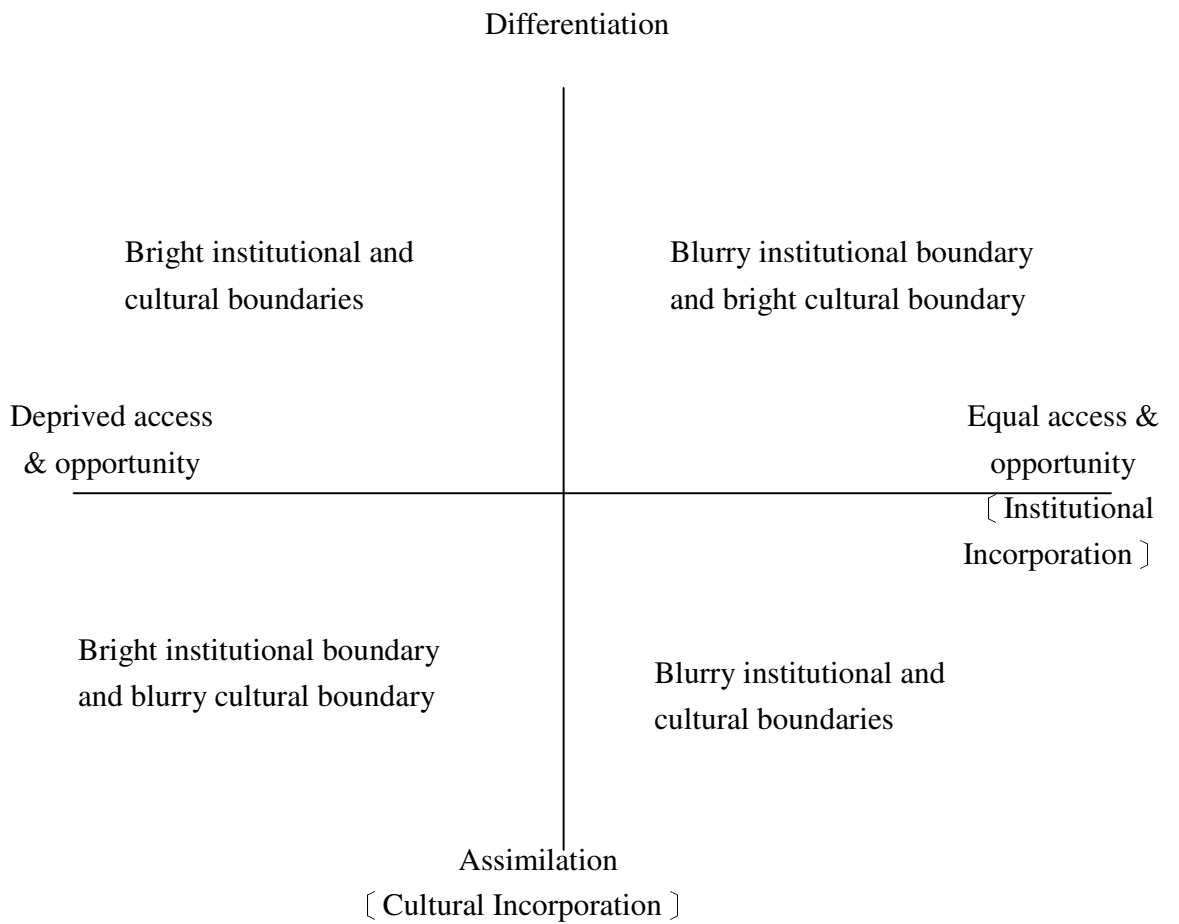


Figure 1 Field of segmented incorporation as an analytic framework

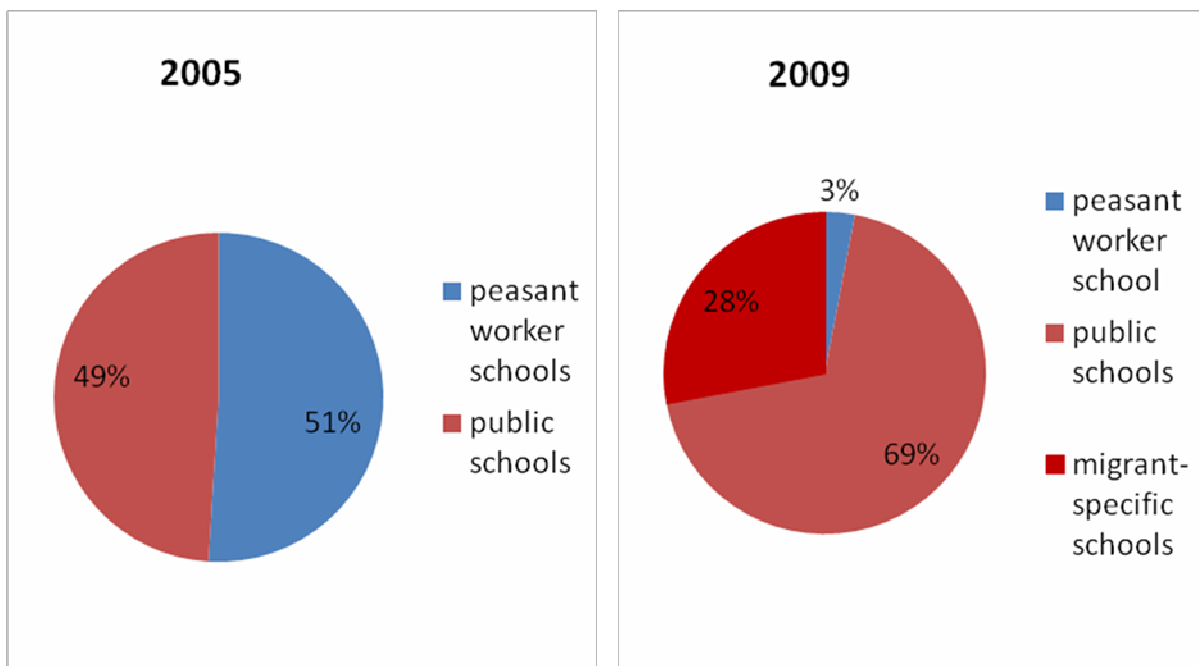


Figure 2: The distribution of migrant children by variety of school in Shanghai in 2005 and 2009. Shanghai City Committee 2009.

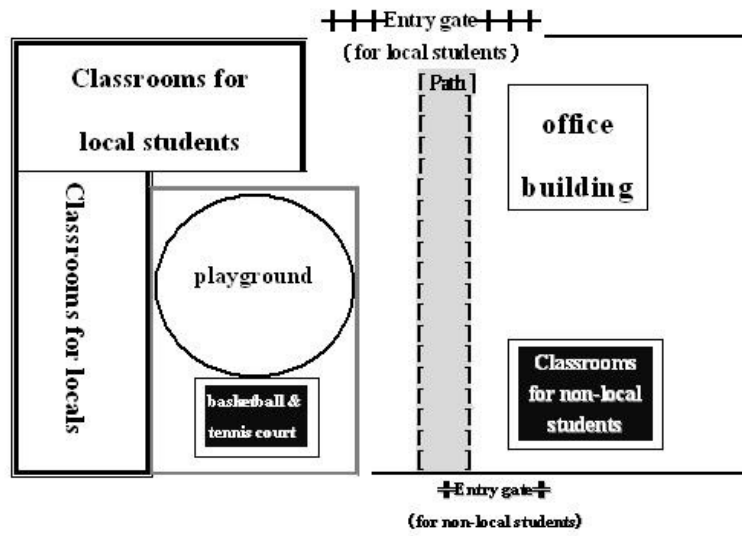


Figure 3: The concession model

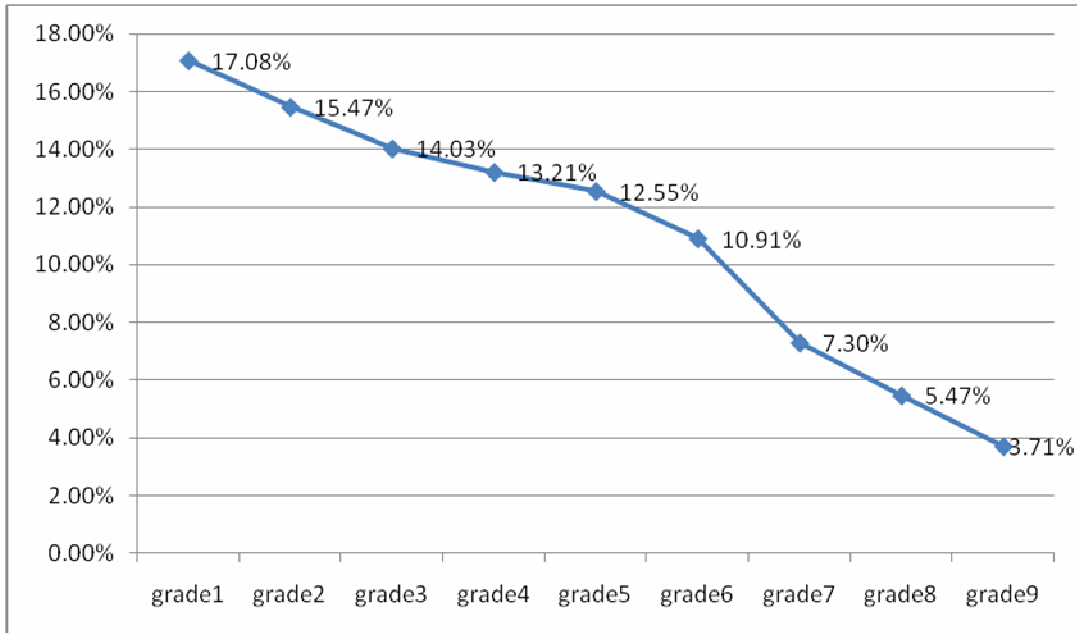


Figure 4: The distribution of migrant children attending public schools in Shanghai by grade. Shanghai City Committee 2009.

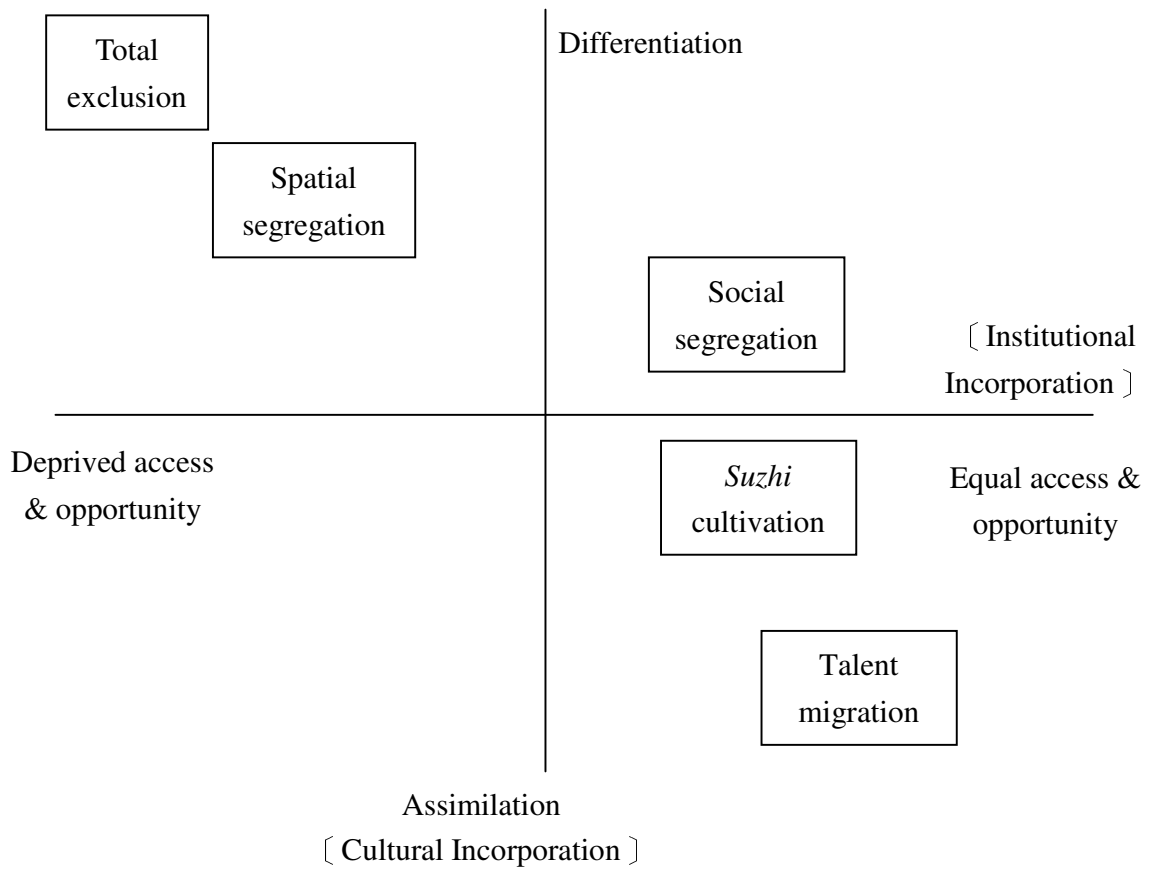


Figure 5 Field of segmented incorporation for Chinese second-generation migrants