

# 2011

*In the summer of 2011, more than two dozen schools serving the children of migrant workers in Beijing were demolished just weeks before the beginning of the new semester. This dramatic event highlighted the capital's increasingly restrictive approach to providing social services to non-local residents, as industrial upgrading and population control came to dominate urban policy. This essay traces the rapid rise and fall of informal schools in Beijing from the 1990s up to the 2010s, drawing attention to a key animating dilemma of China's urban politics—that is, cities' desire to pull in rural migrants as cheap labour, while remaining reluctant to fully underwrite the costs of their social reproduction.*

# Rupture at the Centre: Evicting Migrant Schools in Beijing

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In August 2011, Beijing's municipal government initiated a wave of evictions targeting schools for rural migrant children. In a matter of weeks, more than two dozen schools were summarily shuttered, and in some cases bulldozed, and up to 30,000 students were displaced just before the semester was to begin. This surprise attack upended the lives of migrant families, as they were forced to consider sending their children out of the city to their officially designated place of *hukou* (户口, or 'household registration'), splitting up the family, or forsaking the employment opportunities of the metropolis. The sense of desperation engendered by these closures produced occasionally intense forms of resistance, with parents blocking roads and petitioning government agencies to demand that their children be resettled in local schools. While the spectacle of such a concentrated outburst of destruction was not repeated in subsequent years, things would hardly improve. With a few years' hindsight, it was evident that this event initiated a multiyear campaign to 'optimise the population' by removing people who had been deemed superfluous to the functioning of the capital. Children were not to be spared.

## Entrenched Divisions

The 2011 demolitions laid bare a deep social contradiction: while the Chinese State had gradually crafted a national labour market over the previous generation, social citizenship remained organised at the level of the city. Chinese citizens were granted the thin freedom to sell their labour anywhere in the country where they might find a buyer, but the moment they left their place of official *hukou*, they abandoned any rights to social reproduction, including subsidised health care, housing, and, crucially, education. In the context of the rapid expansion of regional inequality in the era of capitalist transformation, this disjuncture between a national labour market and highly localised life-supporting infrastructure produced endemic social, emotional, and even biological crises for China's migrants.

This sociospatial disjuncture was not always so. Along with nationalisation of industry and the development of the job allocation system (分配), the institutionalisation of the *hukou* system in 1958 essentially eliminated the labour market (see Hayward's essay in the present volume). *Hukou* designated both a productive status—agricultural (农业) or non-agricultural (非农业)—and a location, which tied attendant rights to the citizen remaining in their place of *hukou*. A key motivation for this arrangement was to pin the peasantry in place, such that agricultural surplus could be extracted from the countryside and invested in big-push industrialisation in the cities. In the state socialist period, it was very difficult to survive outside one's place of *hukou* without official permission. With a few notable exceptions (for example, military personnel, seasonal workers), the State expected that one would more or less stay within their tightly circumscribed place in the sociospatial matrix. While this system produced all kinds of inequalities—exemplified most horrifically by the millions of largely rural deaths during the Great Leap Forward—it also realised integration of the spaces of production and social reproduction for rural and urban residents alike.

This system began to break down with the opening up to private capital and the construction of a national labour market, first initiated in the late 1970s and then accelerating dramatically from the early 1990s. By 2011, more than one-quarter of a billion people were residing outside of their place of *hukou*. Rural residents increasingly found that they needed the wages of urban employment to survive, even if it meant giving up access to social services. With declining rural livelihoods, more and more rural residents left the land, with large eastern cities such as Beijing a major draw.

In the 1980s and 1990s, migrant workers were disproportionately young. A typical migration trajectory was to leave home after completing compulsory education and perhaps some further technical training. Teenagers and people in their early twenties came to be the core demographic of China's emerging capitalist industries. But both social and material factors tended to push migrants back to the village by their mid-twenties to marry and have children. It was not uncommon for one parent, typically the father, to return to the city to earn a wage. But the expectation was that the core practices of social reproduction—childrearing, education, health care, and elder care—would remain in the countryside.

## In the Cracks of the Old System

Almost as soon as these new migratory flows emerged, cracks in the old regime of social reproduction were evident. At this stage, it was still extremely difficult for non-local children to access public schools in the city. Public schools were under no obligation to accept non-locals, and would generally only do so for high-achieving students—who would pad the school's average test scores—with parents who could pay a hefty education fee (借读费). Thus, the overwhelming majority of migrants were shut out of the public system. Migrants were faced with the choice of leaving their children behind in the countryside or bringing them to the city with radically uncertain prospects for their education. While the large majority chose the former—which is still the case today—by the 1990s, migrants in Beijing and other rapidly expanding coastal cities began setting up informal schools to cater to those who wanted or needed to have their children with them.

These so-called migrant schools (打工子弟学校) were extremely lacking in resources. In the 1990s, the number of migrant children in Beijing was still relatively low, and many of these schools were little more than babysitting operations, sometimes occupying a room or two of an apartment. Most schools were initially set up by migrants themselves. Over time, there came to be a popular distinction between regular (that is, profit-oriented) schools and 'public interest' (公益) schools that were financially supported by foundations or corporations and were therefore able to provide reduced tuition rates. The government was more or less indifferent; while it certainly did not provide material support, it was not openly hostile. Migrant children were wedged in the interstices of a regime of reproduction that was bit by bit fraying in the face of an expanding labour market. Cities begrudgingly accepted a growing number of informal schools, as it relieved them of having to expand access to education. But it also meant that the large majority of schools were entirely dependent on tuition to fund their operations—a challenging situation when all of the 'customers' were working-class and poor people.

The government's relative indifference to migrant schools could, however, easily become antagonistic in the context of the city's increasing land values in the 2000s. One well-known school—which by 2008 had managed to win official recognition and significant foundation support—was forced to move five times in the years following its establishment in 2001. As described in the school's official history:

There were various reasons behind [Zhifan]<sup>1</sup> School's frequent moves in the beginning of its establishment. For the first two times, it was because the school was forced by the government to close its doors. For the following three times, it was because the school buildings had to be demolished in order to make way for the expansion of the city of Beijing. This explains why [Zhifan] School slowly made its way from the fourth ring road to the fifth ring road and eventually to its current position within the sixth ring road.<sup>2</sup>

Revenue-hungry officials were likely to side with developers against migrant schools, which lacked official registration. While the schools were often tolerated, they did not add value to the city according to the State's metrics. This experience of administrative instability and continual spatial peripheralisation was common for migrant schools and communities in this period.

As it became increasingly clear that mass migration to China's booming eastern cities was not a passing phenomenon, the central government took steps to relax population controls. In 2001 the State Council unveiled a general policy orientation known as the 'two primaries' (两为主) that established a framework for educating migrant children that was remarkably different from what had been in place previously. The policy held that receiving areas should be *primarily* financially responsible for educating migrant children (rather than the place of *hukou*), and that migrant children should be *primarily* enrolled in local public schools (rather than the private and often unregulated migrant schools). In addition, 2003 saw the elimination of the custody and repatriation system under which migrants without proper urban residence permits would be shipped back to the countryside. It seemed possible to stay in the city and educate one's children there.

In light of this national-level policy shift, Beijing and other cities began to establish formal bureaucratic procedures for admitting non-locals into public schools and moved to regularise the informal education system that had sprung up in the institutional interstices. In 2005, the city issued the 'Beijing Department of Education Notification on Strengthening Management of Migrant Population Self-Run Schools,' which proposed dealing with migrant schools according to the principle of 'supporting some, approving some, and eliminating some.'<sup>3</sup> The following year, a limited number of migrant schools were allowed to register, but an absolute

majority of the schools in operation remained unlicensed. At the same time, and more optimistically, public schools did indeed become more inclusive. The Department of Education established the ‘five permits’ (五证) system, which allowed migrant families who could meet the administrative requirements to enrol their children in school, and abolished education fees for non-locals. According to official estimates, from 2001 to 2015, the percentage of migrant children enrolled in Beijing’s public schools increased from 12.5 to 78 percent.<sup>4</sup> While these numbers must be viewed with a high degree of suspicion—the students least likely to be accepted by public schools are the ones who are also least likely to be captured by government statistics—there is no question that an increasing share of migrants were being incorporated into the public system.

#### Pushed to the Margins

The story of Beijing’s migrant children in the 2000s and 2010s is, as intimated at the outset, nonetheless not entirely a happy one of greater incorporation. Although formal procedures existed for enrolling in urban public schools, access for non-locals was maintained as a revocable privilege rather than a right. The metrics used in Beijing—and other large wealthy cities—for accessing public schools favoured migrants *least* in need of state-subsidised services. In general, the higher the parents’ levels of education, access to wealth, and urban social connections, the more likely it was they would be admitted. In both the ‘five permits’ and the subsequent ‘points-based admission’ plans, migrants working in the informal sector or living in informal housing were excluded at the outset by requirements for labour and housing contracts. Paying into local social insurance was a requirement, although the length of time of contributions varied across districts and from year to year. In my own fieldwork in Beijing in the early to mid-2010s, migrant parents claimed without exception that they would have to pay large bribes—often equivalent to more than one year’s salary—to get their children into public schools. These sorting mechanisms can be thought of as an ‘inverted means test’; the effect was to funnel nominally public resources precisely to those who needed them least, while concentrating the most deprived populations in migrant schools.<sup>5</sup>

In this context, these informal schools were a suboptimal choice for parents with no other options. The difficulty, however, was that just as public school access was being somewhat regularised for elite non-locals,

the city began methodically squeezing migrant schools. Following the 2005 notification mentioned above, the focus was quite clearly not on ‘supporting’ or ‘approving’ migrant schools, but on eliminating them. Indeed, the number of migrant schools in Beijing peaked at approximately 300 in 2006, and fell every year thereafter.<sup>6</sup> The mass demolitions in 2011 were by no means an aberration; rather, they were an intensification and condensation of a process that was quite consciously set in motion years prior.

In fact, by 2014 it became clear that the school system had emerged as a key choke point in the municipal government’s population control efforts. In that same year, the central government released the *National New Urbanisation Plan (2014–20)*,<sup>7</sup> which specifically called for cities with an urban district population of more than five million to ‘strictly control’ their population growth. This was part of a broader push on the part of China’s elite cities to optimise the population in tandem with their efforts at shifting to a model of economic growth based on higher value-added, knowledge-based, service-sector industries. The so-called low-end population (低端人口) had no place in this imagined future. In addition to relocating ‘noncapital functions’ (非首都功能)<sup>8</sup> such as warehouses, wholesale markets, and labour-intensive industry outside Beijing, depriving migrant children of schooling was another powerful lever for expelling undesirable populations. While the scale and intensity of the 2011 school demolitions were not subsequently repeated, one by one, schools were demolished, had their power or water cut, or had their operating licence revoked.

This slow drip of school closures was paired with a dramatic increase in requirements for accessing public schools, including new and onerous demands for parents’ payment into social insurance and a dizzying array of documentation requirements. One particularly vexing requirement in many districts was that parents live and pay social insurance in the same district in which they were trying to send their child to school. Countless frustrated parents reported that the new rules were arbitrarily enforced and, if they were able to meet all of the Education Department’s stated requirements, new demands would then be added until they gave up. Many migrant children who *had* been able to access official primary or middle schools thus found themselves expelled from the public system at precisely the moment when the government was also stamping out informal schooling options. The intent was clear enough: working-class migrants were not welcome.

The government's means were brutal but effective. In addition to throttling educational opportunities and relocating industry, in November 2017, the authorities razed entire migrant neighbourhoods under the pretence of ensuring building safety. Indeed, these demolitions followed a tragic fire in a migrant community in Daxing in which nineteen people died. But those expelled from their homes were not resettled. The government was leaving no stone unturned, continuously stepping up its attacks on working-class migrants' schools, workplaces, and homes. After several years of slowing growth, by 2017, the city's population contracted.<sup>9</sup>

### Converging Political and Material Pressures

We will never know the proximate cause of the 2011 school demolitions, nor the less spectacular forms of expulsion visited on Beijing's non-local children in the years that followed. Nonetheless, during this period there were relatively autonomous political *and* material pressures that converged towards the expulsion of working-class non-locals. Politically, the municipal government came under increasing pressure to decrease its population. Beijing had in previous years quickly exceeded centrally imposed population limits, and after 2014 the city faced a 'red line' of 23 million residents. Shrinking the population may not have made sense from an economic standpoint—capital expansion faces real headwinds in the context of falling population—but rather grew out of a deep-seated Communist Party ideology that links overpopulation to political instability. The cold material calculations behind school demolitions are more straightforward. As already noted, the possibility of building high-rise apartments or other commercial properties increased, even on the city's peripheries, during the 2000s and 2010s, and both landlords and local officials were increasingly likely to want to put the land to more profitable uses. Although it is difficult to untangle which of these pressures was dominant, in a sense it does not matter. They both push in the direction of school demolition and expelling a population that has always been seen as potentially disposable.

Despite repeated claims of the end of *hukou* and increasingly inclusive education, the contradiction between China's national labour market and its highly localised social service infrastructure has not diminished, even as its spatial characteristics have evolved. Beijing's policy of expelling the low-end populations appears to have realised its aim: hundreds of thousands of the most vulnerable people have been forced from the city.

But despite its aspirations, Beijing is not an island within the People's Republic of China. Its wealth and grandeur have been produced by the very rural populations the State so despises. Shunting school-age children to the countryside does not eliminate their suffering; it only relocates the social crisis out of sight. Despite the increasingly shrill ethnonationalist tone emanating from the Party centre, the State continues to treat certain members of the dominant Han race as expendable based on ascribed characteristics. China's national problem is thus not limited to the racialised peripheries; a deep rupture, sociospatial rather than ethnic in nature, plagues the very core.