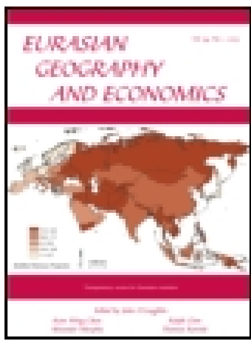

Eurasian Geography and Economics

ISSN: 1538-7216 (Print) 1938-2863 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rege20

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To cite this article: Miao Li & Yihan Xiong (2018): Demolition of *Chengzhongcun* and social mobility of Migrant youth: a case study in Beijing, Eurasian Geography and Economics

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2018.1503966

Published online: 08 Aug 2018.

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EURASIAN GEOGRAPHY AND ECONOMICS
https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2018.1503966

Demolition of *Chengzhongcun* and social mobility of Migrant youth: a case study in Beijing

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ABSTRACT

Since the late 1980s, millions of poor and low-income rural migrant workers migrating to Chinese metropolises with their children have congregated in *chengzhongcun* (villages in the city) for low-cost housing. Drawing on data from a 14-month participant observation in one *chengzhongcun* in Beijing, we critically explore the potential impact of urban expansion on social mobility of migrant youth. We argue that the uncertainty and chaos connected with looming demolition result in substandard schooling and business closures for migrant parents, leading to the stagnant mobility of migrant youth. Expanding the social hierarchy pyramids, we argue that eliminating *chengzhongcun*, a space that creates the possibility of climbing the social ladder, hampers the social mobility of migrant youth in the context of the rigid class structure in the late-socialist China. This research re-examines the goals of the demolition of *chengzhongcun* and advances our understanding by analyzing the prospects of disadvantaged migrant youth during and after the demolition process.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 26 February 2018
Accepted 19 July 2018

KEYWORDS
Social mobility; Migrant youth; demolition of *chengzhongcun*; social hierarchy triangle; rural migrant workers

Introduction

Since the late 1980s, millions of poor and low-income rural migrant workers migrating to metropolises with their families and children have congregated in *chengzhongcun* (villages in the city)[1] for affordable housing (Sato 2006; Zheng et al. 2009). As an obvious impediment to the explosive expansion of surrounding cities, in recent decades *chengzhongcun* across the country are being redeveloped and demolished, resulting in the mass eviction of rural migrants. On 18 November 2017, a lethal fire on the outskirts of Beijing drew worldwide attention. It had broken out in a squatter apartment for rural migrant workers, killing 19 people and injuring more than eight. The tragedy triggered a sudden citywide campaign by the local government to tear down illegal buildings and evict poor rural migrants to "safeguard the city's safety" (Jing 2017; Hernández

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and Zhao 2017). Similarly, in official discourses, *chengzhongcun* removal is conducive to upgrading urban areas, improving standards of living for regular urban residents, and thereby facilitating long-term sustainable economic development. In sharp contrast to the life goals of peasant-worker parents who conceive of urban residence merely as a means to eke out a meager living, their offspring aspire to move up the socioeconomic ladder during their stay in cities (Ming 2013; Li 2015). Given the on-going trend toward massive urbanization, an important question remains: What is the impact of the demolition of *chengzhongcun* on the social mobility of migrant youth?

Instead of answering a future-tense question about the status attainment of migrant youth, this article examines their prospects for social mobility in recent years, particularly when *chengzhongcun* are increasingly engulfed by expanding cities. To do so, we draw on ethnographic data from a longitudinal study in one *chengzhongcun*, currently in the process of being demolished in Beijing, to delineate the educational and occupational trajectories of migrant youth. Developing the social hierarchy triangles introduced in Chan's work (2012), we argue that eliminating *chengzhongcun*, a space that creates opportunities for climbing the social ladder, impedes the social mobility of migrant youth in the context of the rigid class structure in late-socialist China. This phenomenon is worthy of much attention. Li (2011) notes that as "low-status elites" (*diceng jingying*), rural migrant workers constitute the mid-upper classes in rural communities, but their rural-urban migration often leaves them and their offspring at the bottom of the urban hierarchy. Proper upward mobility channels should be provided for them; otherwise, they will seek "irregular or illegal channels" to improve their lot (Li 2011).

This paper makes two contributions to the extant literature on urban expansion in China and the social mobility of migrant youth. First, we argue that, besides catering to indigenous villagers' interests, demolitions of *chengzhongcun* should equally take into account the life chances of rural migrants who are *de facto* residents of *chengzhongcun* (Davis 2006; Ren 2014; Wei and Yan 2005). In this view, we scrutinize the undesirable effect of the demolition of *chengzhongcun* on the mobility trajectories of migrant youth, an important but often overlooked social fact. Second, the majority of studies on social mobility of migrant youth have focused on the role of schooling (c.f., Ling 2015; Xiong 2015), thus leaving other factors underexplored. This paper digs more deeply into the lived experiences of migrant youth in one *chengzhongcun* from their perspectives, paying attention to both school-related and non-school factors. In the sections that follow, we introduce the functions of *chengzhongcun* and the social position of poor rural migrants in urbanizing China and then develop the theoretical framework of social hierarchy triangles to evaluate the pathways to social mobility of migrant youth. This is followed by narrations of educational and occupational experiences of migrant youth immediately affected by the demolition of a *chengzhongcun* in Beijing and discussions of their opportunities for socioeconomic mobility.

Chengzhongcun and the social position of rural migrants in urbanizing China

In the process of urbanization, to curtail compensation costs and the resistance of peasants, municipal governments requisition farmland from adjacent villages and leave housing plots (*zhaijidi*)[2] untouched (Buckingham and Chan 2018). The use of this "green field approach" leads to the existence of *chengzhongcun* where landless villagers congregate (Buckingham and Chan 2018). Thus, *chengzhongcun*, as former agricultural villages, are incorporated into the planning areas of cities and are engulfed by the rapidly expanding cities. Whereas *chengzhongcun* vary throughout the country, the general characteristics include self-built, low quality, and high-density buildings; crowded, dirty, and unhealthy living conditions; a scarcity of public space; dysfunctional infrastructure; precarious environmental conditions; and high crime rates (Liu et al. 2010; Zheng et al. 2009). In these marginal spaces, the ratio of migrants to indigenous villagers is deemed to be at least 5:1 and, in some extreme cases, 20:1 (Feng 2008). This phenomenon is known as a real version of "demographic inversion" (*renkou daogua*).

Two contested viewpoints exist concerning the role of *chengzhongcun* in urbanizing China. First, to prevent and control "urban diseases" that threaten public security and execute urbanization and population control policing, governments at all levels are determined to demolish *chengzhongcun* (Song, Zenou, and Ding 2008; Wu, Zhang, and Webster 2013). In addition, tearing down *chengzhongcun* to build commodity housing and develop lucrative industries augments local government revenues. The targeting of *chengzhongcun* demonstrates the policies of rapid urbanization, which will be achieved through transforming these urban–rural fringe areas into metropolitan spaces with full-fledged infrastructure, high-tech industries, a scientific layout, a scenic environment, and an orderly flow of the population (General Office 2015). In 2016, the 13th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development suggested "speed[ing] up work to rebuild concentrated and contiguous rundown areas and *chengzhongcun*" (State Council 2016). Second, scholars draw attention to the positive functions of *chengzhongcun*. As a social safety valve, *chengzhongcun* provide low-rent housing for migrant households and maintain decent lives of landless villagers (Chan, Yao, and Zhao 2003; Wang, Wang and Wu 2010). In *Arrival City*, Saunders (2012) details numerous migrant stories in 20 urban subunits where new (im)migrants end up. He concludes that the most important function that these arrival cities perform is to provide migrants with a better chance of individual advancement and social mobility. In other words, arrival cities serve as springboards for migrants to jump to the more advantageous social positions by brewing aspiration, encouraging small business start-ups, and maximizing social networking (Saunders 2012). In these views, providing better administration and services for *chengzhongcun*, rather than eliminating them, would be beneficial to China's socio-political stability and urbanization process.

Embedded within the dualism of urban and rural spaces, *chengzhongcun* in China are structured on and, in turn, perpetuate the divide between rural and urban administrations (Buckingham and Chan 2018). In Beijing, *chengzhongcun* had been under the administrative jurisdictions of urban neighborhood offices. In reality, village and township governments still exercise executive power to manage *chengzhongcun* because the household registration status of the inhabitants remains rural. This phenomenon leaves varying types of social problems unsolved. Meanwhile, local governments requisition the *chengzhongcun* land with low costs to achieve rapid urbanization on the cheap while exploiting indigenous villagers. Because local governments are the *de facto* owners of land development rights, the private land use rights of villagers have been significantly weakened (Deng 2013). This explains why recent decades have witnessed an increasing number of petitions and protests initiated by villagers of *chengzhongcun* to resist deprivation of their property rights.

Coupled with urbanization, elements of industrialization and modernization have altered the "once politicized social mobility regime" (Bian 2002). China has transformed from a "two-class, one-stratification" society into a more stratified structure with ten social strata (Lu 2012).[3] As Whyte (2010, 168) suggested, economic expansion and the urbanization process have "produced huge increases in opportunities for upward mobility for three decades." Considering the number of people occupying each social stratum, the social structure of China has developed from an inverted T-shaped to a "土"-shaped income distribution structure (Li 2016). Peasants at the bottom of the social hierarchy still constitute the most disadvantaged majority; however, data from the sixth census reveal that 16.7% of peasants in the country have transformed into higher social stratum mainly through doing migrant work in cities (Li 2016).

Though rural migrant workers achieve short-range upward mobility[4] in the form of higher incomes, they encounter a bewildering situation in which their social position is stuck between "peasants" and "workers." In other words, rural migrant workers possess a transitional status of neither peasants nor workers because they do not cultivate land for a living and sell their labor in cities without fundamental rights or labor protection. Different from their parents who suffer from an identity dilemma, migrant youth fit in with their urban counterparts and join a "new social class" working in flexible service jobs (c.f. Woronov 2011). Similarly, Pun and Liu (2010) conclude that the new generation of rural migrant workers, including migrant youth, constitute "a new working class." Notably, both claims admit that migrant youth find it difficult to move up the social ladder, as they frequently change jobs due to short-term concerns such as convenient transport, strict management of supervisors, and working as long-term interns at minimum wage to name only a few. Migrant youth are not willing to work in low-status jobs that are occupied by their

parents, but aspire to realize upward mobility through securing high-income, low-stress jobs (Huang 2014). However, changing jobs frequently is more likely to entrap them in stagnant mobility or downward mobility (Fu and Tang 2009; Huang 2014).

Social hierarchy based on *Hukou* and pathways to social mobility

Despite the pronounced income inequalities escalating after economic reforms, the stringent *hukou* (household registration) system consolidates the rigid social hierarchy in China, characterized by notorious urban–rural divisions (Chan 2018). Under the *hukou* system, peasants are not allowed to receive social welfare and full citizenship rights in cities due to their rural *hukou*, and this hereditary system passes on the rural *hukou* status of parents to their children (Chan and Buckingham 2008). Chan (2012) posits that rural migrant workers in Chinese cities cannot rise to the urban middle class because these people holding rural *hukou* (rural migrant workers and left-behind peasants) continue to occupy the most disadvantaged social positions. The social hierarchy triangles utilized in his work detail the relatively improved, yet still lower, status of rural migrant workers after relocating to cities.

To frame the present study, we develop the analytical tool on two aspects (see Figure 1). First, we remove the historical comparison in the framework (i.e. the social hierarchy triangle in Mao's era) and pay sole attention to the social hierarchy of Chinese urban societies in the present. Second, social elements in relation to the hierarchy of education and segmentation of labor markets are added to illustrate the strong impact of rural *hukou* on educational and occupational trajectories of children and youth. In particular, we zoom in to

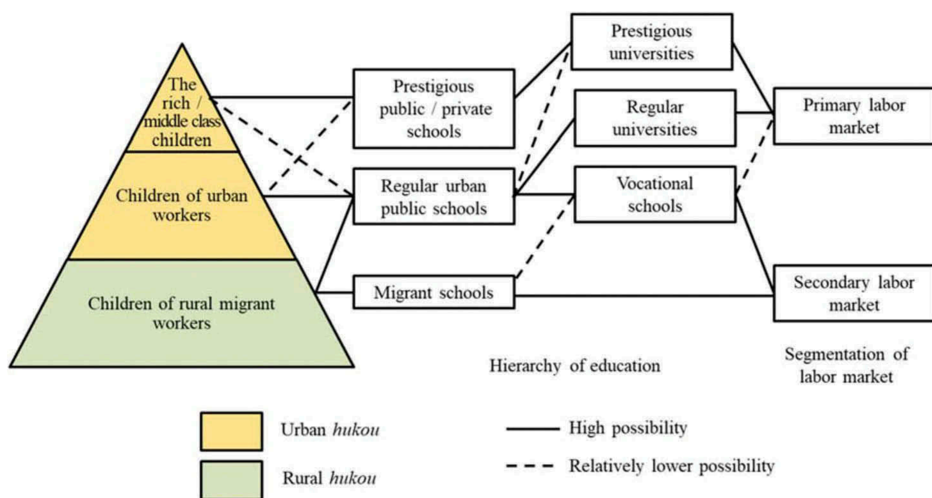

Figure 1. Educational and occupational trajectories of the children of differing *hukou* statuses in Chinese cities.

get a deep understanding of how migrant youth find their journey to upward mobility through education and occupation hampered and blocked altogether.[5] Although this revised social hierarchy triangle sheds light on the correlation between *hukou* status and its attendant possibility of upward mobility through education and/or occupation for children of differing social groups, discussions below focus only on children of rural migrant workers attending migrant schools and their social mobility that is hampered by their rural *hukou*.

Inheriting the rural-*hukou* status from parents, migrant youth suffer from *hukou*-related discrimination and exclusions in forms of educational and occupational inequalities, collectively shaping their poor prospect of social mobility. On the one hand, migrant youth have been excluded from advancing within the regular Chinese education system. Rather than increasing social mobility by enabling students' academic success, schools are complicit with the *hukou* system in reproducing extant class relations (Li 2015; Woronov 2008; Xiong 2015). Under the restricted education policies, many migrant youths attend lower-ranked, urban public schools that are shunned by urbanites; others gain access to substandard migrant schools established and operated by businessmen, many of them of rural origin. Notably, educational policies that favor urban *hukou* students direct migrant youth to return to rural hometowns for post-middle-school education or to attend vocational schools if they choose to settle in cities. This is to say, that they are not allowed to take college entrance examinations in cities so that lower admission lines and higher enrolment quotas that Chinese universities assign to cities can be enjoyed exclusively by urbanites. Meanwhile, many urban public vocational schools remain inaccessible for rural *hukou* youth, while the quality of teaching in schools that do receive them is generally questioned by the public. Thus, attending vocational schools will perhaps not channel migrant youth to a more promising mobility path (Li 2015; Ling 2015; Woronov 2011; Xiong 2015).

On the other hand, *hukou*-related barriers direct migrant youth to low-paying, temporary jobs in the secondary labor market, without social prestige and social welfare. The urban labor market has long been segmented along the line of *hukou* status. For instance, in 1995, the Beijing municipal Bureau of Labor promulgated the regulations on migrant workers and merchants, detailing approximately 200 kinds of work for which non-local people can be recruited. All fell into heavy manual and non-technical categories of labor. Although the regulations were abolished in 2005, in Beijing and elsewhere in urban China recent population policies continue to bar rural migrants from permanent jobs in state-owned enterprises and state agencies. Social networks comprised relatives, and fellow migrants also play a crucial role in helping rural migrants to secure specific types of migrant work, usually offering low wages and being physically demanding and exploitative (Fan 2008).

Chengzhongcun across the country have provided rural *hukou* youth with affordable housing and job opportunities. Their removal will have an impact on the lived experiences of poor, rural migrants and their social mobility (Davis 2006). In this article, we trace the educational and occupational trajectories of migrant youth in a *chengzhongcun* under the constant threat of demolition, on the basis of which we explore their pathway or lack thereof, of social mobility.

Settings and methods

The site of this research, Yellow Field (a pseudonym), is a *chengzhongcun* located near the eastern end of the Fifth Ring Road on the far west side of Beijing. From Tiananmen Square, the prosperous city center, it takes more than one hour to reach the village via a combination of subway and bus trips, followed by a ten-minute walk. Among the 50 named *chengzhongcun* that are earmarked as high-priority redevelopment projects in Beijing, Yellow Field is considered as the largest in the coverage area. The ramshackle village has seen tremendous population growth in the last two decades when nearly all inner city *chengzhongcun* have been demolished completely. It serves as a rental enclave for approximately 50,000 low-paid rural migrant workers who work in jobs such as street vending, janitorial work, catering, and construction.

Yellow Field's local villagers built lines of small rental units on their "housing plots" or extensions to their low-rise houses (no more than two floors) to generate rental income as compensation for their substantial economic loss after losing their farmland during urban expansion. Each room is about 9 to 12 square meters and is rented out for 350 to 1000 *yuan*. In most cases, rural migrant workers can only afford one such room to accommodate all family members. Without a separate kitchen, they simply keep a gas or electric cooker outside the room. They do not have an indoor bathroom either, sharing public water pipes, and public toilets with fellow tenants in adjacent compounds.

The data for this study are drawn from a 14-month participant observation of 20 Yellow Field migrant youth. The first author conducted fieldwork from February to September in 2011, from April to June in 2012, from May to June in 2016, and in September 2017. During these seven years, migrant youth welcomed the first author into their personal lives as a friend-researcher. She spent a total of 262 days observing and interviewing migrant youth regarding their educational and occupational experiences. The research methods were comprised of semi-structured interviews and field visit observations. The ages of the migrant youth participating in this study ranged from 14 to 17 years old. Aside from five youths who dropped out of school prior to the study, all others attended the same unlicensed migrant school. The migrant youth were interviewed voluntarily, at their convenience, in a familiar location, such as their homes, internet cafes, roadside barbecue stalls, and snack shops. Institutional

Review Board procedures were followed throughout the study to safeguard the interests of the minors and protect them from potential harm.

The first author completed all one-on-one interviews in Mandarin Chinese, a widely-spoken language among the Yellow Field migrant youth. A total of 237 h of audio-recordings of interviews were transcribed verbatim in Chinese and, together with the field visit notes, were translated into English selectively as needed to present the findings here. For the sake of confidentiality, all identifying information was removed by assigning pseudonyms to the interviewees while translating and transcribing. Throughout the fieldwork, the first author took reflective notes and wrote analytic memos, made observational comments, and wrote summaries of observations and interviews to generate the field logs (Ely et al. 2004). This functioned as the initial process of data analysis in an attempt to sort and condense the raw data into potentially key data elements by identifying tentative coding categories. Guided by traditional qualitative analysis techniques (c.f. Goetz and LeCompte 1984), we read all coded and segmented logs repeatedly to obtain a holistic view of the overall data. In addition, we developed diagrams to visualize intricate links between emerging coding categories, which were listed with their associated events, processes, and revealing narratives from transcriptions and field notes. The use of techniques such as member checks and searches for disconfirming evidence improved the validity and credibility of the themes elaborated below.

Impending demolition and impact on educational trajectories

In 2011, when the first author approached Yellow Field from a bus stop for the very first time, the incessant noise made by passing vehicles on the nearby highway was deafening. The highway cut through the main thoroughfare, which divided the area into two segments – a middle-class community on the north and a low-income, informal settlement in the south, the latter was inhabited by rural migrant workers and some indigenous villagers. In the north, towering skyscrapers arose from the edges of paved, concrete roads, which turned into rough dirt roads leading to Yellow Field. Two clusters of cheap rental housing were located next to the highway. In dirt alleys that were lined with self-built, high-density rental units, garbage was piled into small hills, which emitted a musty, acrid smell.

After six years, the on-going demolition has transformed Yellow Field by destroying the village housing on the southeast and evicting more than 2000 rural migrant workers. To speed up work to demolish Yellow Field, the district government initiated a special action called "releasing, regulating and enhancing the promotion [of the level of urbanization]" (*shujie zhengzhi cu tisheng*) in Yellow Field. At the end of 2017, approximately 254 squatter structures covering 854,000 square meters had been demolished. Such intervention was consistent with the Beijing municipal government in terms of the steadfast

support of *chengzhongcun* removal, eventually vacating one-half million rural migrant workers inhabiting rundown areas. The demolition instantly changed the lives of a large number of remaining residents – in particular, the mobility opportunities of migrant youth via education.

Many migrant youths in Yellow Field attended a migrant school called Green Tree (a pseudonym), a few minutes' walk from their rented homes. Before relocating to Yellow Field, Green Tree had experienced four forced moves due to government-supervised demolitions of *chengzhongcun*. To continue enrolling migrant children and youth, the school followed the moving route of migrant families to the more peripheral areas. At the outset of this study, Green Tree provided 578 migrant children and youth with a formal education from pre-kindergarten through 9th grade. After six years, the number of students dropped to approximately 380 as the result of the forced eviction of rural migrants during the on-going demolition. Similar to other migrant schools described in other studies (c.f. Goodburn 2009), Green Tree offered students low-quality schooling with inexperienced, unqualified teachers; a loosely packed schedule; a monotonous curriculum; a non-striving, non-demanding school atmosphere; and practices of large-scale cheating on exams (sanctioned by the school principal and assisted by teachers), as well as copying texts as the major pedagogy.

Two factors contribute to the low-quality schooling at migrant schools. First, most school proprietors operate schools through their own efforts; therefore, insufficient institutional and monetary resources could render their schools quasi-legal (or illegal) and poorly conditioned. Because local governments perceive the existence of these schools as encroaching on their jurisdiction, the operations of many migrant schools in Beijing have been suspended or shut down in recent years. Second, local education bureaus evaluate neither teacher performance nor the academic achievement and attainment of the students at migrant schools, leaving much room for migrant teachers and school proprietors to maneuver.

Most strikingly, the impending demolition of *chengzhongcun* deters proprietors from further investing into migrant schools, worsening the already low-quality education of migrant youth. In 2014, Principal Lu confided to the first author about the fact that he intentionally avoided further investment into the school due to the looming demolition:

> "*For these past ten years, people have kept spreading the word that Yellow Field is going to be demolished. No one knows exactly how long this school might exist. I may not be able to get back my funds if I invest some money to purchase equipment, improve school infrastructures, facilities, and teaching quality. I am concerned with building good relationships with government officials and exerting some influence in the political arena. This will shield my school from getting into trouble with governments and help with my next investment in the outskirts. After the demolition, I plan to establish a*

boarding school [for rural migrants]. Right now, I have to lower the cost of running this school in order to save enough money."

Although a vast majority of migrant youth disengaged from schooling and frequently articulated disappointment and frustration toward low-quality education, academically-oriented students suffered the most with the cutting of expenses by Principal Lu. In our interviews, these students expressed strong determination to fulfil the occupational aspiration of obtaining enviable white-collar jobs through educational advancement. In classes, they listened attentively to teachers' instructions, carefully wrote down notes, and answered exam questions on their own. To different extents, academically-oriented students believed in the importance of completing middle school and/or going to college, and therefore, viewed school success as a mobility strategy through which to gain urban residence and elevate their social status. A 7th-grade student named Zi-qi shared her observations about how the investment plan of Principal Lu negatively impacted her studies. She explained,

"*Unlike students in public schools, we don't take classes like computer science. At the outset, we take computer classes using very old computers. Four people used one computer. Because these old computers did not work anymore, our computer course was cancelled. Teachers said to us that Principal Lu did not want to buy new computers. Last summer, some benevolent people donated a dozen computers to the school. We found out that Principal Lu stored up the computers in the warehouse. Teachers said he will use the money saved up from selling computers to build his new school.*"

Surprisingly, a degenerative effect of the demolition of Yellow Field is to exacerbate the already low-quality education of migrant youth. Particularly for a handful of academically-oriented students in each class, their dreams of upward mobility through academic excellence might not be fulfilled when exposed to such flawed and ineffective schooling. In other words, the self-serving behavior of Principal Lu shaped the low-quality schooling which limited the mobility opportunities of migrant youth.

Frustrated about the dysfunctional schooling at Green Tree, most students made gloomy forecasts about the prospects of their investment in academic studies. In classrooms, they resisted copying assignments, talked back to teachers, and oftentimes participated in group fights involving students from nearby schools. In addition to these misbehaviors, running away from home to perform migrant work in *chengzhongcun* was not uncommon among the less academically-oriented students. For example, a 9th grader named Jun-jian was found by his worried parents in an unkempt restaurant, where he cut vegetables and meat in the back kitchen. After nearly 20 days of independent life, Jun-jian was sent back to Green Tree. During the demolition process of Yellow Field, bulldozers tore down the small restaurant and a convenience shop where he had done migrant work. He recalled the days of working in these settings and envisioned his route of social mobility:

> *"There are some job opportunities [for migrant youth] in Yellow Field. I have worked in several places, back and forth. With the money I earned from work, I treated my buddies to meals and went to internet bars as many times as I wanted. I felt happy and independent. I don't want to rely on my parents for everything. It might be harder to find a job in the future, because many shops that I could work at are going to be demolished… About the future, I will work in a restaurant at first to save some money, and I will spend the money to open my own restaurant. My parents work their butts off for their boss every day. I want to be a boss!"*

Notably, all migrant youth interviewed by the first author expressed resentment toward the typical migrant jobs that manifest the vulnerability of their parents in the urban labor market. They planned to change their life circumstances either through school success or joining in the informal economy as small-business owners. With shaken faith in the schooling of Green Tree, less academically-oriented students expected to quit school or to attend vocational schools in order to step into society as soon as possible. From their own experiences of taking migrant work and those of their parents, they increasingly realized that academic studies were disconnected from the demands of the labor market; however, the skills they need to carve out a place in urban society could be learned from vocational schools, which offered practical majors such as catering, automobile repair, and tourism and hotel management, to name only a few.

Telling the migrant youth that they will have no school to attend as the result of the demolition of Yellow Field, Principal Lu and migrant teachers recommended to the majority of Green Tree students that they transfer to a nearby vocational boarding school. Principal Lu and the teachers did so partly because they labeled these students as academically hopeless due to poor performance and partly because they would receive a monetary reward for each and every successfully enrolled student they introduced to the vocational school. Holding a lower status than academic education in Chinese society, vocational education directs graduates to laboring-type jobs that are usually degraded and despised by urbanites. However, from the perspectives of migrant youth, vocational training provides a feasible way for them to scale the social ladder.

What migrant youth were ignorant of is that vocational education assists them in taking blue-collar jobs, rather than fulfilling their dreams of upward mobility. In our interviews, vocational school graduates launched into a long tirade about the disappointing experiences they had in the nearby vocational school, where they basically learned nothing because the teachers spent much time reading textbooks and most students were troublemakers. What is worse, the eventual total demolition of Yellow Field and other *chengzhongcun* in Beijing will impede migrant-worker parents from creating more permanent roots in the city. As a result, despite their parents' hard work, coupled with the low level of education that is a predictor of low-paying jobs, the majority of

migrant youth will be trapped in the situation of stagnant social mobility (more details below).

Job paths impacted by the planned demolition

From unskilled manual backgrounds, many rural migrant workers in Yellow Field entered the informal economy. This economy consists of a set of casual and intermittent economic activities that are outside of state protection and regulation, such as self-employment, petty trade, and small-scale production. In Yellow Field, rundown rental units surrounded a flea market where rural migrant workers set up small stalls to sell hardware and second-hand products. The market draws large crowds from adjacent neighborhoods. In addition, various small businesses flourished on the main thoroughfare, including small restaurants, tailor shops, internet cafes, butcher shops, convenience stores, and so forth. All of these were of humble size with shabby decor. Cheap goods hung outside of shop doors and out-of-date advertisement posters featured some washed-out former movie stars.

Walking through the dirt alleys of rental units, anyone could see rural migrant workers busy with cleaning fruits in laundry basins or trimming a variety of vegetables scattered on the ground. In the early morning, these vendors hawking vegetables, fruits, and cooked food for pedestrians filled the road, forming a boisterous county fair-like atmosphere. Parents of Green Tree migrant youth held wheelbarrows to peddle on the streets, managed stands in the flea market, or operated small stores on the thoroughfare. After school, migrant youth were summoned to join their parents. Some youth skipped classes or even quit school to take care of the small business through which the whole family made ends meet in the city.

Ning was the oldest youth the first author interviewed in Yellow Field. He described himself as "a non-local growing up in Beijing." Staying in the city for an extended period of time, he saw through the varying forms of socioeconomic disparities between urban and rural regions and the deep-rooted social exclusions poor rural migrants have to suffer. Ning's parents operated a small store selling bottled water for customers in nearby skyscrapers. In recent years, polluted tap water has haunted people in Beijing, and some decide to spend extra money on purified water. Two fellow migrants were hired to provide home delivery services. Before employing someone else, his parents performed the arduous work by themselves for 10 years. This small business thrived, with an increasing number of people consuming bottled water. With many years of saving, the family took out a loan for an apartment in their hometown.

Due to poor performance and disappointment about schooling, Ning dropped out of school in the 7th grade and then helped to deliver bottled water for the shop. Although the demolition notices had previously been attached to the walls of their rental units, Ning and his parents suspected

the coming of the real demolition. As early as 2001, when Beijing celebrated wining the right to stage the 2008 Olympic Games, inhabitants spread the word among one another that Yellow Field was scheduled to be torn down in the first phrase of *chengzhongcun* removal in the city. At the end of 2017, Yellow Field was still largely intact enough to house rural migrant workers and their families from all over the country. They speculated that Yellow Field might be successfully escaping from this round of demolition, similar to how it had for the past 16 years.

However, the sharp rise in housing rents shattered their illusion about the delay or cancellation of the demolition. Facing the looming demolition, some local landlords took advantage of the last chance to earn as much money as possible. As a result, rents more than doubled, with a small unit once 700 *yuan* now going for 1,500, and a store on the main thoroughfare that was once 1,500 *yuan* was now 3,500. Apparently, they were out of the reach of Ning's parents, as they struggled to support the nuclear family, send remittances back to Ning's grandparents left behind in the rural countryside, and concurrently pay back the monthly loan of 2,000 *yuan* on an income of less than 8,000 *yuan* a month. One day, Ning talked about the chaos brought about by the upcoming demolition and its consequence on his occupational trajectory. He explained,

> My father talked to the landlords. They were not willing to lower the rents. My father will talk to them one more time. If they continue to refuse, we will have to close the store and find another place to live. This demolition changes my life. If this place is not demolished, my parents will keep running this store until we earn enough money to move to somewhere else. I don't have any skills or school credentials. People like me have no choice but work on construction sites. Anyway, my parents and I will stay here to do any work we can, because we have to pay back the loans.

It is important to note that the scheduled demolition of Yellow Field and other *chengzhongcun* in Beijing will leave rural migrant workers and their children few affordable substitutes for residing and continuing their small businesses. These small businesses not only support migrant households and their extended family in the countryside but also direct migrant youth to a better occupational trajectory than their parents. In other words, the *chengzhongcun* removal will bar migrant youth from advancing socioeconomically, because their parents are unable to accumulate capital necessary for their children to gain a better social status.

Obviously, government-initiated campaigns, particularly the demolition of *chengzhongcun*, have a negative impact on the social mobility of migrant youth. In their research on social mobility of the second generation of immigrants, Zhou and her associates (2008, 42) suggest that "structural exigencies" play a key role in shaping one's mobility trajectory. From their perspective, structural exigencies include problematic (undocumented or illegal) citizenship

status, status-related discrimination, and unfair treatment and bankruptcy of the family business, to name only a few. In this view, the looming demolition serves as a structural exigency leading to the closure of Ning's family business, and because of this Ning perhaps has to take on difficult work at a certain construction site.

In most cases, the demolition of *chengzhongcun* will force rural migrant parents to resettle in the outskirts of the city, or even out of Beijing, and thus leave their children to struggle alone. Yu-jie was left behind in his rural hometown, alone, for three years before he reunited with his parents. His father was a self-employed air-conditioning repairman who walked through the streets to seek work. He studies air-conditioning repair and maintenance by himself, after learning that this simple service is in high demand in Beijing. In regard to the impact of the imminent demolition on his future, Yu-jie stated:

> "*My father likes his job. He said to me many times that he supports this family using his own hands. I am his little helper. I handed him tools and watched out for passengers when he worked at heights. He has good relationships with old customers. They introduce him to more new customers. He is satisfied with what he has and hopes that I will work in this job like him. But, because of the [upcoming] demolition, he is not sure about how long we can live here. My parents perhaps will move to another place [with lower rents] in the city. I will stay here [to finish vocational school education]…. Because my father will not be around, his old costumers would not trust my skills. My skills are not as good as my father's. So, I plan to do something else. Perhaps I can be an express deliveryman.*"

Like Yu-jie, whose parents planned to leave Yellow Field due to the anticipated demolition, another migrant child named Qian-yu had to face the same situation. She was one of a small portion of migrant youth from a relatively well-off family background. Her parents settled in Beijing with the help of folks from the same village to enter the wholesale garment business in a clothing wholesale market near the Beijing Zoo. Six years later, they decided to invest all their savings into running a more lucrative business – selling second-hand motorcycles. They relocated to Yellow Field and rented a large space in the flea market to display the motorcycles for sale, most of them stolen. It was fortunate for them to shift to another trade before the local government closed all wholesale markets in downtown Beijing at the end of 2017. Nonetheless, Green Tree teachers looked down upon the quasi-legal business of Qian-yu's parents and shared their negative comments with the first author. Though in the eyes of teachers and peers Qian-yu was a rich kid who was about to carry on the business of her parents, she described the uncertainty of her future accompanied with the demolition. She said,

> "*Everyone thinks my life is settled. I know it is uncertain. My father said his business is tied together with the development of this city, but few people know beforehand what the city will change into.… People keep saying that Yellow Field is going to be demolished in the future. Even though no one knows when it will be torn down.*

> *Sooner or later, my father will close his business and sell out all motorcycles at low prices. My parents plan to return to the county seat near our rural hometown and perhaps open a convenience store for a living. . .. I will not go with them. I will go to find a job by myself and live an independent life in this city."*

Because policies of *chengzhongcun* removal in China intend to restrict the urban population to an appropriate size by evicting rural *hukou* manual labor, it might not be disappointing to see some rural migrant workers giving up their petty trade and moving to the outskirts of the cities, or even eventually returning to their rural hometowns. It is important to note that almost all migrant youth interviewed by the first author expressed strong determination to stay in the city. However, without the support of their parents, migrant youth will have to start their careers from scratch, in most cases mainly relying on their own efforts and fortune to make a living. Without benefiting from the small business operated by his parents, as a school dropout Ning has to work in a typical migrant job that he evinced an obvious aversion to. In the case of Yu-jie, he thought about giving up working in air-conditioning repair because his father, who had years of experience in the profession, will not be able to mentor him at the beginning of his career. For Qian-yu, the looming demolition of the flea market discouraged her parents from continuing the lucrative business in the cheap rental location. With parents who probably will move to somewhere else, she will be left behind in the city, trying to figure out how to support herself.

As a result, the demolition of *chengzhongcun* makes the stagnant social mobility of these youth all but inevitable as they are not able to climb the social ladder despite their parents' hard work and efforts.

Conclusion

By examining educational and occupational trajectories affected by the demolition of *chengzhongcun*, this paper reveals that migrant youth might not be able to move up the social ladder. After years of toiling in cities, peasant-worker parents have accumulated a small amount of social capital of varying degrees; however, the demolition of *chengzhongcun* prevents them from accumulating capital and creating more permanent roots in the destination city necessary for their offspring to move upward socially – quite different from what has been optimistically portrayed in *Arrival City*. In most cases, migrant youth have to start with nothing. For those who intend to achieve social mobility through school success, the impending demolition of *chengzhongcun* has worsened the already low-quality education of migrant youth because profit-driven school proprietors have no incentives to further invest in the schools. For those who make endeavors to thrive in the informal economy, *chengzhongcun* removal hampers migrant households from keeping their small

businesses through which the family made ends meet in the city and through which the migrant youth planned to build a new future.

In the process of *chengzhongcun* removal, scholars often draw attention to questions such as whether indigenous villagers have been given a reasonable compensation or how city governments address petitions and protests initiated by "nail households."[6] What has always been overlooked is its indirect impact – the stagnant social mobility of the children of rural migrant workers. Declining mobility would be accompanied with their anger and indignation toward social and educational inequalities, leading to social unrest or disorder at some time in the future, potentially jeopardizing the stability of urban society. This unanticipated consequence strongly contradicts the purported aim of the demolition of *chengzhongcun* in terms of improving the well-being of urban residents. As scholars suggest (e.g. Chan 2018; Ren 2014), the existence and redevelopment of *chengzhongcun* not only pertains to indigenous villagers but also equally exerts a strong impact on the life chances of rural migrant workers and their children, whose efforts contribute to the rapid urbanization and economic prosperity of cities. In this view, urban expansion should be adjusted to meet their needs and provide them a great future.

For a long time, the economic and urban development of the country has been propelled by "exploit[ing] the rural sector, including its land, property and people" (Buckingham and Chan 2018). The lack of social mobility of migrant youth is deeply rooted in the long-standing, urban-rural divisions. Most strikingly, the dynamic, tension-laden public policymaking process in China results in the unequal distribution of educational and occupational opportunities among rural and urban *hukou* holders. On the one hand, urban and rural governments are only in charge of taking care of local (urban) *hukou* holders within the purview of their administrative areas. As migrant youth move, funds allocated for them by rural governments of their *hukou* locality do not follow the youth to their new destination. On the other hand, due to the decentralization of administrative and financial powers, lower-level local governments have become the sole provider of public goods. Notably, because the central policies leave local governments enough space to maneuver, local governments oftentimes prioritize parochial interests under the guise of adapting national policies to local conditions. It is against this backdrop that many urban bureaucrats lack the political ambition and motivation to support the rural-urban migration of migrant workers. To improve the limited life chances of migrant youth, the central government should allocate funds to safeguard equal educational opportunities for rural migrants, enabling them to enroll in schools. The educational funds allocated to rural governments of their *hukou* registration should be transferred to cities where migrant youth live. For individual cities, some non-governmental organizations in Shanghai assist migrant youth in securing an education within the global educational market (c.f. Xiong and Li 2017). In any case, only when

official avenues to higher social status are provided can 35.8 million migrant children and youth in cities live a respectable life.

Notes

1. To achieve rapid urbanization, city governments in China must requisition land from rural neighborhoods; therefore, cities expand to incorporate nearby villages in the urban fringe. These villages are called "*chengzhongcun*" (villages in the city). According to the *Land Administration Law of the People's Republic of China* (National People's Congress 2004), "[l]and in rural areas and suburban areas of cities excluding those belonging to the state prescribed by law belongs to peasants' collective ownership." However, in reality, urban development under the ambiguous property rights of *chengzhongcun* land causes social tensions between city governments and village residents. For more details about policies regarding *chengzhongcun*, see Buckingham and Chan's (2018) article, "*One City, Two Systems: Chengzhongcun in China's Urban System*."
2. Housing plots (*zhaijidi*) are the land "inherited from parents or later allocated to an expanded household for housing" (Buckingham and Chan 2018, 9).
3. These social strata include (from higher to lower), state and government administrators, managers, private business owners, specialized technicians/professionals, clerks, self-employed entrepreneurs and businessmen, business and service industry workers, industrial workers, agricultural laborers, and the rural and urban unemployed and semi-unemployed (Lu 2012).
4. Short-range mobility describes a situation in which individuals achieve small but important increases of socio-economic benefits. In contrast, long-range mobility focuses on sharp rises in one's status advancement and accumulative drastic changes for social structure.
5. This study assesses the possibility of migrant youth scaling up the socioeconomic ladder through education and/or occupation. Concerning other pathways, Li Forthcoming argues that some rural-*hukou* individuals, particularly those living in the countryside, obtain higher social status through enlisting in the military or marrying urbanites.
6. "Nail householders" refer to people who refuse to make room for the ongoing demolition.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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