Dogged Optimism:
Striving and Waiting in Rural Chinese Students' Negotiations of Social Mobility

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Abstract

This critical ethnography examines the arduous pursuit of upward social mobility among young students in a rural mountain township in Southeastern China. It explores how rural Chinese students from Watershed School (pseudonym) navigate and negotiate upward social mobility within stratified educational and social systems. Despite the obstacles posed by stratified social class and the rural-urban divide, achieving social and geographical mobility has become a compelling imperative for rural youth in contemporary China. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from Global South youth studies and the sociology of education, this dissertation focuses on the role of education in shaping rural students' life trajectories. It also investigates these students' strategies to navigate the intricate interplay between schooling, stratification, and the urgent demand for social mobility.

The stories underpinning this dissertation were derived from two years of fieldwork at Watershed School, beginning in 2019 when my participants were in ninth grade. This study reveals that Watershed School, produced as a stratified and waiting educational space, has profoundly shaped the life opportunities of its students with varying academic performances. Through the implementation of tracking practices, such as academic grouping and the incorporation of labor education, the school served as an influential institute that propelled some students to strive for educational success while leaving others waiting. Consequently, striving and waiting emerged as two distinct strategies adopted by the students in navigating the tensions between the desire for mobility and the stratified social reality.

Both the striving and waiting rural students have developed a culture that I call "dogged optimism" to cope with the imperative for social mobility within a stratified system. The culture

of dogged optimism serves as a form of social navigation, enabling them to navigate the challenges and opportunities inherent in being aspirational subjects in contemporary Chinese society. This dissertation argues that a critical rethinking of dominant narratives of social mobility rooted in education is necessary to go beyond the limitations of this positive yet tenuous optimism among marginalized youth. I argue that a pedagogy of the nearby, which prioritizes facilitating the capabilities for critical reflexivity and action rather than an illusionary distant future, opens up possibilities for rural Chinese students to reconstruct social relations and foster critical hopes.

Engaging in critical dialogue within the field of Global South youth studies and considering the distinctive Chinese local contexts, this dissertation provides a localized cultural analysis of rural Chinese students' subjective experiences of social mobility. It offers implications for interrogating the deeply ingrained connections between education and social mobility.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

While I was sitting in the teachers' office at Watershed School and flipping through the Chinese textbooks used by students, a text called "*Han Hao Niao*" (寒号鸟) caught my attention. The title means "winter-cry bird[1]." The story is a fictional tale about an industrious Magpie and a lazy Winter-Cry Bird. It was also included in one of my elementary school textbooks around twenty years ago. I was surprised that second-grade children still learn this fable today despite most of the content in their textbooks being different from what I learned.

This story portrays the Magpie as an anthropomorphized hardworking bird, busy preparing for the impending winter by constructing a nest. Upon noticing its neighbor, the Winter-Cry Bird, who spends its days idling away in play and sleep, the Magpie reminds it not to *wait* and to build a shelter before winter sets in. However, the Winter-Cry Bird disregards the Magpie's advice and keeps postponing the task. Winter arrives suddenly, and the frigid wind blows in from the north. One cold night, while the Magpie stays warm in its nest, the Winter-Cry Bird has no place to keep warm and regrets not building a shelter. It screams in pain, "Brr, brr. The cold wind is freezing me to death, and tomorrow I will build my shelter." Nevertheless, the next day, when the wind stops and the weather turns warmer, the Winter-Cry Bird overlooks the Magpie's reminder again and takes no action. Ultimately, the Winter-Cry Bird freezes to death on another chilly winter night.

Even after over twenty years, I can still recite some sentences from this text. The key lesson I learned from the story remains unforgettable: If we fail to plan ahead and work hard for

[1] When I learned the story of *Han Hao Niao* in elementary school, the textbook described the winter-cry bird as a bird species. However, today's textbook has corrected it to be a flying squirrel. They are called Winter-Cry Birds because of their constant calls during the cold winter and bird-like gliding ability.

our future, we will pay a high price. The story instilled in me the values of diligence and self-responsibility, encouraging me to strive for a bright future like the Magpie. I was taught that children and young people could not afford to *de guo qie guo* (得过且过, muddle along), a key idiomatic expression that students were expected to master after learning the text. This serves as a cautionary reminder that if we find ourselves in a state similar to the Winter-Cry Bird at any point in our lives, we must strive to motivate and transform ourselves into better individuals.

I begin this dissertation with this fictional story because the journey of growth and development among rural Chinese children and youth is fraught with the tension of choosing between becoming a Magpie or a Winter-Cry Bird, a theme I will explore further in the following chapters. Parents and educators place immense pressure on every rural student to become a diligent Magpie from the early stages of their schooling, as hard work is perceived as the most reliable, if not the sole, pathway for these young individuals, who often lack the resources for success. For rural Chinese, the notion of success typically revolves around transcending rural life and the struggles of the working class. People know that in a class- and rural-urban-divided Chinese society, only a few rural youths who work hard enough at school will eventually leave the countryside and climb the social ladder.

Nevertheless, the aspirations of the adults often remain unfulfilled within a stratified educational and social system. Rural schools in China today are perceived as overcrowded with uninspired, unmotivated, and disenchanted students who demonstrate little inclination towards striving for academic success (Chung & Mason, 2012; M. Li et al., 2020; T. Li, 2016, 2020; W. Wang, 2023). These studies have documented a considerable number of rural students who make few efforts in academic learning. Although all students in Chinese rural schools are expected to

be industrious Magpies, only a few can fulfill this expectation. Most students are deemed Winter-Cry Birds unwilling to endure the rigors of education and thus forego the opportunity to achieve upward mobility through schooling.

This perception of rural students, however, is inconsistent with some general observations about contemporary Chinese society, which suggest that striving is one of the most significant themes in Chinese people's lives today. The anthropologist Yunxiang Yan (2012, 2013), for example, points out that the ethics of the striving individual is a noticeable moral value that has gradually guided Chinese society since the 1980s. The "striving individual" is a new type of subject that has emerged in post-reform China, which "is driven by the urge to succeed or the fear of failure or the combination of both; to succeed or avoid losing out, the individual must be industrious, self-disciplined, calculating and pragmatic" (Y. Yan, 2013, p. 282). Another influential anthropologist, Biao Xiang (2014b, 2021a), makes a similar observation and points out that the younger generation in China is like hummingbirds. They must keep flapping their wings without even a second of relaxation to avoid falling off.

Such emphasis on striving places a political imperative on Chinese young people to embody the ideals of "an aspirational generation," particularly as the concepts of "positive energy[2]" (*zheng neng liang*, 正能量) and collective struggling (*fendou*, 奋斗) to achieve the Chinese Dream have become official political discourses since the early 2010s (K. C. Tan & Cheng, 2020; Yang & Tang, 2018). Within school education, the theme of striving is equally prominent. China is often portrayed as a nation that exhibits a pervasive educational desire

[2] "Positive energy" is a significant official slogan in contemporary Chinese society. Officials frequently utilize it to encourage individuals to embrace a motivating spirit, engage in behaviors that align with mainstream values, and become positive, hopeful individuals.

(Kipnis, 2011), fostering a culture of diligent struggle among students born into less privileged positions who aim to change their fate. In his ethnography of three places with rural-urban differences, Howlett (2023) finds that the connection between education and defying predetermined destiny is notably strong among rural Chinese students. Using education to rise above disadvantaged social positions has become a dominant school culture in China. Howlett refers to this deeply ingrained connection as "an institutionalized form of defiance" (p.26), emphasizing that the agency and resistance of rural Chinese students are demonstrated not through relinquishing education, but rather through docility and self-discipline. This mainstream school culture serves as an inspiration for Chinese students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, encouraging them to combat their fate in pursuit of social mobility constantly.

When Chinese students are under cultural, moral, political, and economic pressures to embody a culture of ceaseless striving and perpetual hummingbird-like activity, it raises a perplexing question: Why is there a significant population of rural students who seem to represent the opposite, evolving into who are considered as "lazy" Winter-Cry Birds? The overrepresentation of these Winter-Cry Birds in rural schools deserves more attention, considering that moving out of rural mountainous areas and climbing the social ladder has become a collective aspiration for young people in rural China amidst modernization and urbanization (Y. Liang, 2022). Given that people believe education to be the most effective way to achieve such geographical and social mobility in current Chinese society, it becomes puzzling that many rural students give up and choose to muddle along instead. Why and how does rural schooling produce many aspirational students who do not actively strive (for academic success)?

This dissertation aims to develop a clearer understanding of these tensions and

inconsistencies. It examines how and why some rural Chinese students choose to (or are able to) become Magpies while some act like Winter-Cry Birds at school, even though both groups of students are the "aspirational generation" growing up in the era of China's positive energy. My critical ethnography in a rural mountain township explores the complexities of choosing between diligent struggle or idling in a society where upward mobility has become imperative for rural students. These seemingly contrasting reactions to education are generated within a context where society and schools instill high aspirations but fail to provide adequate support to fulfill them, owing to escalating disparities. These strategies represent rural Chinese students' agency in negotiating the intricate entanglement between schooling, mobility, and stratification. As my fieldwork demonstrates, Chinese rural students are generally aspirational, following the striving ethics and the norm of achieving both geographical and social mobility. However, a stratified educational and social system produces different types of "striving individuals" to negotiate the gap between a hopeful, imagined future and an unequal reality.

Based on a critical ethnographic study in a field site that I call Watershed School, I explore how students in rural China negotiate the relationship between education, stratification, and their embodied navigation of "a bright future" (Frye, 2012). In an era when discourses of social mobility are increasingly embedded in education for marginalized groups across the world (Ansell et al., 2020; Frye, 2012; Jakimow, 2016), stories from Watershed School contribute to illuminating how disadvantaged students, such as rural young people, negotiate and navigate the tensions between being aspirational and being hopeless in societies that lack justice systems to meet meritocratic promises. These stories uncover how rural Chinese students' schooling experiences shape—and are shaped by—the urgent need for success and the forces pulling them

stuck at the bottom. They deepen our understanding of how rural students think, feel, and imagine their current and future lives along their pathway of moving out and up (Parsons, 2022). These rural students' hopes, imaginations, fears, and struggles push educators, both in China and globally, to rethink the role of education and the promise of development for young people who seek mobility at the margin.

A Personal Journey of Learning to Move

As I grew up in a rural mountain village, mobility has become a central theme. My life experiences thus far consistently revolved around navigating the complex negotiations between the desire for mobility and the realities of stratification, with education being the primary battleground for these negotiations. Contrary to my parents' generations, who had not been allowed to migrate from rural to urban spaces until the late 1970s—a time when China started to shift from a planned economy to a market one—I, like the participants in this study, was born and grew up in China's great migration (Gu, 2021; Murphy, 2020). This era has witnessed hundreds of millions of rural Chinese residents moving back and forth between rural and urban places. It is also an era where my parents and I must be mobile to access opportunities for work, education, and, ultimately, a better future.

I have spent most of my childhood and youth pursuing geographical and social mobility. I learned at an early age that my parents greatly expected me to walk out of the mountains and obtain an urban identity. Escaping from a rural origin is a collective shared aspiration among rural mountain people, especially for the younger generations. My parents, born in the 1960s, had tried to move away from the village yet failed. They attributed their failure of unsuccessful geographical relocation to *mei wenhua* (没文化), or too low level of education. Therefore, they

have urged me to avoid following in their footsteps by encouraging me to study hard since I was a little boy. To help me succeed at school, they even consulted a fortune-teller to determine the best time for my first school day. Following the advice, they brought me to visit a teacher at that specific moment on that particular day. They asked the teacher to give a brief class to me individually for enlightenment (*kaimeng*, 开蒙).

Much to my parents' delight, my life trajectory appeared different from theirs after entering school. I was able to sit quietly and listen carefully in class. I was aware of the importance of learning well. Thus, fortunately enough, I quickly learned how to become a Magpie without too much struggle. Since early childhood, I have been seen as "college material" (*dushu de liao*, 读书的料) (Cheng, 2018). I did not disappoint my parents when I entered the best high school in the county, becoming the first one in my family to receive a high school education. My later educational journey far exceeded their expectations: going to a well-known university, earning a master's degree, and now pursuing a Ph.D. in the United States.

My unexpected education experience may be interpreted as an example to prove the effectiveness of being a Magpie: the harder you work, the more successful you will be. I used to think so, too. It was only when I started my university studies in social work that I gradually realized my educational mobility was not merely a story of individual effort. In the four-year bachelor program in Shanghai, during many visits to migrant schools that served rural children who migrated to the city with their families, I heard many stories that helped me realize a simple fact: Not every effort will pay off if the system does not permit it. These rural migrant students, lacking legally recognized urban citizenship (discussed in more detail in Chapter 2), had no access to the same resources as their urban peers. Structural and institutional barriers matter.

"But what makes you *here*?" After introducing my rural background and the multiple difficulties rural students face in China, I have often been asked why I finally became a doctoral student across the Pacific. Looking back at my schooling, I still have a lingering fear of being off-track in China's highly competitive and stratified school system. What if I was not selected to sit in the "key point class" (*zhongdian ban*, 重点班)—a class filled by the students with the highest test scores—in middle school? What if I could not continue my education in the "key point class" at the best public high school in the county seat? Many intermediary variables create the seemingly cause-and-effect relationship between individual effort and success. These factors make some of my rural classmates *here* and others *there*.

My educational advancement has primarily hinged on the class and school I was enrolled in. China's education system is often described as "one exam determines one's life." In my case, this held true not only for the college entrance exam (*Gaokao*, 高考) but also for every exam during each transitional phase: from elementary school to middle school, from middle school to high school, and from university to graduate school. My middle school entrance exam scores allowed me to study in the "key point class" in a non-key middle school, which consisted of the school's highest-achieving students and the best-qualified teachers. The exam at the end of middle school (*Zhongkao*, 中考, or the high school entrance exam) plays the role of tracking, determining whether students continue their studies at academic or vocational high schools or lose schooling opportunities and enter the job market. The proportion of students on each track is predetermined in advance, with only half continuing in academic high schools (Woronov, 2016). Moving upward through the channel of education is not only about individual efforts but also about how the system is designed (Du, 2016).

I have been trying to understand my own mobility experiences: growing up in a rural village, moving out of the village for education, and navigating schooling to learn to leave the rural hometown and then secure a position in a higher social class. Coming of age in a rapidly urbanizing China has been a complex journey for me. It means a constant negotiation between the origins and expected destinations: from being rural to becoming urban, from starting as a lower social class to ending in a higher one. I decided to pursue graduate studies focusing on rural education ten years ago, seeking to get smarter about how rural Chinese youth—including myself—negotiate the complexities of growing up rural. We learn and unlearn our rural selves during repeated migrations, whether moving from villages to cities or returning from cities back to villages. It is through each escape and return that we come to realize the existence of social differences.

This dissertation explores these complicated negotiations involved in growing up rural in contemporary stratified China. It is about how we rural young people experience stratification and mobility in and outside of school, how we respond to the complexities of striving for geographical as well as social mobility, and how rural schooling plays its role in our journeys of social (im)mobility by producing different kinds of striving individuals (Y. Yan, 2012, 2013), such as "diligent" Magpies and "lazy" Winter-Cry Birds. For rural youth, including myself, the pathways to adolescence and adulthood are primarily shaped by the need to move out and move up. To move out of the village is to move upward on the social ladder. In a stratified system, upward mobility becomes highly significant for rural Chinese youth who grow up at the bottom. However, rural students' negotiations of upward social mobility vary. This dissertation explores how students in rural China negotiate the need for social mobility differently within the

educational and social systems that are significantly stratified. It challenges some misunderstandings and reductive views of rural young people's lived experiences in and outside the school.

Interrogating the Rural as a Problem

Growing up rural in contemporary China is multifaceted and multidimensional. However, this complexity is often neglected in public discourses and academic research. Stories of rural Chinese children and youth are usually reduced to problems (Q. Zhou, 2022). A popular perception of a rural student is that a poor child grows up lacking adequate economic, cultural, and social resources, "scientific" parenting, and sufficient attention to the value of education, resulting in unsatisfactory academic performance. Stories of rural students are perceived to be all about loneliness, suffering, deficiency, and failure. Simply put, growing up rural is a *problem*.

The public shares similar views about rural young people with the urban parents who visited Watershed School on the first day of 2020 to make a charitable donation. The following field note is an example to show how rural students are always perceived in China: we are "broken" and are always the problematic other.

> "I can't believe that the boy I visited lives alone. His grandmother, who cares for him, only occasionally comes to see him. Aren't his parents worried?" A mother in her late 30s expressed her surprise after she visited a ten-year-old boy's home at Watershed School. It was the first day of 2020. The weather was getting warmer after two chilling days. When most students at Watershed were enjoying their New Year's Holiday at home, 25 children and their parents from a nearby city came to the rural mountain school to participate in a charity event. They brought cash and daily necessities to support some students

financially at Watershed.

> During the two-hour event, these parents kept expressing their shock at the experiences of growing up rural in today's China. They were not able to imagine a childhood without parental accompaniment. Nor could they understand why the parents of these rural students cannot prioritize the kids' healthy growth instead of working outside the village. One of the urban male visitors who ran a business in the field of family education noticed that many of the rural students at Watershed were too shy. He blamed these rural students' parents for bringing up mentally unhealthy children. "These kids are too poor," he shared his pity. (Fieldnote, January 1, 2020)

The students at Watershed did not know that—in the eyes of the urban visitors—they became "broken" on that day. In a news report written by the organizer of the charity event, a for-profit calligraphy training studio located in the city where the visitors came from, to promote this charitable activity, the students at Watershed were called *zheyi ertong* (折翼儿童), which means children with broken wings or broken children. These urban children were described as angels who came to support the broken children in the rural village. The woman in charge of this studio shared with me after the event, "This is a meaningful learning experience for our urban children by stepping into the deep side of a mountain. Our [urban] children will learn the hardship of life and truly understand the meaning of striving for success."

Like these urban parents, media discourses and policies in China often portray rural children and youth as problems (Gu, 2021). In the era of great migration, rural parents usually have to leave their villages to seek job opportunities. However, due to China's urban-rural divide and household registration policy (further elaborated on in Chapter 2), their children cannot

receive public education in cities, resulting in the separation of many rural children from their parents. These children who grow up without their parents' accompany are labeled as left-behind children (*liushou ertong*, 留守儿童). Similar to the view of the urban parents who visited Watershed School, the public often pathologizes rural migrant families, constructing the problems of left-behind children and their families as a national crisis because they are considered to deviate from certain norms (Gu, 2021). In fact, the term "left-behind children" implies normalcy, reflecting norms from particular classes and cultures regarding child-rearing practices (Guo, 2022). Many "'abnormally-normal' Southern (rural) conditions" (Cooper et al., 2019, p. 35) shape young people's life experiences in rural regions, which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters.

Rural education is perceived in a similar deficient way. Scholars have written about how schools serve to reproduce the marginality of Chinese students with a rural background due to low-qualified teachers and their negative expectations for rural students and parents (Kim, 2019; Yiu & Adams, 2013), routing pedagogy (M. Li et al., 2020; T. Li, 2020), various disciplinary techniques (T. Li, 2016), the construction of loser identities for academically underperforming students (T. Li & Wu, 2015; W. Wang, 2023), and a loose disconnection with rural communities and traditions (Y. Liu, 2014; Lou, 2011). While urban schools in China's big cities actively dedicate themselves to education reform aimed at cultivating high-quality and globally competitive talents (S. Liu, 2020; C. Tan, 2019a, 2019b), rural schools are often perceived to lag behind. As part of China's public education, rural schools are seen as strong evidence that education leads to social reproduction.

Although I have been working on critiquing various binary thoughts, I found myself

having difficulty resisting the rural/urban oppositions when I tried to understand the inequalities experienced by rural students. I often unintentionally start telling a story of rural education and rural youth with the difference between the urban and its rural Other. Rural areas are often perceived as existing in contrast to urban areas. Under this logic, my previous narrative of the rural is also inescapable from describing it as suffering and problematic. It jumps too quickly to the conclusion that rural schools are victims of China's modernization, a social reproduction machine through which rural students are prepared to become an urban underclass. My discomfort with reinforcing stereotypes of rural education urges me to think about education in rural space differently, to resist the temptation of uncritically telling "another deficit story about schooling in rural places" (Cuervo, 2016, p. 2).

This discomfort grows as I become more familiar with qualitative studies of rural schooling in China. While reading stories of rural education and rural students in these studies, I share Madison's (2005) uncomfortable feelings and disbelief when she watched a documentary film that told a partial and misleading story of women's lives in Ghana by representing Ghana as merely a dangerous country. Similarly, I believe that there are some untold stories behind these narratives. Rural education studies in China often categorize rural students as "at risk." This view is problematic because it will likely lead to a singular, pessimistic portrayal of rural young people. Consequently, these studies risk unwittingly reproducing otherness in their representations of rural education, students, and teachers.

However, I could not articulate what was lacking in these studies until I became more deeply involved in critically rethinking theories through perspectives of decolonizing knowledge production, such as "Asia as method" (K.-H. Chen, 2010; Yu, 2023) and theorizations from the

Global South (Connell, 2007, 2018; Cooper et al., 2019; Cuervo & Miranda, 2019; Santos, 2014, 2018; Swartz et al., 2020). Current research on rural Chinese students in the field of sociology of education mainly relies on theories that originated in Europe and the United States, such as social reproduction theory (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), theories of cultural reproduction (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), and culture production theory (Willis, 1977, 1981). These Western and Northern theories, according to Cooper et al. (2019), are "useful but insufficient for conceptualising Southern Youth" (p. 31) because they are socially and geographically embedded. Cooper and colleagues, therefore, call for youth studies *for* the Global South that pay more attention to the socio-historical contexts in which young people from the Global South are situated.

Some studies have pointed out the difficulties of these Western and Northern theories in explaining the educational experiences of rural Chinese students. For example, Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital cannot fully understand why some rural students from low-income families still aim high (Hong, 2022). Willis's theory of counter-school culture sometimes runs into contradictions when analyzing that rural students express little interest in education and, at the same time, believe deeply in the value of formal education (Kipnis, 2001a; W. Wang, 2023). These theoretical difficulties demand that educational researchers become more sensitive to the contextual circumstances shaping the schooling experiences of rural Chinese students.

A context-sensitive approach to educational studies in the Global South opens up new possibilities for understanding the relationship between the school and the student, the nation and the citizen, structural constraints, and individual agency. One of the contextualized differences relevant to understanding rural Chinese students' experiences of social mobility within a

stratified system, the key focus of this dissertation, is how social stratification is shaped by and shapes society. China's social stratification, viewed as "a participatory competition involving everyone" or "mass participatory differentiation" (B. Xiang & Wu, 2023, p. 224), should be analyzed differently from other cultural contexts. In a recently published book entitled *Self as Method*, Xiang insightfully points out these differences,

> This kind of mass participatory differentiation [in China] is unlike the rigid hierarchy we find in India, nor is it like what modern Western scholarship focuses on as the main problems of the day: exclusion, expulsion, marginalization, and direct oppression. Chinese people don't have this feeling. They feel like they have to run fast, but if they fall behind, it is their responsibility. They don't feel that they have been excluded. In some ways, it might have been healthier if they had been excluded, because this might have produced a new sense of self, which would come with a new set of actions. People might resist, or they might carve out a new path. But precisely because they feel like they are still in the game, and can still keep playing, they actively participate. (B. Xiang & Wu, 2023, p. 224)

We have reason to believe that this specific aspect of social stratification in China will significantly impact rural young people's pursuit of social mobility. Social stratification arising from different political, social, cultural, and historical backgrounds produces people with different identities and subjective feelings regarding mobility. For example, in Western literature, people who emphasize self-responsibility in their relations with society are increasingly considered neoliberal subjects (Cairns, 2013; Stahl, 2018; Watts, 2022; Wilkins, 2012). Although we will see in the ethnographic materials that rural Chinese youth have developed subjectivities

and identities seemingly similar to those found in youth studies in the West, we need to be cautious when we apply terms such as neoliberalism and neoliberal subject to rural Chinese youth because of the different contexts in which such identities have developed.

A more critical engagement with writings regarding the Global South reminds me to be cautious about the local conditions and provides me with new analytical tools. One tool that helped me develop this ethnographic study comes from Santos' (2018) writing of the rejoicing body from the epistemologies of the South. According to Santos, the epistemologies of the South emerge from struggles against capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. He claims that the body is not forgettable and should not be forgotten in understanding these struggles. Therefore, epistemologies of the South privilege three types of bodies: the dying body, the suffering body, and the rejoicing body. Santos reminds us that the body's joy is as significant as the body's suffering. He continues to write,

> To situate resistance and struggle at the center of emergent epistemological communities in no way implies that oppressed social groups are taken into account only as long as they struggle and resist. This would mean an unacceptable, modernist reductionism. People do many things other than resisting and struggling; they enjoy life, however precarious the conditions may be; they celebrate and cherish friendship and cooperation; and sometimes they also decide not to resist and give up. (p. 296)

The ideas of the rejoicing body and other epistemologies/theories of decolonization (discussed in more detail in Chapter 2) have helped me understand that the focus on rural students' struggles in much of previous research neglects how these students celebrate joys, happiness, and hopes. What is also overlooked in existing grand narratives of rural students'

pathway to reproducing marginal social positions is the students' perceptions of their current and imagined future lives. Therefore, this dissertation pays more attention to what Santos (2018) emphasizes as the "other things" that are not directly related to resistance and struggles in the lives of rural Chinese students. Focusing on rural Chinese students' experiences in relation to social mobility and stratification, this study aims to develop a more complicated picture of how rural Chinese youth interact with structural and institutional challenges.

Another reason that explains my difficulty in resisting the urban/rural binary comes from my understanding of the word "rural" in rural education. I used to think about rural education as education in fixed rural spaces. This conceptualization, however, indicates a Euclidean container model of space, which views space merely as a container or background. Critical geographers have critiqued this perspective by arguing for relational theorizations of space, describing space as dialectic, fluid, and bodily lived (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 1994, 2005; Soja, 1989, 1996). Theorizing space relationally provides valuable alternative understandings of the entanglements of rural space and education. It opens up possibilities for reconceptualizing rural education in relation to both the rural and the urban, as well as the local and the global. In addition, theories of space emphasize the co-constitution of space and body, which helps bring an embodied and performative perspective to understanding students' schooling experiences in rural schools.

With all this in mind, I aim to disrupt my previous comfortable yet dualistic narrative of schooling in rural China that may reinforce a problematic representation of rural youth as a problem. This endeavor aligns with what Lather (2007) refers to as "a less comfortable social science" (p. 149). I intend to understand some untold stories about China's rural education and youth by thinking more productively from the local, the Global South, and "from the margins"

(Farrugia & Ravn, 2022, p. 1). In choosing theories and conceptual tools, I intentionally kept a distance from Northern theories that I was previously comfortable with when explaining rural students' marginalization. As Kelly and colleagues (2018) point out, "those who do Youth Studies need to continue to problematise the 'tool'…, the 'thinking technologies'… that they have at hand, that they put to work, into play, as they conceptualise, as they enact, as they assemble young people's marginalisation" (p. 5). This is not to say that I reject all theories originating in the West and the Global North. Many of these theories, indeed, have been helpful in my development of this project. I argue for a more careful, cautious, and constant reflection on the tools and thinking technologies we use to analyze contextualized inequality.

Overview of the Study

This dissertation study is a critical ethnography of the complex nexus between schooling, stratification, and rural youth's imperative need for social mobility in China. The key focuses of the research are the schooling experiences of rural students and their navigation and negotiation of upward social mobility within China's stratified educational and social contexts. Rural Chinese students have to deal with various forms of differentiation in striving for a good life, such as a tracking educational system, rural-urban divide, social class disparity, and gender differences. I aim to explore how a group of rural Chinese students, both academically engaged and disengaged, make sense of these differentiations in their present and imagined future lives. I look specifically at how stratifications within and beyond the school gate shape rural students' subjective and embodied experiences of social mobility, as well as their relationship with education.

I intend to understand how rural Chinese students negotiate the tension between

stratification and mobility at the end of compulsory education against changing rural-urban relations, economic restructuring, gender renegotiation, and increasing social inequalities in globalized and urbanized China. These backgrounds bring new challenges and opportunities to rural students on their path to navigating social mobility: gender relations are reconstructed through migration (Choi, 2016; Lin, 2013); big cities are becoming more exclusive by driving away migrant rural workers and increasing the costs of housing and education for non-local urban citizens (Morris, 2022); the government is drawing more attention to rural revitalization and urbanization to correct its earlier policies of urban priority (Kipnis, 2016; Smith, 2021); and economy is in the process of being transformed from "Made in China" to "Created in China" (Keane, 2006), which means low-skilled or semi-skilled jobs may be less available for rural youth and the need of receiving more years of schooling is increasing.

The increasing prominence of the requirement to extend the years of education led me to choose the final year of compulsory education to start this ethnographic study. In China's nine-year compulsory schooling system (six years in elementary schools and three years in middle schools), students face three primary choices after graduating from middle schools: continuing in academic high schools, going to vocational schools, and entering the job market. Whereas academic high schools prepare students for college, those who choose the latter two tracks are more likely to seek unstable jobs in cities and become low-skilled or semi-skilled rural-to-urban migrant workers.

In this context, China aimed to universalize high school education in 2020. That is, to increase the gross enrollment ratio in high schools from 87.5% to 90%. However, the main focus of this policy was to increase the number of students in vocational schools rather than the

number of students in academic high schools—only approximately half of middle school graduates continue to study in academic high schools nationwide (Woronov, 2016; X. Yan, 2016). The percentage of non-academic graduates is higher in rural areas, at around 70% (C. Li, 2015). Therefore, the transition from middle school to high school in *Zhongkao* becomes an important site of educational stratification in China, especially for rural students (C. Li, 2015; Loyalka et al., 2017). This transition is described as a "class sorter" (Woronov, 2016, p. 178), which tracks the majority of rural Chinese youth and places them at the bottom of an unequal economic structure. Consequently, most rural students share a similar destination of becoming urban working class, leaving their rural communities and finding employment in labor-intensive industries in urban areas. In this sense, rural middle school education and later vocational education contribute to the pathway of "the school-to-sweatshop pipeline" (Cahill et al., 2016).

There is a scarcity of studies on rural Chinese students' negotiation and navigation of social mobility against these changing social circumstances. Many of the scholarly works on rural young people and education in China emphasize how rural students fail and are failed in schools as well as how some of them succeed. A key topic in this field focuses on the construction of counter-school culture among "failed" rural students, mainly drawing on Willis's (1977) ethnographic study on White working-class young men in England. Another approach to rural youth focuses on the "successful" ones who ultimately pass the fierce competition and selection to enter elite universities. Most of the research investigating how rural students' success is influenced by Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and cultural capital. Researchers following the latter approach have examined the ways in which the development of "underclass cultural capital" supports rural students in breaking through the tight structural restrictions (Cheng, 2018)

or the lack of cultural capital prevents rural college students from sustaining academic success in higher education (J. Chen, 2021; Liao & Wong, 2019; Xie & Reay, 2020).

Both research areas provide important insights into rural youth's schooling lives. They, however, have not paid sufficient attention to rural students' complex and contextualized negotiations of educational and social mobility in secondary education. Some research primarily focuses on the role of social reproduction in rural education, particularly for academically struggling students. Others limit their analysis to the educational experiences of academically successful rural students at the college level. Additionally, some studies examine how college-aged youth navigate their experiences in secondary education through reflections and memories after achieving mobility. However, as Mallman's (2017) analysis shows, "The story of mobility begins much earlier" (pp. 20-21) than higher education and work environment. Thus, this dissertation aims to fill this gap by taking seriously the tensions between stratification, reproduction, and rural youth's aspirations for mobility at the end of their compulsory education. I argue that the complexity of these tensions can be more fully understood when we invite both educationally motivated rural students (the Magpie) and disenchanted ones (the Winter-Cry Bird). I began this project with the following four questions:

1) In what ways does education shape the differentiated schooling experiences, aspirations, and life opportunities of young people in rural China?

2) How do rural students link their personal lives to the broader frameworks of educational, class, and spatial inequality?

3) How do rural youth navigate and negotiate the complexities of stratification and social mobility in and outside school? What identities, subjectivities, and youth cultures develop?

4) What lessons can education in rural China learn from the experiences of youth on the margins regarding navigating the complex nexus between schooling, stratification, and mobility?

I will explore these four questions together to address my overarching concern about *the ways that rural students are influenced by and respond to the tensions between the mobility imperative and the stratified social reality*. The first question allows me to look closely at the production of the rural school space and its consequences in students' daily lives. The second question focuses on students' discursive, embodied, and material experiences of various social differentiations they encounter, investigating how rural students make sense of the connections between their lives—current and imagined future lives—and the structural issues of inequality. It contributes to an intersectional and entangled understanding of time, space, and social class in students' education experiences and later life journeys.

The third question pays particular attention to the identities and subjectivities rural students develop to pursue a good life in an era when striving has become a political and moral imperative for all young Chinese people while facing multiple and intersectional inequalities. These questions do not begin by questioning how China's stratified education system marginalizes youth in rural places. Instead, they adopt an embodied and grounded perspective to understand the day-to-day lives of rural students. The last question is about the implications of the study for rural education. It pushes educators and policymakers to rethink and reimagine a more critical pedagogy that genuinely addresses rural young people's struggles, fears, aspirations, and hopes.

In this study, I purposively use the terms "navigation" and "negotiation" to investigate subjective experiences of social mobility. Social navigation, a metaphor for an individual's

practices in the social space, has been carefully theorized by Vigh (2009) through an anthropological perspective. Vigh elaborates it as an important analytical optic to explore how people act in the context of constant social change. By emphasizing the "motion within motion" (p. 420) or "moving within a moving environment" (p. 425) feature inherent in navigation, Vigh claims that this concept is helpful in highlighting the movement of both social forces and agents, as well as the intersection between the environments and individuals. Thus, social navigation is able to contribute to rethinking the relationship between agency, structure, and social change. Vigh's theorization of navigation is particularly relevant to my interest in understanding rural Chinese students' aspirations for social mobility because it considers the spatial and temporal aspects of how rural students connect themselves to dynamic and changing social settings.

Additionally, the movement in navigation has a future orientation, which is helpful in examining how students imagine, aspire, and hope for their future lives. As Vigh (2009) writes, "When navigating we seek to act in and through immediate changeable circumstances as well as move toward positions in the yet to come—articulated in unison as hopes and dreams" (p. 426). Therefore, navigation as an analytical tool considers "both the socially *immediate* and the socially *imagined*" (Vigh, 2009, p. 425, emphasis in original).

My use of "navigation" also draws on Appadurai's (2013) arguments of "the capacity to aspire" (p. 179). When discussing issues in development and poverty reduction, Appadurai points out that we need to conceive aspiration as an important part of cultural capacity. The capacity to aspire, according to Appadurai, is unevenly distributed in all societies, and those with privileges are able to mobilize resources and develop this cultural capacity more fully. Appadurai uses the metaphor of navigation to argue that the "dense combination of nods and

pathways" on "the map of aspirations" (p. 189) varies among the rich and the poor as the rich have a clearer sense of their route from the start point to their desired destination with a more detailed map. In this sense, the capacity to aspire is "a navigational capacity" (p. 188), which plays a different role in people's navigation of the social world.

Building on Appadurai and Vigh, Gilbertson (2017) adds an extra dimension to the uneven distribution of aspiration: aspiration as a compulsion. The difference in aspiration between the advantaged and disadvantaged groups, as Gilbertson argues, is not only reflected in the capacity to aspire but also the different levels of compulsion to aspire (or to navigate). In her ethnographic study in two high schools in India, Gilbertson (2017) claims that in addition to the different levels of capacity to navigate, students with different social class backgrounds experience different compulsions in their projects of future-making, as those from lower social classes "are compelled to pursue" a future that is perceived as more secure but less open and flexible (p.22). The aspect of compulsion in people's aspirations is consistent with the following quote from Vigh (2009),

> [W]e all navigate, but the necessity of having to move in relation to the movement of social forces depends on the speed and volatility of change as well as the level of exposure or shelter that our given social positions and 'capital' grants us. (p. 430)

Drawing on these discussions of aspiration and navigation, I pay particular attention to rural Chinese students' experiences of "the necessity of having to move (socially upward)." As my own journey of learning to leave has shown, growing up in rural China often instills a compulsion to escape for many rural youths, or what I term "a social mobility imperative" in the next chapter. In this sense, rural youth's navigational capacity to imagine and pursue an upwardly

mobile future becomes significant during their transition to adulthood.

In addition to navigation, I use the term "negotiation" to explore the complexity of students' experiences in relation to social stratification and mobility. Although I use the two terms interchangeably throughout the dissertation, I am aware of their nuanced differences. Both concepts have been popularly adopted in educational studies to highlight students' agency, especially the strategies that students in deprived situations mobilize to deal with various structural forces they encounter in and beyond school. However, the two concepts focus on different aspects. "Where negotiation suggests dialogue between entities, and winner or loser at any given moment, navigation emphasizes the logic by which change occurs within changing landscape" (Stambach, 2017, p. 10). In the pursuit of upward mobility in a highly stratified society, there will inevitably be winners and losers, assessed based on prevailing social norms. With less developed capacity to navigate, rural Chinese students require more arduous ongoing negotiations on their way to move.

This ethnographic study is based on two years of fieldwork with a group of students from Watershed School in a rural mountain township in Zhejiang, a coastal province in Southeastern China. I employed participant observations, interviews, and visual methods to understand these rural students' lived experiences and their relations with the broader institutional context. I observed how the rural school shaped students' learning experiences, identities, and later life opportunities. Through long-term participation in their lives on and off campus, as well as a lot of formal and informal conversations, I attempted to figure out how my participants made sense of their current lives, imagined their life trajectories, and navigated "the complexity involved in mediating the call to become socially mobile" (Stahl, 2018, p. 69). I used visual methods during

my fieldwork to capture embodied spatial experiences that may extend beyond verbal and visible representation, inviting students to utilize photos and drawings to articulate their thoughts and ideas.

This project is situated at the intersection of the sociology of education and Global South youth studies. I take a transdisciplinary approach to rural Chinese students' educational experiences by drawing on multiple sociological, anthropological, and geographical perspectives of education and youth. The sociology of education has long been concerned with the influences of social stratification on disadvantaged students' mobility through education. Anthropological studies, with a particular focus on youth culture, inform us about how education plays a role in young people's making of subjectivities and identities (Stambach & Hall, 2017). Critical geographies provide unique insights into rethinking the rural as relational, which contributes to going beyond a class-centered interpretation of rural youth in current educational studies in China (W. Wang, 2023).

Situating the dissertation from a Global South perspective, I am aware of the limitation, as well as the contribution, of Western and Northern theories in analyzing the relationship between education and rural Chinese youth. Therefore, I did not start with the current mainstream theories typically used in interpreting the schooling experiences of rural Chinese youth in the sociology of education, such as theories of cultural capital and counter-school culture, even though these theories have always influenced my thinking.

In this dissertation, I adopt Froerer's (2015) approach of intentionally blurring the boundary between "child" and "youth," using them interchangeably alongside the term "young people." The definitions of "child" and "youth" vary depending on context and culture, rendering

them “fluid and at times artificial” (Froerer, 2015, p. 367). Critical scholars in youth studies often reject a fixed notion of these categories solely based on age differences. I view my participants as children and youth throughout their long journeys of navigating social stratification and transitioning into the desired adulthood of upward mobility.

Significance of the Study

The difficulty of rural youth achieving upward social mobility through education has become a major concern in China. In the context of rapid economic development and continuous expansion of higher education, Chinese society has increasingly recognized that it is becoming even harder for poor rural families to raise a “successful” child. However, the complexities of this difficulty have not been fully investigated. Rural youth’s educational experiences are often understood only one-sidedly on how they fail or succeed. Some researchers seem to have drawn too quickly the conclusion that education reproduces the disadvantage of rural students or that rural students can climb up the social ladder by acquiring specific cultural capital and habitus.

A closer examination of the complexities embedded in rural students’ navigation of a socially mobile trajectory in a stratified system reveals a more nuanced view of the role of education. This dissertation not only explains how a large number of rural students are excluded from the academic track but also portrays a grounded picture of rural students’ relations with education. This contributes to disrupting the partial and problematic representations of rural youth in previous rural education scholarship. Findings from this critical ethnographic research will illustrate how rural students discursively, bodily, and materially experience stratification and construct the meaning of their lives in and beyond rural spaces. I will use these findings to discuss ways educators can produce the schooling space differently to meet students’ needs better

to negotiate time, space, and social class.

Despite the setting of this research in a rural mountainous township in China, this ethnography attempts to engage in dialogue with broader scholarship on educational and social justice. China is a unique case of educational inequality. As Gruijters (2022) points out, it is not common to witness an increase in inequality during periods of educational expansion. He writes, "Post-reform China, however, is the only known case in which inequality increased in a context of rapid economic growth and rising living standards" (p. 335). Using China as an example to investigate the relationship between inequality, education, and youth's life opportunities will complement the existing literature on education for social justice. Expanding education for disadvantaged children and youth is a key theme in global development projects. However, this expansion does not necessarily bring equality and justice to marginalized students. Instead, many false promises and "a structural raising of aspiration" (Pettit, 2023, p. 4) produced through educational expansion sometimes result in broader collective disillusionment (Ansell et al., 2020; Jakimow, 2016; Jeffrey, 2010). My critical ethnography aims to join relevant discussions that examine tensions between aspiration, future, and education (Frye, 2012; Stambach & Hall, 2017), especially in the Global South, to rethink the role of education and the promise of development.

In addition, this dissertation contributes to the relatively small but growing literature that looks at subjective social mobility (Ackers, 2020; Boese et al., 2022; S. Friedman, 2014; Hoskins & Barker, 2017; Lawler & Payne, 2018b; Lizama-Loyola et al., 2022; van den Berg, 2011). In the sociology of education, the mainstream approach to social stratification and social mobility draws on quantitative studies. Subjective social mobility, or how social mobility "is actually

lived" (S. Friedman, 2014, p. 358), remains relatively under-explored. However, a qualitative analysis of how students think, feel, and do about social mobility is significant for educational researchers to understand and unsettle intersected social differences that (re)produce inequalities in education. Such effort would contribute to avoiding treating education as a "black box" in many quantitative studies of social mobility (Brown, 2013). Brown (2013) reminds us that the education system has the risk of being simply treated as a monolithic sorting machine by exclusively focusing on the causality or correlation between educational outcomes and class origins. This view neglects important issues within school education, such as curriculum, pedagogy, and student schooling experiences. My study, focusing on rural Chinese youth's embodied navigation of moving up, seeks to add to this ongoing scholarship on subjective social mobility.

Much of the research on rural education in China relies on Western and Northern theories, lacking a productive dialogue with the Global South. It not only misses the opportunity to learn from the existing Southern theoretical and conceptual tools but also the opportunity to bring the Chinese context into the emerging scholarship of the Global South. By critically engaging with the Global South youth studies, I attempt to bridge the Southern scholarship and the Chinese context. By doing this, I aim to decenter Western-centric knowledge production in the sociology of education and youth studies.

Structure of the Dissertation

This study is my effort to get smarter about how rural Chinese students make connections to education, the future, and broader power relations at a time when most young people feel compelled to strive. The following chapters demonstrate how educational and social

stratifications shape rural students' experiences and aspirations for the future. They also show how rural students engage or disengage with the call to achieve upward mobility through education.

Chapter 2 discusses the contexts and theoretical perspectives that frame this study. I start by introducing the meaning of "rural" in Chinese society, which contextualizes rural Chinese students' schooling lives within specific historical, cultural, and educational settings. I present what educational and social stratifications look like in China and how the stratified systems have made social mobility imperative for rural youth. After providing an overview of the contexts in which rural Chinese students' lives are situated, I transition to the theoretical frameworks that inform my understanding of growing up rural in China. I draw on previous literature, including critiques of social mobility and perspectives from the Global South, to examine the complex relationships between education, mobility, and stratification. By extensively drawing on theories, conceptual tools, thinking technologies, and empirical studies across disciplines, I aim to explore how we can reimagine rurality and rural youth in China differently from existing scholarship that primarily depends on a Western- and Northern-centric way of knowledge production.

Chapter 3 introduces the social contexts of the field site and methodologies. It starts with a social-geographical description of Watershed School and Red Mountain Township, where the school is located. By employing critical ethnography as the methodology, I gained a rich understanding of the township and the school. I then introduce the methods, participants of this study, and how I used reflexivity in doing fieldwork and writing the dissertation.

The following three chapters present ethnographic findings. Chapter 4 zooms in on the educational settings at Watershed School and the consequences for different rural students. The

campus's spatial design and class arrangement provide insights into how desires for academic success and social mobility have significantly shaped the production of a learning space for rural students. A description of everyday dynamics in the rural school illustrates how stratification is lived for rural Chinese students. Not only are rural and urban regions divided, but significant stratification also exists within the same school. Watershed School created itself as "a school within the school" by employing specific classroom arrangements, curriculum design, and pedagogical approaches. Students are categorized as "good" and "bad." A close examination of the school settings reveals how some students are able to become Magpies while others are not. This chapter illustrates how the school serves to produce aspirational subjects in different ways through its stratified pedagogical approaches.

Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 explore two major strategies Watershed students adopt in navigating social mobility: striving and waiting. Following a detailed examination of rural Chinese students' understanding of the role of education, Chapter 5 focuses on students' practice of striving at the rural school. Striving students, buoyed by their academic achievements, reinforced the school's meritocratic narrative. However, their acceptance of meritocracy was not without a critical awareness of broader structural inequalities. Despite this, they maintained optimism, viewing education as a means to overcome societal disadvantages. This chapter concludes by examining the cultural price paid by striving students in their pursuit of social mobility within contemporary Chinese society.

Chapter 6 examines the production of waiting subjects in rural Chinese society. It begins by analyzing the emergence of a "slacking off" subculture in contemporary Chinese society, contrasting it with the traditional emphasis on hard work. By examining Watershed students'

attitudes toward striving and slacking narratives, I explore the similarities and differences between their practice of waiting and the growing subculture of slacking off. Moreover, I examine the mobility expectations of these students, revealing a paradoxical schooling life marked by aspirations without active pursuit. This chapter concludes by advocating for a "waiting" framework to better understand the academic journeys of rural Chinese students, distinguishing it from the concept of resistance used in Western contexts to interpret the experiences of working-class youth.

The final chapter discusses this dissertation's key arguments and explores the meanings of dogged optimism in rural Chinese students' pursuit of social mobility. I use the term "dogged optimism" to summarize the construction of "aspirational identities" (Frye, 2012) among both the striving and waiting rural students. The students in this study relied on a culture of optimism to maintain a hopeful subjectivity in combatting various inequalities. This form of reclaiming hope brought solace while limiting their agency in fostering critical reflexivity and actions. Therefore, I argue that turning to the nearby (*fujin*, 附近) might be an alternative solution to their challenging navigation of social mobility. The "nearby" is a concept recently developed by the anthropologist Biao Xiang (2021b). I discuss the possibility of developing a pedagogy of the nearby that transcends the (misleading) promise of social mobility in rural China.

Chapter 2: Understanding Rural Chinese Youth in China

Stratification and social mobility are pivotal themes in the life journeys of many rural youth. This chapter explores contextual and theoretical perspectives to understand the tensions experienced by rural Chinese students regarding these themes. It starts with a brief introduction to China's stratified social and educational systems. The urban-rural divide is one of China's most prominent manifestations of social stratification. Although rural-urban inequality is a global issue in an increasingly urbanized world (A. A. Khan, 2018, 2021; Maselli et al., 2021), rural Chinese children and youth face challenges that are likely unique to China. These systems, along with recent social and economic transitions, have profoundly shaped rural youth's life chances. Such stratified structures make social mobility imperative for rural young people. Like in other societies, mainstream discourses both critique the reproduction of inequalities through education while advocating for greater justice to facilitate social mobility for rural students.

However, anchoring hopes on creating more opportunities for upward mobility is insufficient to solve the inequalities rural students face, as highlighted by theoretical critiques of the widespread social mobility narratives embedded in education reforms (Reay, 2013). This chapter draws on these discussions to question the tight connection between education and social mobility when addressing issues of inequality and stratification. In doing so, I also turn to theoretical perspectives and conceptual tools from the Global South, which have been used to understand the lived experiences of youth in today's increasingly precarious world.

Rural Youth in a Stratified and Transitional China

The urban-rural disparity represents one of the most significant manifestations of China's social and education stratification (Hao et al., 2014). As China gets more affluent, the gap

between rural and urban areas becomes wider. For example, the inequality of receiving a high school and college education has widened since the early 2000s (Y. Liu et al., 2012; Ma & Yang, 2015; Y. Wu, 2013a). From 1978 to 1988, rural students' chance to enter a high school was 54 percent lower than urban students. However, the opportunity for rural students to receive a high school education became 70 percent lower than their urban peers from 1990 to 2008 (Y. Wu, 2013a). Chunling Li (2015) points out that although rural-urban inequalities in elementary education have decreased, these inequalities in high school education access continue to increase. She suggests that "urban-rural inequality in secondary education is the key location of educational stratification" in China (p. 163). Therefore, I focus on secondary education in this study to understand how rural Chinese students navigate the tension of social mobility and inequality. This section briefly introduces China's stratified social and educational systems that have driven the widening differences between rural and urban areas.

Rural and *Hukou*

What do "rural" and "urban" mean? Where are rural and non-rural places? Who constitutes the rural population, and who comprises the urban population? These questions are not easy to answer, not only in China but also in many other countries (Clark et al., 2022). In the context of the United States, Clark and colleagues (2022) point out that clearly defining the meaning of a rural place and a rural person is difficult, even for individuals who grew up in rural areas. Many of the definitions and understandings of the rural are based on "a seemingly unproblematic division of space" (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992, p. 6), a division indicating that there are discontinuous spaces: the rural and the urban. Therefore, these spaces are not only discontinuous but also opposite to each other. According to the United States Census Bureau

(n.d.), “rural” is defined as “any population, housing, or territory NOT in an urban area” (para. 4). Clark and colleagues (2022) critique this problematic definition of “rural” by pointing out, “Rural is defined as what is not urban. Rural is whatever territory or area is outside of the urban boundaries. Rural areas are not selected and bounded based on their own characteristics but is what is left over after bounding *urban* territory” (p. 4, emphasis in original).

This binary thinking of the rural and the urban is prevalent, not just in the definition. In China, a rural-urban binary exists not only geographically but also politically. Upon birth, a Chinese individual is officially assigned either a rural or urban identity, profoundly impacting their access to education, healthcare, employment, and social welfare. Even if residing in an urban area, a Chinese individual may not be officially recognized as an urban citizen. According to the latest China Population Census (2021), in China’s total population of 1411.78 million, over 901 million people live in urban areas, accounting for 63.89% of the national population. However, many of these urban residents lack official urban identity due to China’s household registration (*hukou*, 户口 or *huji*, 户籍) system. Only around 655 million people are officially registered as urban residents and hold urban citizenship. In other words, around 246 million people who reside in urban areas lack officially recognized urban identity and are categorized as migrant populations.

The distinction between “rural” and “urban” in China, therefore, extends beyond mere geography. One must examine the household registration policy to understand the meaning of “rural” in Chinese society. I was born as a rural child not only because my family resides in a rural village, but also because my parents were officially designated as rural in the household register (*hukou bu*, 户口簿), a booklet identifying my family as an agricultural (rural) household.

My family maintains two household registers: an outdated one issued in 2001 and a recent one from 2021, obtained after our village merged with a larger neighboring village as part of China's village-merging project. In the 2001 register, my family was labeled as an "agricultural household" on the first page of the red booklet, whereas the term "agricultural" has been omitted in the newer version, with our household type now classified as a "family household." The change reflects the evolution of China's *hukou* policy and its reforms, which have profoundly shaped the opportunities available to most rural Chinese over the past seven decades.

Any attempt to understand rural Chinese youth is inseparable from knowing China's *hukou* system. This system, established in 1958, formally delineated the rural-urban divide to regulate the movement of Chinese citizens across geographical regions. By assigning each individual a rural or urban status, it enforced restrictions on rural people's migration to urban areas. Traditionally, the *hukou* system consisted of two components: *hukou* type and *hukou* location. *Hukou* types were categorized as agricultural or non-agricultural, while *hukou* location referred to a person's registered permanent residence. The former determined whether an individual was identified as rural or urban, and the latter determined whether the person was recognized as a local resident or a nonlocal migrant. Through these distinctions, the *hukou* system classified Chinese people into four social groups based on their *hukou* types and locations: urban residents, urban migrants, rural residents, and rural migrants. For example, a young Chinese man from a village in Zhejiang province (with a rural *hukou*) who has worked in Shanghai for over six months (nonlocal *hukou*) would be categorized as a rural migrant.

This highly rigid classification offered little opportunity for individuals to alter their *hukou* status between the 1950s and 1970s. However, the *hukou* system began to relax as China

entered the Reform and Opening Up, a period of market-oriented social and economic reforms launched at the end of the 1970s. The resumption of the college entrance examination (*Gaokao*) after a decade-long hiatus allowed young rural residents to relocate to cities for university education. A following reform in the *hukou* system occurred in 1980, permitting a select number of rural talents with skills needed for urban development to migrate to cities. This reform was significant as it enabled rural people to convert rural to urban *hukou* status.

An equally significant consequence of this relaxed reform was the emergence of a cultural and symbolic divide between rural and urban *hukou* status. Only those rural individuals with higher human capital were deemed eligible for an urban *hukou*, while others remained tightly bound to rural settings. As economic reforms deepened, cities faced an increasing demand for manual labor, a demand that urbanities were often unwilling to meet. Consequently, many migrant workers from rural areas sought job opportunities in cities. In order to reinforce social control over rural migrants, the government emphasized that while rural residents were allowed to "leave the land but not villages" (*li tu bu li xiang*, 离土不离乡) and to "enter factories but not cities" (*jin chang bu jin cheng*, 进厂不进城). As a result, many surplus rural young workers moved to cities to find jobs without officially recognized urban citizenship.

Today, the distinction between agricultural and non-agricultural *hukou* types has been abolished, as reflected in removing the word "agricultural" in my family's household register booklet. Consequently, my parents and I are no longer officially labeled as rural residents or possessors of rural *hukou*. Instead, we have been given a new identity: that of "citizens" (*shimin*, 市民) in everyday contexts or "residents" (*jumin*, 居民) in official discourse. Shedding the label of rural peasants and attaining the identity of urban residents was a significant aspiration for my

parents when they were young. They eventually got rid of the rural *hukou*, although in many instances, they were unaware of the difference this change made. All Chinese citizens now have been given the right to be called citizens or residents, and there is no longer a distinction between urban residents (*jumin*) and rural peasants (*nongmin,* 农民) at the policy level. However, the cancellation of agricultural and non-agricultural *hukou* does not signify the obsolescence of the *hukou* system in delineating social status; the system persists. Economic, cultural, and symbolic disparities between urban and rural areas persist. As we will explore in the following section, students born in rural areas still face barriers to accessing public education, even in county seats, let alone larger cities.

Stratified Educational System and Rural Education

Not only is the *hukou*-based social system stratified, but the education system in China is also highly differentiated (Du, 2016). Educational stratification is evident in significant disparities among regions (e.g., between the West and the East), between schools at different administrative levels, between rural and urban areas, and among different types of schools (e.g., vocational schools and academic high schools, key schools, and non-key schools). Schools at every level are distinguished based on location, quality, resources, and reputation. There is significant variation among schools in terms of government support, funding, educational resources, and academic achievements. Schools in major cities receive superior educational resources and are more likely to facilitate positive learning outcomes for students. On the contrary, students in smaller cities, counties, and rural areas have limited access to these opportunities compared to their urban counterparts.

The educational stratification is not incidental but rather deliberately and officially

created through various elite- and urban-biased educational policies implemented since the market-oriented reforms initiated in the late 1970s (Gruijters, 2022). One of these policies is the key school policy, which institutionalized the unequal distribution of educational resources (Du, 2016). In order to optimize talent development amidst scarce resources, China revived the key school system in the 1980s, establishing a small number of key schools at primary and secondary levels. These key schools received preferential treatment in terms of development, including increased funding, attraction of high-quality teachers, and enrollment of academically exceptional students. Within a given school, there are also distinctions between key classes and non-key classes, reflecting the same educational ideology of key school policy—selecting the best students and equipping them with the most qualified teachers and the highest-quality educational resources. Despite the abolishment of key schools (especially in compulsory education) at the policy level, they persist in reality, often rebranded as "exemplary schools," and continue to perpetuate education inequality (Koh & Li, 2022; Y. Wu, 2013b; Ye, 2015).

Chinese parents are often well aware of which schools in their local communities are considered "good" and "bad" (J. Liu, 2018). They are also aware that the type of schools their children attend significantly influences their future life trajectories. Entering a high-quality middle school typically greatly increases a student's chances of gaining admission to a high-quality high school (Ye, 2015). This principle similarly applies to the transition from high school to college. Consequently, many anxious urban middle-class parents carefully select schools for their children as early as kindergarten and formulate comprehensive education plans throughout their schooling years (Koh & Li, 2022; Kuan, 2015). Some rural parents with similar educational anxieties also seek ways to send their children to study in county seats or cities.

While middle- and upper-class parents can leverage their economic and social capital to gain access to top schools, the majority of Chinese parents and their children, particularly those facing disadvantages, have limited opportunities to choose their schools. This is primarily due to China's public school admission policies at the compulsory education level. The basic principle governing primary and middle school student enrollment is that local education bureaus divide school districts for each public school within the compulsory education stage, and students apply for nearby schools within their designated districts (J. Liu, 2018). Urban public schools primarily, if not exclusively, admit students whose household registration is in urban school districts. This means that rural students are compelled to attend public schools in their local rural communities, typically of lower quality.

Rural students can only apply to enroll in urban public schools if their parents meet specific requirements. Take the county seat of my ethnographic study as an example. Rural students are generally not allowed to attend schools in the county seat, where the quality of teaching is significantly higher than in rural schools. However, in cases where schools in the county seat (usually called urban schools, or *chengqu xuexiao*, 城区学校) have available spots after admitting all students from their designated districts, rural parents with accumulated points (*jifen*, 积分) of 72 or above become eligible to apply for enrollment in these urban schools. The higher the points, the greater the likelihood of acceptance into an urban school. Ways for rural parents to earn points include purchasing a house or doing business in the county seat, working in the government or other specific types of institutions, and obtaining a bachelor's degree or higher. However, for most rural students and their parents, meeting these criteria proves to be challenging. For example, none of the parents of students at Watershed had a college education.

The majority had completed only primary or middle school education, with few having received a high school education.

The distinction between vocational and academic high schools is another significant stratification within China's educational system. Whether students go to vocational or academic high schools is determined by their scores in *Zhongkao*. Chinese children usually begin kindergarten at age three and primary school at age six. They then undergo nine years of compulsory education, consisting of six years in primary school and three years in middle school. At the end of compulsory education, Chinese students are required to take a tracking exam: *Zhongkao*. Those who pass *Zhongkao* with good grades continue their studies in academically focused high schools, preparing for the college entrance examination (*Gaokao*) three years later. On the other hand, students who do not perform as well in *Zhongkao* either enroll in vocational schools or no longer have the opportunity to receive a high school education and then enter the workforce. After *Zhongkao*, students in both academic and vocational high schools face another educational tracking—*Gaokao* at the end of their three years of high school. This exam determines whether high school graduates can receive higher education and which level of colleges they can attend.

Zhongkao is a competitive tracking test that selects some students to continue their studies in the academic route, channels some into the vocational path, and pushes others out of the education system. Many studies have demonstrated that this exam primarily contributes to educational inequality, especially the widening gaps between rural and urban students (Du, 2016; C. Li, 2015; Woronov, 2016). The life trajectory of young Chinese individuals is profoundly affected by the tracking system from an early age. Jinting Wu (2016) outlines rural ethnic

students' choices beyond the school walls after *Zhongkao* in Southwest China. A few continue the academic track in high schools or go to technical schools for vocational training. Some remain in their local communities to do service work (such as jobs in hair salons, shops, markets, and hotels). At the same time, the majority of these rural youth leave their villages to seek employment in factories in coastal cities. Woronov (2016) regards *Zhongkao* as a "class sorter" in China, which fails half of China's youth and locks them out from future economic and social upward mobility (p. 178). The majority of rural students (over 70 percent) are pushed to the vocational track due to their lower competitiveness in the exam. As a result of the cumulative disadvantages rural students face since childhood, most of them cannot attain scores high enough for admission to academic high schools.

Vocational high schools in China, where rural students are overrepresented, are often considered low quality. According to the *China Vocational Education Law*, these schools aim to cultivate high-quality technical personnel with the professional knowledge and technical skills required by modern occupations. However, in practice, vocational education tends to produce low-skilled and cheap labor (Koo, 2016). China's vocational education is often viewed as inferior to the academic track (G. Wang, 2022). Students in vocational schools are stigmatized as lazy, bad, and stupid (Ling, 2015; G. Wang, 2022). The vocational track provides fewer opportunities for its students to achieve social mobility (Koo, 2016).

Rooted in the profound influences of the rural-urban dual social system created by *hukou* policies, the stratification within China's education continues to perpetuate an enduring urban-rural gap. Although the Chinese government has made important efforts to promote educational equity, educational stratification remains a significant challenge, especially for rural students. Du

(2016) points out,

> [I]t is reasonable to suggest that China's educational institutions, like their counterparts in many other parts of the world, are not simply providers of education and educational qualifications but also major distributors and redistributors of opportunities for employment and mobility, and potent social mechanisms that sort young Chinese into stratified class positions. (pp. 161-162)

Therefore, a thorough examination of the impact of stratification on rural students' life trajectories is crucial for understanding education inequality in China. It tells a complex entanglement between education, stratification, and social mobility. The following section explores how China's stratified systems generate a pressing demand for rural students to achieve upward social mobility.

The Social Mobility Imperative for Rural Chinese Youth

Social Mobility Imperative

Within stratified social and educational systems, young Chinese individuals from rural backgrounds have become a group of youth with a high need to be socially and geographically mobile. Constrained by *hukou* and unequal educational opportunities, rural Chinese youth usually occupy the lowest rungs of China's hierarchical systems, both economically and symbolically. Therefore, rural students, myself included (see Chapter 1), have been taught from a young age that we must strive to alter our rural destiny and climb the social ladder relentlessly (Murphy, 2020; X. Xiang, 2018). We were also encouraged to believe that after going through many hardships without giving up, we could finally rise from the bottom of the social hierarchy. Growing up in rural China means, for many of us rural youth, a constant negotiation between the

need for upward mobility and the risk of reproducing the disadvantaged status. Therefore, whether individuals can achieve social mobility often lies at the center of public discussions and academic inquiries regarding rural education and youth in China, whether explicitly or implicitly.

The aspiration for upward social mobility instilled in rural students is captured by the following Chinese proverb: *Chi de ku zhong ku, fang wei ren shang ren* (Only those who endure all harsh work can become a person above persons, 吃得苦中苦，方为人上人) (see Y. Yan, 2013). The emphasis on becoming "a person above persons," according to Yan (2012, 2013), implies the emergence of a new form of subjectivity—the striving individual—in contemporary China after the economic reform in the late 1970s. The striving individual highlights the ethics of competition and individual interests, which differs from the collective-oriented Confucian and Communist moral ethics. In an increasingly stratified Chinese society resulting from the market-oriented reforms, especially after the 1990s, "being or becoming successful is crucially important for the individual because only a person above persons can have all the power and privileges, which will in turn accord the person dignity and social respect" (Y. Yan, 2013, p. 271). For rural youth, therefore, striving towards upward mobility—in many cases, by putting other people down—means not only changes in economic conditions but also the acquisition of a dignified future (X. Xiang, 2018). Upward mobility carries both economic and symbolic meanings in rural China.

Drawing from Farrugia (2016), I describe this high need to become successful and achieve upward mobility experienced by rural Chinese youth as a solid "social mobility imperative." Farrugia (2016) points out that rural youth today must deal with the "mobility imperative" in an increasingly urbanized global context (p. 836). Rural young people are

encouraged, and sometimes compelled, to become mobile in pursuit of education and work opportunities. Mobility in Farrugia's (2016) theorization mainly refers to rural-to-urban migration. Considering the influence of the *hukou* policy and the rural-urban divergence in China, the geographical out-migration from rural to urban areas is intricately linked with social class mobility, as explained in the preceding section. The changes in place-based identity are equivalent to social class mobility. A recent study has demonstrated that the shift in Chinese people's *hukou* status from rural to urban "is an important determinant of individuals' experiences of social mobility" (Huang, 2020, p. 2062). In other words, transitioning from rural to urban areas and acquiring an urban *hukou* are now synonymous with earning a new position within the social stratum in China. Besides the force of out-migration from rural to urban regions, rural Chinese youth also face significant pressure to embark on upward social mobility.

Previous literature has documented that rural Chinese youth hold high aspirations for upward mobility in response to daunting life challenges (Cheng, 2018; Kipnis, 2011; Murphy, 2020; X. Xiang, 2018; Y. Xu, 2022). Xiang (2018), for example, examines the multiple meanings of schooling for impoverished rural Chinese youth, finding that many rural high school students made great effort in their studies due to a keen awareness of their lower positions in the social hierarchy. Driven by the hope that they could change their positions at the bottom for themselves and their families, these rural Chinese students studied hard even though they found that learning was not fun and not useful to their present lives. Even a brief thirty-minute nap at noon could provoke feelings of guilt among some rural students, who perceived any time spent not studying as wasteful. Learning, therefore, became "a sacrifice" for a promising and dignified future (X. Xiang, 2018, p. 91).

The imperative for social mobility among rural youth is also evident in recent autoethnographies conducted by researchers Lin (2019), Dong (2019), and Cui (2021), all of whom have rural backgrounds. Coming of age in rural China, they each had to mobilize themselves to learn to depart from their rural communities under the pressure of "moving out to move up" (Parsons, 2022, p. 208). As for Cui (2021), he realized that during his pathway to upward mobility, he has to be an "escaper" of his rural village, a "fighter" in the competitive educational settings, and an "exam-taking master" to get access to higher education opportunities through forcing himself to engage in "crazy learning activities" (p. 174). For these authors, schools, particularly middle and high schools, were battlefields where they competed with classmates to earn a limited spot in college. The desire to leave poverty behind, the need to gain respect and dignity, and the motivation to change their destiny all shaped the journeys of these authors during their pursuits of a better life beyond rural confines.

The desire for upward mobility is not only articulated among rural people who have achieved educational success but also expressed by rural youth with poorer academic records. Researchers have written about rural Chinese students with fewer opportunities to navigate the education system successfully also generate a high aspiration and a positive imagination for their future social status (Koo, 2021; Pun & Koo, 2019; G. Wang, 2022). Rural students in vocational high schools, for example, often develop a resistance to taking working-class jobs (Pun & Koo, 2019). As Pun and Koo (2019) find in their ethnographic study of a group of vocational students,

> None of them aspire to become a manual labourer but rather are eager to enter the middle class as the neoliberal value induces them. Their working-class parents, have a strong desire to get rid of poverty, share similar hope…Students and their parents have

> negative images of working-class jobs, regardless of their own social origin. In this sense, the family is constituted to the negation of its own class origins, steering to send their children to vocational school or higher education in order to *escape* its working-class background. There is no pride in 'being a worker' or superior masculinity of the working class that we can observe in our field studies. (p. 56, emphasis added)

These vocational students in Pun and Koo's (2019) study, the majority of whom had a rural origin and held rural *hukou*, strived to move up the social ladder by escaping their rural and working-class identities. Their aspirations to escape were further reinforced by the messages conveyed by vocational schools. Even though vocational education in today's China primarily aims to prepare students for positions in factories or the service industry (jobs that are usually low-paid, unskilled, and semi-skilled) due to its less satisfying quality, vocational education is imbued with messages that devalue these jobs by encouraging students to aim high to get white-collar jobs or become skilled technicians (Pun & Koo, 2019). Hence, the imperative for social mobility among rural youth stems from a collective effort involving society, schools, parents, and students themselves.

The Tension of Social Mobility and Social Reproduction

A few studies have elucidated why social mobility is imperative for rural Chinese youth. Factors that "encourage or mandate (upward) mobility" (Farrugia, 2016, p. 836) include a stratified and transitional social context (Du et al., 2020), an embedded neoliberal belief stemming from the market-oriented reform era (Koo, 2021), meritocratic discourses (Jin & Ball, 2020; G. Wang, 2022), the development of a new subjectivity centered around "the striving individual" within the process of individualization (Y. Yan, 2012, 2013), and the governance of

educational desire (Kipnis, 2011). Under these combined conditions, upward mobility has evolved into a social norm. Striving for personal success and becoming a "person above persons" is esteemed by society, whereas being trapped at the bottom tier of society is seen as a failure. This perception is significantly different from the collective ethics of traditional Confucianism and Communist morality during the Mao era before the economic reforms initiated in the late 1970s (Y. Yan, 2012, 2013). Rural Chinese youth today "are driven by the fear of failure as much as by the drive for success, and the two work together to push the individual to strive, with or even without the chance to succeed" (Y. Yan, 2013, p. 272).

Despite the strong drive for social mobility, rural Chinese students face great risks of reproducing marginalized positions in society. Recent scholarship has illustrated that rural Chinese children and youth are likely to lag behind their urban peers due to limited economic resources, unequal access to quality educational opportunities, a lack of recognized cultural capital, and sparse social network connections. As a result, the dropout rate in middle and high schools in rural China remains high (Y. Shi et al., 2015). The difference in academic performance between rural and urban students is significant. Rural students are increasingly underrepresented in higher education, especially in elite universities. Without socially recognized educational credentials, rural youth's pathways to upward mobility are inevitably obstructed. Rural youth must negotiate constantly between the imperative for upward mobility and the stark potential for social immobility in reality.

Existing research has explored how the life trajectories of rural Chinese youth are shaped by the aspirations for social mobility and the risk of social reproduction. Based on the promise of moving to higher social positions, researchers have mainly focused on two groups of rural

Chinese students: socially mobile college students and educationally marginalized students in secondary and vocational education. Chinese society usually views college students as successful survivors in China's fiercely competitive *Gaokao* system. Passing *Gaokao* and entering a prestigious university signifies a significant opportunity for climbing the social ladder. Conversely, for those who are or will be pushed out of the academic track during middle and high school, the prospect of changing their lower social status looms. The tension between social mobility and social reproduction remains a focal point in recent studies of these two groups of rural students.

Stories of rural college students navigating upward mobility are replete with tales of individual agency and structural barriers. Receiving higher education is perceived as a hallmark of upward mobility in the social hierarchy for rural youth in China. Researchers use terms such as "exceptions" and "deviants" (both following Bourdieu's terminology) (Jin & Ball, 2020), as well as "class travelers" (Cheng, 2018; Lin, 2019), to label rural working-class students who have attained educational success and gained entry into college. A growing body of literature has examined how rural college students have made their way in a stratified education system despite encountering formidable challenges. Scholars have identified "enabling factors" (Kupfer, 2012, p. 57) in rural Chinese students' paths to educational success, including forming solid bonds between rural students and their families, cultivating "underclass cultural capital" (Cheng, 2018) and reflexivity habitus (Meng & Yongjiu, 2019; Y. Xu, 2022), and misrecognition of their limited life opportunities (Y. Dong & Wang, 2022). These findings illustrate how rural students harness their agency to fight against their destiny through a combined effort involving individual efforts, family support, and school education.

The agency developed by academically successful rural students before entering colleges is frequently challenged in higher education settings, where they confront the stark rural-urban differences between themselves and their urban peers. Rural college students, including those enrolled in elite universities, often experience feelings of shame and a sense of being "out of place" (J. Chen, 2021; Y. Li et al., 2021; Liao & Wong, 2019; Xie & Reay, 2020). Their paths to upward mobility, similar to working-class college students in the West (Morton, 2019), are laden with emotional and ethical costs, along with experiences of hidden injuries.

Another approach to understanding the tension of social mobility and social reproduction focuses more on rural students who are less likely to obtain upward mobility through schooling. These students include *liushou* (left-behind) children, migrant children, and young people in the vocational education track. Although researchers work with different student groups, employ different theoretical perspectives, and arrive at various conclusions, they commonly highlight that education in China has contributed mainly to the reproduction of lower social positions for many rural students. Schools are institutions where rural students come to understand their life trajectories and prepare for the pathways ahead. This is not to say that these rural students with poorer academic performance are merely passive recipients of structural factors. Instead, they construct specific identities and youth cultures to either resist or comply with institutional expectations during the processes of knowing and preparing (Pun & Koo, 2019). They use these cultural strategies to deal with the push forces of the imperative for upward mobility and the pull forces of social reproduction function within schools.

In recent years, counter-school culture as a form of cultural production among rural youth has garnered attention in China. Some researchers have noticed that Chinese students with a rural

background are more likely to disengage in schooling compared to their urban counterparts (T. Li, 2016, 2020). They argue that social reproduction in education is achieved not only through structural and institutional power but also through the production of resistance culture among rural students. In China, over the past few decades, there has been a strong emergence of a desire for educational success (Kipnis, 2011), evidenced by intensive parenting and growing anxiety among middle-class families. Despite urban families and schools striving to cultivate middle-class and internationally competitive talents through increased investment in education, there is a perceived resurgence of the devaluation of schooling among rural Chinese students. Researchers remind us that perceptions of "useless schooling" and "hopeless schooling" have spread throughout rural communities (M. Li et al., 2020; Xie, 2019). Rural parents and their children seem to show less interest and confidence in achieving upward social mobility through education due to their unsatisfactory academic performance.

The local expression of "schooling is useless" in rural China has been understood from theories of resistance and counter-school culture since the 2010s when Willis's (1977) *Learning to Labour* became well-known among Chinese scholars. The rise in popularity of resistance theory was partly due to the publication of the Chinese translation of *Learning to Labour* in 2013, followed by Paul Willis teaching at Beijing Normal University from 2014 to 2017. Influenced by Willis's theory of cultural production and working-class youth resistance, Chinese scholars have found important similarities and differences between Chinese rural students and the British working-class "lads." But this resistance approach has a risk of mistakenly reinforcing a "laddish" depiction of rural Chinese youth, viewing counter-school values as rooted in working-class or rural culture (Pun & Koo, 2019; W. Wang, 2023).

Rural students in contemporary China face a contradictory reality, described by Pun and Koo (2019) as the "double contradiction of schooling" (p. 50). They are deeply influenced by the social mobility imperative generated by society, schools, and their families while simultaneously encountering limited opportunities within the education system to adequately prepare them for such upward mobility. This raises an important question: How do the majority of rural Chinese students negotiate/navigate the tension between their aspirations for social mobility and the more probable reality of social immobility? I aim to examine this question in depth through this critical ethnography.

Social Mobility: A Theoretical Critique

Social mobility usually means the movement of an individual (or sometimes a group) from one social position to another in a hierarchical society. A change of one's place in a given social order is often desirable because it implies the openness of the system. A society that allows or facilitates more individuals to achieve upward mobility, moving from lower to higher social positions, is perceived as more just and equitable. Social mobility, therefore, has increasingly become synonymous with social equality (Reay, 2013). This explains why social mobility has gone beyond academic studies and become a political agenda in many countries (Payne, 2017; Pearce, 2011). The extent of mobility is regarded not only as a sign of social justice but also as a solution to inequality. There is a growing concern over the declining rate of social mobility in some developed countries, such as the United States and Great Britain (whether it is correct or not). The underlying assumption is that increased social mobility means greater social equity. Hence, social mobility is often constructed as a positive phenomenon.

Recent discussions have developed a more critical approach to the dominant views of

social mobility (Durst & Huszár, 2022; Ingram & Gamsu, 2022; Lawler & Payne, 2018a; Payne, 2012, 2017; Reay, 2013). These discussions remind us that social mobility is not as inherently positive and transformative as commonly perceived, particularly when it is narrowly conceptualized, such as within political agendas. In the following section, I summarize three major critiques of social mobility discourses, highlighting that mainstream narratives are illusionary, individualistic, and misleading in relation to education.

Firstly, the idea that increased social mobility is a solution to social inequalities is, at best, illusory, if not deliberately misleading. At first glance, this argument seems counterintuitive, as more social mobility appears to enhance the likelihood of individuals from lower social classes moving to higher ones. However, shifting the focus to mobility can obscure the more fundamental goal of social equity. This is because strategies aimed at bolstering mobility among the underprivileged do not necessarily contribute to promoting social justice at a collective level. Strategies aimed at creating upward mobility for the working class, for example, often target addressing the perceived "weakness" of their socioeconomic status and assisting them in escaping their class origins to become middle class through expanded opportunities (Ingram & Gamsu, 2022; Lawler, 2018; Reay, 2013). Being working class seems to be a problem, and the only solution is to learn to be part of the middle class. Reay (2018) characterizes this perception as "the cruelty of social mobility" (p. 146) both at the social and individual levels. By doing so, the living conditions of the working class as a whole remain unchanged. The emphasis on increasing social mobility and equal opportunities diverts attention from broader structural barriers. In this sense, it is not difficult to understand Ingram and Gamsu's (2022) contention that the "social mobility agenda is the enemy of equality" (p. 202).

Treating social mobility as a solution also underestimates the difficulties of moving upward for less disadvantaged groups. Working-class youth who aim to move upward find themselves competing with other social groups possessing more resources, such as the anxious middle class, who actively maintain their advantages (Weis & Cipollone, 2013). In reality, upward mobility for the disadvantaged is far more complicated, considering that the "room at the top" is limited within the current occupational structures (Ingram & Gamsu, 2022, p. 192). There must be downward mobility to create enough "room at the top" for people from lower positions to move up. But this direction of movement is often overlooked. In British political discourse, for example, the fact that social mobility inevitably produces winners *and* losers is largely concealed, emphasizing instead the notion that everyone can be a winner (Lawler, 2018; Lawler & Payne, 2018a; Payne, 2012, 2017).

The difficulty of upward movement for the underprivileged leads to the individualistic nature embedded in mainstream narratives of social mobility. Since there are always "losers" in what is considered fair competition, those who experience downward mobility or remain immobile are often expected to bear sole responsibility for their perceived failures. This deficit narrative attributes their failures to their perceived lack of ability, aspirations, or "right" character. This narrative is prevalent among disadvantaged groups, especially under the neoliberal governmentality. An individualistic approach to social mobility naturalizes social inequalities and places responsibility for failure on the individual, thereby downplaying various structural factors that shape the fate of individuals and groups. As Lawler and Payne (2018) point out, "mobility becomes a way of legitimating unequal outcomes on the grounds of individual characteristics, rather than structural processes which reproduce social inequality" (p. 8).

The third major critique is that the relationship between social mobility and education is often misunderstood in current social mobility discourses. Education is often perceived as the driver of social mobility in political and public discussions. Therefore, equalizing educational opportunities and improving educational quality for less advantaged groups are key policy concerns in many societies. However, the role of education in promoting upward social mobility is more likely to be exaggerated. In this sense, the hope of promoting social equality through educational reform is a divergence from the target center (Thompson, 2019).

The problem of social mobility in education extends beyond the tendency of schooling to perpetuate social reproduction rather than facilitate mobility. It also involves reevaluating the myths and aspirations of social mobility embedded in educational practices. Many studies have indicated that the correlation between educational attainment and an individual's ultimate socioeconomic status is diminishing (Goldthorpe, 2016). Even possessing a college degree does not ensure intergenerational mobility (X. Zhou, 2019; Zipin et al., 2021). Studies based in China and the United States show that a bachelor's degree brings limited returns if a student attends a non-elite university (X. Zhou, 2019; Y. Zhou & Xie, 2020). Zhou and Xie (2020) find no significant difference in income returns between attending a non-elite college and obtaining a high school education in China. Therefore, education and social mobility cannot serve as a panacea for the growing inequalities related to class, gender, race, and other social differences, as advocated by the dominant discourses. Anchoring hopes in social mobility represents a form of cruel optimism (Reay, 2017, 2018).

This does not suggest that social mobility itself is totally an evil thing; rather, it is the ways in which social mobility is understood and utilized that are problematic. Scholars

advocating for a deeper rethinking of social mobility often argue that a narrow understanding of social mobility (and its implications for social justice) in current political discourses and public dialogues is insufficient. It is significant to view social mobility as a political and wider systemic project rather than merely an individual responsibility (Bradley, 2018; Reay, 2013). As Bradley's (2018) longitudinal research on the relationship between higher education and social mobility reminds us, even though working-class students still have opportunities for individual upward mobility, structural social mobility—the systemic design of society that promotes people's changes of positions—is "stalling" (p. 91).

Theoretical Perspectives From the Global South

Decolonizing knowledge production has become a major concern for scholars who work in non-Western contexts to challenge the domination of Western epistemologies and theories (Connell, 2018; Santos, 2018). In *Asia as Method*, Kuan-Hsing Chen (2010) calls for a more critical reflection of "the West as method" (p. 16) in understanding issues in Asia. He reminds us to correctly recognize the West "as one cultural resource among many others" (p. 223) and broaden our theoretical perspectives in researching Asian societies. He writes that this effort is to "diverse frames of reference cross our horizon, multiply our perspectives, and enrich our subjectivity" (K.-H. Chen, 2010, p. 255).

My attempt to engage more with Global South youth studies is to move beyond my previous comfort narratives of rural Chinese students (see Chapter 1). In my earlier work, I have tried to apply different theoretical approaches to make sense of rural Chinese students' educational experiences, such as queer theories and intersectionality (W. Wang, 2019) and the spatiality of rural schooling (W. Wang, 2023). These frameworks allow me to interrogate a

Western class-centered analysis of rural Chinese students. This dissertation builds on this earlier attempt by joining in discussions from the Southern and Eastern contexts. Young people coming of age in these contexts share some challenges that are distinctive from Western youth due to global political and economic inequalities. They experience distinguishing temporality and spatiality in their transition from youth to adulthood. Therefore, literature in this field offers important contextualized concepts to capture these temporal and spatial meanings experienced by young people from the Global South as they navigate a hopeful future in a precarious time. In this dissertation, I primarily utilize two concepts to interpret the life journeys of rural Chinese students: waiting and nearby. These concepts inspire us to carefully examine the time and space of youth who often find their aspirations for moving upward attainable.

Waiting and Waithood in the Global South

Increasing literature has examined waiting as a means for young people to navigate the tension between mobility needs and social inequalities in many contexts in the Global South, including Africa (Alacovska et al., 2021; Elliot, 2016; Honwana, 2012; Masquelier, 2019; Pettit, 2023; Stasik et al., 2020), Asia (Jeffrey, 2010; Kwon, 2015; Zharkevich, 2021), and South America (Auyero, 2012). These studies use waiting as an analytical tool to understand how young people deal with social issues such as unemployment, migration, and precarity (Gökşen et al., 2023). In a contemporary era characterized by uncertainty, waiting becomes an inevitable strategy for some disadvantaged youth to navigate their daily lives. For example, young people in Africa find themselves challenging in transitioning into adulthood because of the difficulties of achieving traditional markers such as finishing education, getting married, and finding stable jobs (Honwana, 2012; Masquelier, 2019). Honwanna (2014) uses the term “waithood” to

describe “a period of suspension between childhood and adulthood” (p. 2) in Africa. In the context of educational expansion, many college-educated young people cannot find employment and, as a result, are stuck in a state of indefinite waiting, which has become a widespread condition of precarity.

Scholars have developed the concept to explore the politics of waiting, which means “engagements with the structural and institutional conditions that compel people to wait. Waiting has been, and is increasingly used as, an instrument to elicit particular forms of subjectivities” (Bandak & Janeja, 2018, p. 3). Waiting, as a specific form of temporal experience, is generative in understanding how unequal social structures produce different ways of engaging with time for young people. In contemporary unsettling times, disadvantaged youth often find themselves with no alternative but to become more patient and wait for changes. Therefore, waiting and patience serve as techniques of governmentality in neoliberal times (Auyero, 2012; Ozolina, 2019).

The politics of waiting brings two consequences, as we have learned from existing literature. One is anchoring hopes in an imagined future with the cost of suspending the present. As Osei and colleagues (2022) suggest, “Youth in the Global South have been described as ‘stuck’ or ‘entrapped’ in their developmental trajectories because they mostly focus on futuristic visions rather than their present lives” (p. 130). A futuristic view of life is socially constructed. When young people recognize the challenging nature of effecting substantive improvements in their present circumstances, they often find solace in the prospect of a hopeful future to simply endure and progress. However, this hopeful anticipation of the future is frequently revealed to be a form of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011), as the anticipated changes are not easily realized and can impede the possibility of leading a meaningful life in the present. It constructs a subjectivity

that Bellino (2018) calls “wait-citizens” who envision limited opportunities for active actions but “postponing their demands for inclusive and transformative citizenship” (p. 381).

The other consequence, relevant to the first one, is the legitimation of neoliberal subjects that highlight individual responsibilities, self-discipline, and meritocratic efforts. A status of waiting is not only a result of personal failure but is also expected to be ended through individual efforts. Mainstream discourses urge youth in waiting to constantly invest in themselves, whether through further formal education or other forms of skills development training (Pettit, 2023). The emphasis on individual investment shifts responsibilities away from society, putting youth with limited resources more marginalized.

The development of waiting and waithood as conceptual tools is a significant contribution of the Global South to youth studies (Bottrell & Pessoa, 2019). By highlighting “waiting as a social practice with political, cultural, economic, and affective implications” (Gökşen et al., 2023, p. 6), youth studies can develop a nuanced understanding of how young people negotiate the intricate relationship between hope, doubt, and uncertainty (Bandak & Janeja, 2018). The recent global phenomenon of waiting during the COVID-19 pandemic is an example that demonstrates the significance of further theorizing waiting as a social practice (Masquelier & Durham, 2023a).

Waiting is not only temporal but also spatial. It connects both the spatiality and temporality in youth’s lived experiences. For instance, youth who are stuck often turn to spatial changes (such as migration) to fix their temporal issues (Pettit, 2023). Kara and Mullings (2023) examine the relationship between waiting and space, unpacking how “space is repurposed and restructured as young people redefine their relationships with others, including the state” (p.

1048). Both the temporal and spatial aspects of waiting open up a possibility "to capture the spatiality of precariousness, the way that space is produced through periods of waiting" (Kara & Mullings, 2023, p. 1052). This time-space entanglement is helpful when we uncover the ways children and youth locate themselves to connect with structural and institutional restrictions at particular times.

Scholars have also explored agentive aspects of waiting (Jeffrey, 2010; Khosravi, 2021; Masquelier, 2019; Pettit, 2023), viewing waiting as becoming (Masquelier & Durham, 2023b). Waiting, often perceived as a passive social practice, appears to restrict individuals' opportunities for meaningful action. However, ethnographies have documented that young people still mobilize their agency in their waiting time to strategically move toward their desired futures. Therefore, waiting, similar to other forms of youth idleness (such as sitting on streets), is "a tactical mode of being in the world at the intersection of agency, constraint, and impotence" (Masquelier, 2019, p. 212). This perspective allows us to view that young people not merely experience waiting negatively but exercise agency during the suspended life period, through which they navigate opportunities and (re)construct their subjectivities. In this sense, both striving for social mobility and waiting "are modalities of hope that exist on a spectrum" (Alacovska et al., 2021, p. 631).

This field of literature provides important insights into understanding the production of Magpies and Winter-Cry Birds in Chinese society. It brings striving and indolence together to grasp young people's relationship with the future (Richaud, 2022). Like other Southern contexts, futuristic visions are prevalent among contemporary Chinese young people. The anthropologist Biao Xiang (2021a) theorizes the Chinese phrase "*xuan fu*" (suspension, 悬浮) to capture "the

displacement of the present" (B. Xiang, 2014a, p. 183) in China. A suspended life causes young people to develop a distinctive relationship with time and space because they are compelled to sacrifice their present lives—including their health, time with their children, leisure, and even their daily routines—in favor of engaging in an unsustainable state of work or study. For example, rural migrant workers exert themselves in strenuous physical labor, despite being aware of its toll on their health. They understand that their current lifestyle is flawed but persist in the hope of eventually escaping it. They wait for a brighter future by hustling in the present. This example illustrates how striving and waiting are closely connected.

The Nearby

Another conceptual tool that inspires this study, related to the phenomenon of suspension and waiting, is the concept of "nearby" (*fujin*). This concept was recently developed by Biao Xiang (2021b) through his grounded observations of Chinese society. The nearby, according to Xiang (2021b), is an in-between space between "the very near (the self) and the very far (the imagined 'world')" (B. Xiang, 2021b, p. 147). It is a lived space where people's interactive connections with the world begin to unfold. In our nearby, for example, there are people with different occupations and different lives, the residents in each building are changing, and each piece of land has its past use. The nearby is generative, fluid, and critical. It differs from "community" because the latter is constructed through, or aims to form, durable relations and commonalities shared by its members (such as the emphasis on developing a sense of community). The nearby, on the contrary, highlights differences. It encourages people to explore these differences, to care about the lives of people around them, to understand what prompts neighbors to come and leave, and to figure out what factors have caused the changes in land use.

Xiang (2021b) suggests that it is productive to use the nearby "as a scope of seeing the world" (p. 149). Seeing the world through/with the nearby provides a valuable way of understanding ourselves and our *concrete* relations with society in uncertain times, guiding us to explore the possibility of a different way of knowing and living. Connecting ourselves concretely to the world helps mitigate our vulnerability resulting from abstract discourses, norms, narratives, and power relations. Stories from the nearby enrich our knowledge of our own experiences, the struggles of others, and the doings of external powers. Turning to the nearby, therefore, is a solution for the individual to regain the capability of action in a precarious age. In this sense, Xiang (2021b) believes that the nearby as a scope of seeing can "generate additional capacities of seeing" (p. 149) and "new capacity for acting" (p. 153).

However, the nearby disappeared in a highly atomized and divided society where (young) people lose interest in the people and things around them. Xiang (2021b) argues that although the disappearance of the nearby is a global phenomenon, it deserves more attention in current Chinese society. This is partly because the nearby once played a very important role in Chinese social life, as evidenced in his autobiography about growing up in south China during the 1970s and 1980s. The disappearance of the nearby is the result of combined forces from the state, capital, and the development of technology.

Although the nearby is a physical and material existence around us, it needs to be deliberately discovered and created through subjective efforts to serve as a scope of seeing. The nearby is a social construction. It is a socially constructed space where the spatiality, materiality, and humanity of their nearby experiences intersect. This is why Xiang (2021b) calls on academics, artists, and activists to collaborate in enhancing citizens' capability to construct their

nearby.

The nearby as a scope of seeing is relevant to *renming* (认命, accepting fate, or knowing fate), another concept that Xiang (B. Xiang & Wu, 2023) mentions in *Self as Method: Thinking Through China and the World*. Xiang finds that there is a common phenomenon in China: everyone refuses to accept their fate. Chinese people are always committed to changing their destinies, moving socially upward, and transcending current life realities. This is one of the reasons to explain the production of the collective anxiety felt by the Chinese today. Xiang's (B. Xiang & Wu, 2023) advice to young people is to accept fate but refuse to admit defeat. For him, *renming* means people need to know their (class) origins, family history/background, and life courses. It means to see their disadvantaged origins as something to embrace rather than escape. People can gain a clearer understanding of the forces that constantly shape the trajectory of their destiny when they neither deny their fate nor constantly seek to transcend their lives in the moment (B. Xiang, 2017).

Later, in a speech entitled "Nearby: A Possibility of Progressive Education," given online at Beijing Normal University and Harvard-Yenching Institute International Webinar Serious on Sociology of Education, Xiang invited educators and educational scholars to explore whether and how the concept of "nearby" can be applied as a method (or methodology) of progressive pedagogy for today's young people who live in an uncertain era filled with anxiety, fear, and powerlessness. He believed that the thinking tool of the nearby can generate a rich dialogue with Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy and critical consciousness.

The concept of "nearby" is valuable in (re)thinking about the social mobility imperative for rural Chinese students. It encourages students to critically reflect on the normative discourses

of mobility and changing fate embedded in rural education. Turning to the nearby makes it possible to reengage with the present and rebuild social relations with their parents and rural communities, which are often considered to have failed in the mobility project. It is challenging to theorize the nearby and then apply it in critical thinking of pedagogy. But the effort to do so is worthwhile. In this dissertation, I employ the concept of "nearby" to develop a contextualized understanding of rural Chinese students' lived experiences. Also, the stories I present below will enrich our theoretical investigation of the nearby, providing insights for the further development of the concept in education, or what we might call a pedagogy of the nearby.

This chapter introduces what the rural-rural divide looks like in China and how this divide is reflected in a stratified educational system. Rural Chinese students' life opportunities have been significantly shaped by the stratification in educational and social systems, making upward social mobility a critical theme in their life journey. Achieving social mobility is not only economically relevant but also a moral and political need. Young people are responsible for striving for their futures, a key means of dealing with the stratified social reality. Similar to other societies, facilitating social mobility is expected to be the solution to social inequalities. However, critical theories have informed us that narratives of social mobility are often illusional hopes. These critiques push educational researchers to develop a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between schooling, stratification, and mobility. I shift my theoretical frameworks from class-centered Western theories popular in interpreting rural Chinese students' experiences to conceptual tools developed in the Global South. I believe that this attempt is meaningful, as Kuan-Hsing Chen (2010) suggests, "to multiply frames of reference in our subjectivity and world-view" (p. 223). By broadening my points of reference, I generate some insights that can

disrupt my previous comfortable but less reflexive interpretations when working with rural Chinese students.

Chapter 3: Contexts and Methodology

This dissertation is a critical ethnography that examines the lived experiences of navigating and negotiating social stratification and mobility among a group of young students in rural China. What lies at the center of this dissertation is to unpack the complex interplay of power and inequality in rural Chinese students' schooling experiences and life trajectories. To understand this complexity, I need to carefully consider local contexts, power relations, and their relationships to the contextualized negotiations of rural Chinese students. Therefore, critical ethnography is particularly beneficial for this work as this methodology "begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular *lived* domain" (Madison, 2020, p. 4, emphasis in original). Its demand for being ethically responsible prompts me to carefully consider the representational issues of rural students and theoretical approaches within the Global South and Eastern contexts.

What makes my ethnography *critical*? In their recently published book entitled *Critical Ethnography and Education: Theory, Methodology, and Ethic*, Fitzpatrick and May (2022) claim that the meaning of "critical" in critical ethnography means differently to researchers despite their common concerns of power and relationalities in their methodological approach. In my endeavors to engage in critical ethnography, I am committed to interrogating injustice, challenging taken-for-granted ways of thinking and representation, and embracing discomfort and uncertainty as I work toward (partial) knowing and even unknowing (Lather, 2007).

One of the key features of critical ethnography is that it incorporates critical theories and epistemologies into ethnographic research (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). This combination of theories and methods makes ethnography the "doing" or "performance" of critical theories or

"critical theory in action" (Madison, 2020, p. 21). In this sense, critical ethnography goes beyond interpreting culture and extends its commitment to promoting social change and justice. While conventional ethnography seeks to comprehend what exists, critical ethnography's *criticality* (following Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005) aims to reimagine what is possible (Thomas, 1993). This critical perspective is relevant to my endeavor to ethically represent rural Chinese students and critically choose theoretical frameworks.

Although I am not directly guided by queer theories, critical feminism, postcolonialism, or decolonial theories in this research, these theories inform my epistemological and methodological considerations. These theoretical traditions, along with conceptual tools associated with the Global South, compel me to take responsibility for resisting "representational violence" (Lather, 2001, p. 484) when producing knowledge about rural Chinese students. Building on the calls for "working the hyphen" (Fine, 1994), "writing against othering" (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi, 2012), and "doubly engaged ethnography" (Pacheco-Vega & Parizeau, 2018), I have been exploring the possibilities of reimagining youth and education in rural places differently throughout both the fieldwork and writing phases.

The Social Geography of Watershed School

Red Mountain Township

The stories in this dissertation were collected from a rural school I call Watershed School. The school is situated in Red Mountain Township (pseudonym), adjacent to the township where I grew up. The township is located in a less-developed mountainous region in Zhejiang, one of China's wealthiest provinces, on the southeast coast of China. The local villagers and teachers at Watershed School considered the township a remote mountainous area. Located on the southern

border of Shen County (pseudonym), the township is around 14 miles away from the county seat and is one of the ten rural townships within the county. Instead of being referred to as a rural school, Watershed was more commonly described by teachers as a mountain school. Similarly, the county classified Watershed as a typical mountain school in its educational documents and policies. Teachers and students sometimes called themselves *shan tou ren* (山头人), which means mountain people, a term also used by my parents and people from my village to identify themselves. In our local communities, individuals who are not *shan tou ren* are referred to as *cheng li ren* (city dwellers or county seat dwellers, 城里人) or, more specifically, in our dialect, *yang xia ren* (people from the lowlands, 垟下人).

Red Mountain Township is commonly characterized by a geography-related folk saying, "Nine (90%) mountains, half (5%) water, and half (5%) rice fields" (*jiushan banshui banfentian*, 九山半水半分田), which highlights its mountainous terrain and scarce availability of water and cultivated land. The township's arable land area is 453 hectares, representing less than 0.05% of its administrative area. While farmlands are scarce, the local economy has long been heavily dependent on agriculture due to the area's geographical location and limited means of production. Local villagers' primary crops include rice, peaches, tea, and bamboo shoots. Besides agriculture, during the time I conducted fieldwork, the township had four small-scale factories, all engaged in handicraft production. Although there were still some service industries in the area, such as retail stores, restaurants, and hairdressers, neither the factories nor these shops could provide sufficient employment opportunities for the local labor force. As a result, most young villagers chose to seek employment elsewhere.

While Red Mountain Township may seem geographically remote from the county seat, it

is not a closed rural space without connections to the outside world. The people in the township have largely participated in China's great migration. Many local villagers, especially the younger generation, prefer to work or conduct business outside the township. Those who stay are typically elderly people, women, and children. This explains why the registered population in the township is about 13,000 while the actual number of residents is only around 5,000. The population that currently lives in the township has halved in the past five years. As with most rural areas in China, an increasing number of villagers in Red Mountain Township have become migrant workers who work outside their home villages. Zhejiang, a wealthy coastal province, is usually viewed as a migrant-receiving region where millions of migrant workers from other provinces find jobs. However, villagers in Red Mountain have had to migrate out to seek better livelihoods. Some villagers relocate to the county seat to work in factories and service industries or to run small businesses. Others operate laundries or breakfast shops in major cities in the Yangtze River Delta region, such as Hangzhou (the capital city of the province), Ningbo (the second-largest city in the province), and Nantong (a city in the neighboring Jiangsu Province).

Another connection between Red Mountain Township and the wider world is demonstrated by the local men's need to marry women from outside the nearby areas. The number of local men who were unable to get married was relatively high due to poverty. Consequently, some male residents needed to marry women from poorer regions. This story is not unfamiliar to me. During my childhood, I often heard that one of my uncles was too impoverished to marry and had to meet women from less developed places such as Guizhou and Yunnan. A local teacher in his sixties shared with me, "If no Guizhou people came to our township, many men here would remain bachelors." Nowadays, some local men need to search

as far as Southeast Asia to find suitable marriage partners, as provinces such as Guizhou and Yunnan have undergone significant development. Teachers at Watershed informed me that some Vietnamese women lived in the township, joking that the township is becoming more and more international.

Figure 1: A broken house in Red Mountain Township

The two aforementioned connections with the outside world are manifestations of poverty in Red Mountain Township, which have profoundly impacted the growth of the children and youth in the area. Many students have to separate from their parents at an early age when their parents work outside the township. Some move to the cities, where they become migrant children, and then have to return to Red Mountain to continue their middle school education to attend academic high schools after *Zhongkao*[3]. The separation between rural children and their migrant parents and its consequences have been extensively discussed in China. However, less attention has been given to how rural children are affected by the second connection between the township and the outside world I mentioned above. The first surprising fact I learned during my

[3] In some cities, rural migrant children are not eligible to attend public academic high schools according to local educational policies. Therefore, some migrant children need to return to their hometowns to take *Zhongkao*.

fieldwork was that teachers at Watershed informed me repeatedly that some of the children here have no mothers. These children's mothers were from other provinces and left them later because the quality of life in the village was too impoverished. Approximately 10 out of the 76 ninth-grade students grew up in this type of family.

The poverty of Red Mountain Township stands in stark contrast to the affluence of Zhejiang Province. Zhejiang is an economically developed coastal province. Its GDP ranked fourth, and per capita disposable income ranked third across the country in 2021. In addition to the highly developed economy, the urban-rural income gap in Zhejiang is considered the lowest in China (T. Chen, 2022). This explains why Zhejiang was designated as a demonstration zone for achieving common prosperity by the central government in May 2021. Common prosperity is an important social development goal emphasized by the Chinese government recently, aiming to solve problems such as unbalanced and insufficient development, rural-urban disparity, and a large gap in income distribution. Zhejiang Province has set a goal to achieve common prosperity at a basic level by 2035, which includes narrowing the development gap between urban and rural areas.

Although the urban-rural development gap in Zhejiang is the smallest compared to other provinces, this gap is still significant. Shen County is one of the 26 underdeveloped mountainous counties in Zhejiang, which poses challenges for the province in achieving common prosperity. The urban-rural gap can be seen through the per capita disposable income (PCDI) figures. In 2020, the average PCDI for all residents in Zhejiang was 52,397 yuan[4] (approximately $7,700 USD). For its urban residents, the number reached 62,699 yuan, while for rural residents, it was

[4] "Yuan" refers to the basic unit of currency in China.

31,930 yuan. This marked the first time that the urban-rural income ratio dropped below 2 in the province. In the same year, the average PCDI for all residents in Shen County was around 36,000 yuan. Urban residents in the county had an average income of around 45,700 yuan, while permanent rural residents earned less than 24,500 yuan (approximately $3,600 USD).

Figure 2: A main street in Red Mountain Township

In recent years, changes have been witnessed in Red Mountain Township, mainly driven by the Construction of a New Socialist Countryside and the development of red tourism. The Construction of a New Socialist Countryside is a policy launched by the Chinese government to enhance the living standards of farmers and develop rural areas. A noticeable change that this policy has brought to the residents of Red Mountain Township is the reconstruction of some villages according to a specific design, resulting in many villagers moving into newly built and beautiful houses. Red Mountain Township is "an old revolutionary base area" (*geming laoqu*, 革命老区) where the Red Army fought against the enemy before 1949. Building on this revolutionary history, the township has developed a red tourism project and has become a provincial patriotism education base. Each year, it attracts students, teachers, and government

officials for visits and drives the development of the local economy. This is why I have chosen to use the pseudonym "Red Mountain Township" to refer to the township.

Watershed School

Watershed School was established in 1946, three years before the foundation of the People's Republic of China. Although Watershed still serves as a township central school[5] (*zhongxin xuexiao*, 中心学校), it is the only school in Red Mountain Township. Before the 2010s, Watershed School managed two village primary schools (k-3), but they were closed between 2013-2014 when fewer than twenty students were in each school. Teachers at Watershed School referred to this process as "a natural death" of rural schools. The school is located next to the Red Mountain Township government office building. Despite their geographical proximity, Watershed School is not under the management of the township government but is directly managed by the county level.

Watershed School comprised students from kindergarten to grade 9. As a township central school, it consisted of three sections: the kindergarten, primary school, and middle school. Although Watershed School was sometimes considered as two separate schools (the kindergarten and the nine-year school, including the primary and middle schools), they were typically regarded as one school by teachers and local residents since they were on the same campus and led by the same principal. Most children who stayed in the township completed their kindergarten, elementary, and middle school education at Watershed School.

The biggest challenge facing Watershed School was the decreasing number of students.

[5] A township central school is a school that has functions of management and guidance for all of the primary schools and/or middle schools within the township.

Against the backdrop of population and educational resources increasingly concentrating in county seats and cities, teachers were concerned that the school might suffer a fate similar to the two village primary schools that were forced to close. From 2015 to 2019, the number of classes decreased from 18 to 12, and the number of students decreased from 512 to 396. In the 2019-2020 academic year, there were less than 15 students in both grade 1 and grade 2. The continuously declining number of students implied that middle school education at Watershed might soon cease. In 2020, the principal confided in me that he foresaw the school's middle school education likely not continuing beyond five years. Some teachers, with over ten years of experience at the school, often reminisced about the lively atmosphere on campus in the past. According to education records archived by the county library, Watershed had over 700 students in 1992, comprising 390 middle school students and 342 elementary students. Some teachers recalled that the school had over 1,000 students at its peak.

The decline in student enrollment at Watershed School was attributed, on the one hand, to some students accompanying their migrant parents to study in other cities and, on the other hand, to the increasing preference among villagers to send their children to schools in the county seat. Teachers shared that local parents were typically unwilling to enroll their children at Watershed. Only those parents lacking the means to send their children to urban schools would opt to stay. No teacher at Watershed enrolled their children at the school where they worked. The majority chose to send their children to schools in the county seat, while a few teachers opted to pay hefty tuition fees to secure placements for their children in Hangzhou city, the provincial capital, for higher-quality education.

For children in Red Mountain Township, gaining acceptance into urban public schools

was typically difficult because their households (*huji*) were not registered in urban areas. Consequently, some local villagers had to pay high tuition fees to secure a better education for their children in private schools located in the county seat. Principal Tong mentioned that only a few top elementary school graduates would continue their middle school education at Watershed each year. Those who left often decided to study at Foreign Languages Middle School or Grand Middle School, the two largest private schools in Shen County.

Another challenge at Watershed arose from the low academic performance of its students. Shen County had 23 middle schools, comprising three urban public schools, 13 rural (including town-level) public schools, and seven private schools. There existed a notable discrepancy in educational outcomes among these middle schools. In the 2020 *Zhongkao*, three schools (two public urban schools and one private school) accounted for 61 percent of the county's top-performing students, whose scores placed them in the top 15 percent of the examination.

Although Watershed School's educational outcomes were relatively strong compared to other rural schools in the county, there remained a considerable disparity with local urban schools. In the 2020 *Zhongkao*, over 40 percent of the school's ninth graders ranked in the county's bottom 30 percent of students[6]. As a result, approximately 70 percent of graduates from Watershed enrolled in the lower-quality vocational high school located in the county seat. This percentage is notably higher than the county-wide average of around 50 percent of all middle school graduates enrolled in vocational high schools. The division between vocational and

[6] The evaluation method used by the local city-level education department for *Zhongkao* divided students' scores into five categories: the top 15%, top 50%, top 70%, and bottom 30%. The top 15% is referred to as the excellent rate, the top 50% as the rate of students who are eligible to attend academic high schools, the top 70% as the pass rate, and the bottom 30% as the failure rate. According to this education evaluation system, Watershed School had a failure rate of 40% in this year's *Zhongkao*.

academic high school students results from the widely known "5-5 streaming" (*wuwu fenliu*, 五五分流) policy, which mandates that half of middle school graduates attend academic high schools while the other half attend vocational ones. In 2020, out of the 76 ninth graders at Watershed, 55 students were admitted to the local vocational high school, while only 14 students were accepted into academic public high schools. Additionally, one student was accepted into the private Grand Middle School, and the remaining six did not pass the entrance exam.

However, for Watershed School, the majority of students entering vocational high school was not a significant concern because the teachers' primary focus was on ensuring that enough students could enter academic high schools, particularly the best high school in Shen County—County High. In recent years, the county education bureau has primarily evaluated middle schools based on the number of students admitted to County High. This criterion also serves as the primary avenue for schools to build their social reputation. The number of students admitted to County High from each school garners significant social attention annually. The county allocates 3 to 5 quotas for Watershed students to attend County High each year, with the specific quotas determined based on the student population for that year.

For example, during the first year of my fieldwork, the principal secured five admission quotas for the school to enroll students in County High, marking the highest number granted to Watershed in over a decade. Due to its location in a mountainous area, Watershed benefited from a 70-point reduction policy for its students entering County High. This policy aimed to support students from mountainous regions, enabling them to gain admission to the top high school with lower *Zhongkao* scores compared to those from the county seat. However, despite this score reduction advantage, gaining admission to County High remained extremely challenging for

Watershed students. Hence, each year, ninth-grade teachers prioritize achieving the allocation quota. Meeting this quota was deemed a successful teaching year, with the possibility of additional students entering other academic high schools being seen as a bonus. The number of students entering the vocational high school or failing to secure placements in any school was not central to evaluating the school's teaching success or failure.

Most of the teachers at Watershed came from a rural background, having grown up in rural villages in Shen County. During the academy year of 2019-2020, 42 teachers and administrators worked at Watershed, including three in the kindergarten, 19 in the elementary, and 20 in the middle school level. In response to the school's teaching requirements, there existed a degree of flexibility among primary and middle school teachers. For instance, in cases of shortages of teachers for specific subjects in the middle school, primary school teachers might also be called upon to teach at the middle school level. All the teachers, except for one, were from the local county. None of the teachers at Watershed currently resided in Red Mountain Township, although eight grew up in nearby villages within the township. Almost all of them had purchased apartments in the county seat and had acquired urban household registrations (*cheng li ren*). They typically commuted approximately 35 minutes from the county seat to the school every working day, except when they had evening classes. Only three senior teachers, two single young teachers, and two teachers who were a young couple lived in the teacher's dormitories from Monday to Friday.

Gaining Access to the Field

Watershed School is approximately a 20-minute drive from my home village. The main road connecting Red Mountain Township and the county seat passes by my home. I had no

connection with Watershed before I started my fieldwork. While still in the United States and searching for a research site, I asked my father to help me visit Watershed and see the possibility of entering the school. The process went smoothly. The school principal, Principal Tong, welcomed me and expressed his enthusiasm for my research with his students. Later, I called the principal and briefly introduced my research topic over the phone. Coming from a nearby village helped me quickly gain the principal's trust and support. Principal Tong was pleased that I had chosen his school as my research site and believed that my work would provide valuable experiences for both students and teachers at Watershed. He verbally committed to providing me with the necessary support.

After returning to my home village from the United States, I met with Principal Tong at his office in October 2019 to discuss my research in depth. Principal Tong signed the school consent form and granted me permission to participate in school activities comprehensively, by which he indicated his support for all the research activities required for this study. I was pleased to know that Principal Tong did not ask me to volunteer as a teacher as I was not trained to teach middle school. Without a teaching certificate, I might have only earned the teaching position due to my role as an overseas doctoral student, indicating that "the researched would benefit from 'superior' Western knowledge" (Ansell, 2001, p. 103). What the principal requested was that I could assist the school in developing local curricula, participate in teachers' professional development courses, and provide academic support to students.

The principal's welcome was the first step in gaining access to Watershed. In order to become deeply involved in the school, I still needed further permission from teachers and students. During the process of obtaining permission, Mr. Wu became another key gatekeeper.

Upon knowing that I was from the same township as him, Mr. Wu invited me to walk outside the school on the first day of my fieldwork. He graciously helped me become acquainted with the area. As one of the most senior teachers at Watershed, he retired in July 2019 but was rehired due to his extensive knowledge of the local community and ability to maintain a positive relationship between the school and the township. As we walked around the streets of Red Mountain Township, many villagers warmly greeted Mr. Wu, and he introduced me proudly to villagers, "This is our school's new teacher. He is a Ph.D. from the United States. Have you ever seen a Ph.D.?" It seemed that my identity as a doctoral student brought honor to the school.

On our return from the township visit, Mr. Wu emphasized the importance of being socially knowledgeable in order to gain acceptance within the school. He said,

> You must already have a great deal of academic knowledge since you're a doctoral student. But you still need to learn social knowledge, to learn how to deal with relationships with others as now you have left the university and entered society. If you have knowledge of *zuoren* (做人 literally, to make oneself a person) in society, you will be even more successful. Then you will become a Ph.D. of Society (*shehui boshi*, 社会博士), not just a Ph.D. in Education. As a newcomer, it would be beneficial for you to arrive early in the morning and help with cleaning tables and the teacher's office. Young guys like you should be diligent.

I was surprised that Mr. Wu was teaching me some social rules when we first met. I did not expect that cleaning the teachers' office and tables would be a part of my research work in the field. Although feeling a little embarrassed, I understood he was offering well-meaning advice to help me fit into the school. He worried about me being bookish because of my high

level of education. In the local cultural context, a person with a high level of education may be easily considered a nerd who lacks experience in social interactions. At that moment, I realized that Mr. Wu did not merely treat me as a researcher. Instead, he perceived me as a young man seeking belonging in a new place. In his eyes, my graduate degree became a barrier. I came to understand that my relationship with the school was not simply that of a researcher conducting research in a field site but rather that of a newcomer seeking to belong in an authoritative institution. Therefore, I needed not only academic knowledge but also social knowledge, which, as I later learned during the fieldwork, the school constantly emphasized to equip some students.

Mr. Wu's next suggestion was to participate in the school's swimming team. According to him, all male teachers were members of the swimming team. They swim outdoors all year round, whether in summer or winter. Mr. Wu reminded me that I needed to join the team and get along well with the teachers. Male teachers at Watershed usually swam at noon when they had a two-hour break before the afternoon classes. As expected, some teachers invited me to swim together after lunch on my first day of fieldwork. I knew this was more than an invitation because I did not feel I could refuse. We drove for around five minutes and arrived at a small lake that had been remodeled by the teachers for swimming. Water had become quite cold in late October, especially in mountainous areas where mountains block the sunlight from reaching lakes and streams.

I later realized that the teachers' invitation on my first day of fieldwork was a test for me, as well as a ticket to doing my fieldwork. A couple of months later, I was told by Principal Tong and some teachers that they accepted me as a member of the school when I jumped into the cold water. As Principle Tong once half-jokingly remarked, "If you hadn't jumped to the lake that day,

we might not have accepted you so quickly, nor would we have been so cooperative with your fieldwork." Swimming outdoors in cold water was my ticket to conducting research at the school. I recognized that this ticket also stemmed from my privilege as a male researcher in a male-dominated institution. The swimming team became an important way to know the school, the teachers, and the stories of students. During many times of swimming together, my identity as a researcher gradually faded away, and I was truly accepted as an "insider" of the school.

Gaining acceptance from the students at Watershed was easier than from the teachers. The students were delighted to learn that a doctoral student from the United States had come to their school to conduct research. They were willing to talk to me and share their life and growth experiences. Although they sometimes addressed me as "*Wang Laoshi*" (Teacher Wang), most of the time, they called me "*Xiao Wang*" (Little Wang) or "*Lao Wang*" (Old Wang) to indicate that I was different from the other teachers at the school.

The students rarely saw me as an authoritative teacher and instead presented their most authentic daily lives in a relaxed manner. For example, they played poker, read novels, and used their phones during or after class without concern for avoiding me. They were also willing to share their opinions about their teachers with me, discussing challenging moments in their upbringing, and trusting that I would not divulge their secrets unethically. They invited me to attend classes with them, as well as invited me to their weekend gatherings. During breaks between classes, I was often surrounded by a group of students who shared their exciting stories and troubles with me.

Methods and Participants

I conducted a two-year ethnographic study between 2019 and 2021 and another two-year

follow-up interviews and visits in Red Mountain Township. The first section of the study was a two-year on-site fieldwork that started in October 2019 after I had completed my IRB approval. October is the second month of the new academic year for students in China. I conducted the fieldwork in the Fall and Spring semesters and continued during the summer break. In these two semesters, I usually spent four to five days at the school and another one or two days in the township. My main goal was to participate in ninth graders' lives in and outside the school in the Fall semester. By the end of the semester, I identified 22 students with whom I later worked more closely. Starting in the Spring semester, in addition to continuing to conduct participant observations with the students, I began to interview the 22 students and teachers at Watershed more formally. I also visited the students' home villages to get familiar with their lives beyond the school.

The second section was follow-up interviews and visits with 22 students with whom I worked more closely. In the original research design, I planned to return to the United States after completing the on-site fieldwork and conducting follow-up interviews online. However, I was not able to return to the United States because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, I changed the online interviews to face-to-face interviews and continued to visit the township on weekends. During weekdays, the school principals invited me to continue to stay in their school to offer assistance with a project developed by the school to help students with less interest in learning. I found this project meaningful and continued visiting Watershed at least four days a week during the academic year of 2020-2021. This period of fieldwork allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the school, teachers, and the local community.

Participant observations are significant in answering the research questions in this

dissertation study. In the Fall 2019 semester, I used participant observation in the school and extended my participation in students' lives outside the school in Spring and Summer 2020. My participation in the field included attending classes, participating in school activities, chatting with students and teachers, visiting students' home villages, and joining students' games outside of the school. By focusing on the embodied and spatial dimensions of students' schooling experiences, I wrote ethnographic fieldnotes that represent how students' routine practices occur in and outside the school (Emerson et al., 2011).

In addition to participant observation, I paid particular attention to the method of observation of participation. Tedlock (1991) points out that there has been a shift from participant observation to the observation of participation since the crisis of representation in ethnography. This shift has been influenced by feminist movements and postcolonial scholarship, which led to the emergence of narrative ethnography (Tedlock, 1991). In this type of ethnography, ethnographers represent *themselves* both in their knowing and writing about the participant. The ethnographer is no longer a detached researcher but an engaged participant in their ethnographic study. Critical reflexivity is needed to understand how the ethnographer takes part in the daily lives of the participants and its consequences. I observed my participation in and outside Watershed and wrote reflexive field notes.

The interview method was used to understand my participants' perceptions of education and lived experiences. Madison (2020) introduces three related forms of the ethnographic interview: oral history, personal narrative, and topical interview. I included these three forms of interviews in my study. Interviews that focused on the students' oral history invited students to recount historical moments, or what Kumashiro (2002) calls "moments of significance" (p. 17),

in their life journeys. I used interviews to understand the 22 focused students' life histories, including their memories in childhood, in the elementary schools(s), and migration experiences. Personal narrative allowed students to express themselves more freely and lead the conversation. This is similar to MacDonald and Marsh's (2004) biographical narratives of schooling. In topical interviews, I asked students' personal perspectives on specific topics, such as their schooling experiences, choice of academic or non-academic tracks, and future imaginations. According to students' language preferences, I used the local dialect, Mandarin Chinese, or both, during the interviews. Typically, students preferred to speak Mandarin Chinese, with the local dialect being used only in a few cases. I transcribed all recorded interviews, translating the local dialect into Mandarin Chinese during this process, and then translated it into English for writing. The quotes from Watershed students and teachers presented in this dissertation were translated by me from Mandarin Chinese and the local dialect into English.

In addition to participant observations and interviews, I utilized visual methods to capture embodied and spatial experiences that may be beyond verbal and visible representation. The visual methods I used during my fieldwork and interviews included photo-elicitation and drawing. These methods were employed to facilitate my participants' discussions about their educational experiences, as well as their thoughts on their current and future lives. The goal was to gain insight into "the non-visible, the non-verbal and the non-obvious" aspects of how they navigated the contradictions between social stratification and mobility (Dowling et al., 2018, p. 780). I collected pictures drawn by the students who were willing to express their thoughts through drawing. During both formal and informal interviews, I occasionally brought photos I had taken of the village, school, and students' schooling lives to aid them in discussing their

experiences.

The participants of this study were ninth-grade students enrolled at Watershed during the academic year 2019-2020. These were 76 students in the ninth grade that year, divided into two classes—a “good” class (Class A) and a “bad” class (Class B). The number of students in each class varied slightly throughout the year, but generally, the “good” class had around 50 students, while the remaining 25 or so students were placed in the “bad” class. Further details about the two classes will be discussed in the following chapter. Out of the 22 students I worked more closely with, half of them were from the “good” class, and the other half were from the “bad” class. The selection of these students considered factors such as academic performance, family background, and gender to present a diverse group of students as much as possible. The information about the key participants included in this dissertation is listed in Appendix B.

The majority of my participants were born in 2005, a few years before the Global Financial Crisis (GFC). Unlike their counterparts in the West who experienced an era of austerity after the GFC (McDowell et al., 2022), my participants, commonly referred to in society as the “post-2000s” generation (*lingling hou*, 零零后), grew up during the period of China’s economic takeoff. They were born in the third decade after China’s market-oriented reforms and had benefited more from the material improvements brought about by the golden period of China’s high-speed economic growth than previous generations. Even though they were born in the countryside, their exposure to the world was not limited to their local villages. Many students had already traveled with their parents to big cities and spent a significant part of their childhood and primary education in cities. They also had easy access to the internet, which allowed them to access diverse information and ideas.

In my participants' upbringing, there was not only rapid economic development but also active shaping of political discourses, which has contributed to shaping them as an aspirational generation. Since primary school, my participants had been exposed to the "Chinese Dream." Even at a young age, they knew they were responsible for contributing to the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation as part of the Chinese Dream. The economic and political backgrounds are significant for understanding the construction of an aspirational and optimistic culture among the rural students at Watershed, as I will describe in more detail in the following chapters.

Toward Uncomfortable Reflexivity in Fieldwork

Although I extensively studied decolonizing research methods and the importance of practicing reflexivity before starting fieldwork to conduct a non-exploitative ethnography, I still had to do more "homework" when I entered the field, which I considered my hometown. Merely being an "insider" from the local community did not guarantee that I, as an ethnographer, would be fully aware of the implicit issues within my interactions with the participants. Therefore, I must continue to do "homework" during fieldwork and subsequent analysis before I am able to "write home" (Asher, 2009, p. 4). While working in the field, I consciously applied what Pillow (2003) calls "uncomfortable reflexivity" to identify, comprehend, and rectify any biases, misperceptions, and unintended harms that might have impacted my research participants. I used critical and uncomfortable reflexivity not as a remedy to gain a "better" understanding of rural Chinese students, acknowledging the crisis of representation in ethnography and broader social sciences, but rather as a means to contemplate the limitations and partiality inherent in my knowing and not knowing (Lather, 2007).

Doing Fieldwork, Doing Homework: Uncomfortable Reflexivity

Reflexivity has become an omnipresent notion in ethnographies and other qualitative studies (Berry & Clair, 2011; Pillow, 2003). It requires researchers to critically reflect on how their personal backgrounds and social positions influence their knowing and writing processes. Critical reflexivity is particularly important for ethnography because ethnographic knowledge production has long been critiqued for its colonial history and Othering outcomes. Ethnographic research of other(ed) cultures should pay sufficient attention to how researchers come to know and what they represent both in the field and the text, as feminist, queer, and post-colonial theories have suggested (Adjepong, 2019; Ansell, 2001; Lather, 2001; Macbeth, 2001). Therefore, reflexivity is considered to be more than a methodological issue. For Marcus (1994), it is also an ideological matter. For Dean (2017), reflexivity is methodological, theoretical, disciplinary, practical, and personal. He writes, "[R]eflexive work cannot just be about the person doing the research. It is the examination of both the structural and personal conditions which help us understand the knowledge we create" (p. 10). Reflexivity is not only about doing but also about being and knowing. In this sense, it brings ontology, epistemology, and methodology together (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi, 2012). Thus, reflexivity has become a hallmark of "good" ethnographies and qualitative studies.

Reflexivity, in its broad sense, requires researchers to bring themselves into the research. By so doing, researchers analyze who they are, what they believe, and how their identities and values influence the processes of knowing and knowledge production. Reflexivity asks researchers to consider themselves as involved in the world being examined (Lumsden, 2019). This use of reflexivity serves to, on the one hand, reduce researchers' biases and thus increase

objectivity. On the other hand, many scholars use reflexivity in this sense to challenge objectivism in social sciences and claim the subjectivity of research. This challenge leads to an emphasis on the messiness and openness in academic inquiry. Writing from a queer perspective, Adams and Jones (2011) remind us that the ways we tell stories are flexible and changeable. They claim that reflexivity allows us not only to cautiously examine stories that we (can) tell but also the ones we cannot. For them, "*The reflexive* means listening to and for the silences and stories we can't tell—not fully, not clearly, not yet; returning, again and again, to the river of story accepting what you can never fully, never unquestionably *know*" (pp. 111-112, emphasis in original). To understand which stories we cannot tell and the reasons behind them, we must make the self visible.

Despite becoming a critical criterion for most qualitative studies, the notion of reflexivity is now facing challenges from different perspectives and has been stuck in an impasse (Nagar & Geiger, 2007; Wasserfall, 1993). Some scholars have reminded us that the notion of reflexivity itself is Western-centric. Villenas (1996) calls it a "White middle-class 'discovery'" (p. 727), arguing that merely examining the researcher's privileges—what Western privileged researchers usually call reflexivity—is insufficient. The corrective role of reflexivity that sees reflexivity as a solution to researchers' privilege has been critiqued as self-indulgent and narcissistic (Davies et al., 2004; Doucet, 2008; Lather, 2001). According to Villenas (1996), the "we" in the literature of qualitative reflexivity neglects the marginalization of researchers from colonized contexts. These other(ed) researchers who are not included in the "we" open up new possibilities of bringing together "the researcher as colonizer" and "the researcher as colonized" and call for a more nuanced analysis of researchers' reflexivity.

Although reflexivity is often associated with postmodernist standpoints, it still reflects the modernist presumptions of cure and intentionality (Lather, 2001; Pillow, 2003; Visweswaran, 1994). Visweswaran (1994) separates deconstructive ethnography from interpretative/reflexive ethnography, as the latter uses reflexivity to seek better knowing, while the former develops knowing from not knowing (see also Pillow, 2003). In Pillow's (2003) influential article, she argues for moving beyond a "comfortable" use of reflexivity that considers reflexive practices to increase research credibility and objectivity and, therefore, serves to re-inscribe underlying modernist assumptions. Instead of using reflexivity as a methodological power, Pillow suggests using it as a methodological tool and developing an alternative reflexivity of discomfort. Uncomfortable reflexivity "seeks to know while at the same time situates this knowing as tenuous" (Pillow, 2003, p. 188). This attempt disrupts familiar and narrow foci of reflexivity as recognition of self and other, truth, and transcendence in previous scholarship.

This critique of reflexivity as methodological power is related to another reflection on positionality in reflexive practices. Positional reflexivity faces tensions because it combines both realist claims of understanding which social positions of the researcher shape the research and a normativism goal of challenging objective knowledge (Lichterman, 2017). One critique is that identifying the researcher's positions is not as easy as many have shown in their writings about correlations between their positionalities and the knowledge they produce. Social positions are inconsistently mobilized and intersected (Reyes, 2020). Underneath these correlations is a realist epistemology that presumes the researcher's ability to sort out which and how positions matter in fieldwork and textual representation (Lichterman, 2017). A consequence of this realist understanding is to reduce reflexivity to fixed social categories (Nencel, 2014; Robertson, 2002;

Salzman, 2002). Therefore, Lichterman (2017) calls for a more interpretive understanding of reflexivity, which makes ethnographers' explanations more transparent and shows the process of interpreting other cultures, both rightly and wrongly. Nencel (2014) proposes a similarly situated reflexivity that avoids a predefined notion of research relations and researchers' positions. She maintained that intentional use and strategical displacement of researchers' reflexivity depend on specific research contexts. These critiques illustrate how a predefined and fixed way of using reflexivity is not only not helpful but also harmful.

The following sections provide examples of how I have used reflexivity to critically examine my role as a researcher throughout the fieldwork. I have tried to go beyond a comfortable use of reflexivity, which helped me identify some of my previously unnoticed problems during my interactions with participants.

Troubling an Exotic Gaze: Desires for Unfamiliarity

When I entered the field, I openly emphasized that I came from a nearby village and spoke the local dialect. I hoped that this would help me establish a closer connection with my participants. This strategy proved useful, as I quickly gained the trust of the principal and teachers. Principal Tong allowed me to become deeply involved in the school. The students were excited to see a doctoral student from overseas who spoke their local language. However, I began to question how familiar I was with the community when I learned a surprising fact: some of the students had grown up without their mothers. The teachers informed me that this was not an isolated case and that many mothers left their families after giving birth to one or two children due to the poverty in Red Mountain Township. Teachers and some students used the term "ran away" to describe this phenomenon. Although I had heard of this situation in some rural areas, I

did not know it was common in the township. Given that neither I nor the previous literature has mentioned this surprising phenomenon, I paid particular attention to this issue at the beginning of my fieldwork. I assumed that students who grew up without their mothers would face specific difficulties and struggles.

In an informal interview with a male student whose mother left when he was around six years old, we talked about his childhood experiences. He shared, “I felt everything was good. All of a sudden, my grandparents told me many adult things, such as my mother ran away. The adult thing.” He did not understand what had happened then because his mother still called him. He said he was too young to comprehend the situation. When I realized that the student thought everything was still good in his childhood, I was more surprised than when I learned from Watershed teachers that many students’ mothers had left. I hid my surprise on my face and asked him again about his feelings to ensure he had no negative emotions. He replied that even when he later understood what had happened, he still did not feel sad or have a sense of loss. He said in a calm tone, “This is my life. I have to accept it.” When I asked him about the most challenging thing in his life, he did not mention his mother’s leaving.

This conversation made me realize the exotic gaze I brought to my fieldwork as a researcher. Although I claimed that my research aimed to understand the everyday experiences of rural Chinese students, I found that I paid insufficient attention to their mundane lives in the field. Instead, the stories that captured my interest were those that I found exotic or unfamiliar.

At the start of my fieldwork, another instance where I interrogated my exotic gaze was my initial focus on the struggles and resistance of the students. Influenced by structure-agency debates that have been influential thinking tools in youth studies, I was initially interested in

finding evidence of how the structure had shaped my rural participants and how they mobilized their agency to overcome structural barriers. However, this focus ran the risk of neglecting the richness of rural students' everyday lives. Starting with Western thoughts on struggles, resistances, and agency, and seeking similar stories in existing literature, my understanding of rural Chinese students deviated from the grounded local contexts. Although I came from the local community, it was still difficult for me to resist an exotic gaze, reflecting my desire for unfamiliarity as a researcher. On the one hand, I intentionally used my rural identity to highlight the similarities between myself and my participants. On the other hand, I continually sought out unfamiliar aspects that seemed important to me as a researcher but likely had little relevance to the participants.

After recognizing my desire for unfamiliarity and my exotic gaze, I returned to Santos's (2018) writings about the rejoicing body that is emphasized in the epistemologies of the South (discussed in Chapter 2). Santos argues that social struggles in the Global South are not only about suffering and resistance but also joy. To address my discomfort by mainly focusing on struggles and resistance, I foregrounded what Santos calls the rejoicing body—the body that enjoys life. Not limiting myself to the structure-agency debates opened up new possibilities for me to examine the mundane, ordinary, and even trivial aspects of rural Chinese students' daily experiences. Mobilizing a form of uncomfortable reflexivity problematizes my previously comfortable ways of knowing. By showing examples of how I recognized my desires for unfamiliarity and resisted my exotic gaze, I do not mean that reflexivity makes my ethnography "better." As Lather (2007) reminds us, responsible reflexivity "is not a matter of looking harder or more closely, but of seeing what frames our seeing—spaces of constructed visibility and

incitements to see which constitute power/knowledge" (p. 119).

Stop Saying "Jia You": Critical Thinking, Uncritical Talking

"*Jia you*" (加油) is a Chinese phrase that literally means "add oil" or "add fuel oil to a machine or a car." In English, it has similar meanings to "keep going," "hang in there," "come on," or "make extra efforts." Generally, the phrase "*jia you*" is an expression of encouragement or motivation to "refuel" someone's energy, especially when facing a challenging situation or working toward a goal. After spending a couple of months at Watershed, I gradually realized that I had been using the phrase "*jia you*" excessively with my participants. I began to recognize that my language and messages were too focused on meritocracy, a prevalent yet problematic discourse in education that I have been attempting to critique. I often found myself in a paradoxical situation of thinking critically while speaking uncritically at the onset of my fieldwork.

The Chinese language teacher of the students in Class A, Mr. Yang, invited me to provide feedback on students' *Shuoshuo*, similar to tweets but written on notebooks. Every day, each student wrote a *Shuoshuo* to enhance their writing skills and share their thoughts with classmates. Students would write about anything they like, and others could write comments under each *Shuoshuo*. The teacher would also provide comments for each student. After I arrived at the school, Mr. Yang assigned me the task of writing the teacher's comments because he thought it would be a good opportunity for me to get to know the students and understand their culture. I agreed and found it a fun task because the students usually wrote insightful and interesting things. During my communication with the students in this way, I found myself giving too many words of encouragement, such as "*jia you*" and "*nu li*" (try hard, 努力), which

problematically reinforced a meritocratic discourse.

Another case involved a speech that I delivered to all the students at Watershed. At the beginning of my fieldwork, Principal Tong invited me to speak to the students, believing that my educational journey—especially my progression from a rural village to pursuing a Ph.D. degree abroad—would inspire and motivate them to strive for more. I agreed to the request, considering it a necessary return for the school's generosity in accommodating my research. During the speech, I shared my rural background and continued efforts to overcome learning challenges. I also informed them about the highly competitive nature of *Zhongkao* in China and how obtaining good grades and entering an academic high school would significantly increase their chances of going to college. After the speech, I noticed that students in Class A had written the English sentence "Everything is possible!" on the small blackboard on the left side of the classroom that day. Typically, students in Class A used this small blackboard to write motivational sentences to inspire themselves. Upon seeing those words, I questioned whether I had made a mistake by giving the speech. I realized that my presence could bring a different perspective to the research site. Having read many critical ethnographies, I was not concerned about being unable to remain objective as an ethnographer. Nevertheless, I was worried about the potential implications of my presence, constructed as an exemplar for educational success, upon the rural students if I did not practice continuous and meticulous reflexivity.

My discomfort did not end there. I kept asking myself, "Why did I use so many encouraging words with the students? Why did I find these meritocratic discourses problematic as a researcher but could not resist them in my daily interactions with the participant?" I knew I should be more cautious about my language and the meaning I conveyed, but what should I say

to the students when I aimed to motivate them? These questions brought me many uncomfortable feelings. Huijsmans et al. (2021) remind us that researching aspirations with young people should take methodological challenges seriously because researchers are likely to run the risk of reproducing normative narratives on aspirations. Taking this risk into account is particularly important in the school context given that schools usually serve as key institutions that propagate such dominant discourses. They point out, "[T]here is a danger that research conducted in schools ends up reproducing the dominant norm, a problem that is further aggravated by the fact that researchers themselves often embody this norm" (p. 8). In the process of becoming critical ethnographers, we need to think deeper about how we, as researchers, often navigate "working within/against dominant" at the same time and understand our process of "tracing complicity" in doing research (Lather, 2007, p. 14).

To address this discomfort and risk, I critically examined what I spoke in the field and what I thought when I returned from the field to write about the students' stories. I discovered with restlessness that it was difficult to reject inspirational words in a rural educational setting where educational failure was prevalent and working hard appeared to be the only solution available to rural students. In the field, like many teachers at Watershed, my talking inadvertently reinforced a meritocratic belief. In other words, I sold meritocracy to the students, even though I did not intend to do so.

Later, I understood that this discomfort came from my desire to give back. Whether I accepted the task of giving a talk to the students or using some words to cheer up the students, I intended to give back to the research site and my participants. I wanted to bring something positive to them. Before I started the ethnographic research, I reminded myself to do non-

extractive research. Ethnographers usually go to the field to collect data, interact with their participants, and then leave to write *about* them. I reminded myself that ethnography is not only a research method but also a pedagogy that "can be a tool of self-knowledge for the marginalized, and by enabling them to better understand and articulate their conditions, it can contribute to popular struggles for liberation" (Alonso Bejarano et al., 2019, p. 9).

Growing up in rural China, I benefited from this meritocratic belief before I went to college. Then, I used meritocratic speeches to motivate the participants without critical reflections. While in my analysis and writing, I critiqued meritocracy. I believed meritocracy would bring "cruel optimism" to many rural Chinese youth. "Cruel optimism" is a term Berlant (2011) uses to describe the situation that "something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (p. 1), especially in neoliberal societies. During fieldwork, I left an impression on these students that everything is possible. Like many other teachers at Watershed, I would encourage the students to believe that their future will indeed be bright. In my writing, I would represent the students as individuals living in a precarious era filled with uncertainty. I understood that these contradictions must be addressed, especially in the process of doing representation. It was through constant self-criticism and self-reflection while working in the field that I learned we do not need to shout "*jia you*" to encourage students. As researchers and educators, we have more important work to do than simply offering words of encouragement.

Analysis, Writing, and Challenges

My dissertation writing progress has been slow due to both personal and academic challenges. Completing this dissertation has been more difficult than I initially anticipated, particularly since the fieldwork and writing took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. I

experienced significant personal challenges during the pandemic period of immobility and encountered difficulties in telling the stories of a group of non-Western students because many of the concepts and thinking tools I previously trained in were Western-centric. These personal and academic challenges have greatly influenced the final analysis and writing of the work.

Writing Mobility in Times of Immobility

I wrote this dissertation on social mobility when I was personally experiencing a sense of being stuck and immobile during the COVID-19 pandemic. After completing the fieldwork that I had originally planned, I was unable to return to the United States due to the travel restrictions imposed by the Trump Administration on Chinese arrivals. As a result, I stayed in my home village to continue my follow-up fieldwork and interviews with my participants. My writing of this dissertation on social mobility started from this background marked by immobility.

Throughout the writing process, the immobility I experienced was not only spatial but also social. For over a decade since I started college, I have rarely lived in my hometown for more than a month at a time, visiting only once or twice a year for brief stays. However, this unexpected extended stay in the village posed significant challenges to my personal life. I found it challenging to follow the preconceived trajectory for my life, which included completing a Ph.D. degree and securing a faculty position at a university. This led to a state of limbo that I had not anticipated, causing me to be seen as an oddity by people in my home village. It was considered unusual for a young, single man in his thirties to remain in the village for an extended period of time, particularly if he did not have a stable job or engage in farm work. I felt that my previously smooth path to upward mobility had been abruptly interrupted. I had to wait for my life to return to normal and for myself to get back on track.

But waiting is not always negative. Being stuck in a period of waiting has given me a more personal and enriched perspective on the promise of social mobility embedded in education. I began to focus not only on the spatial aspects of rural youth experiences but also included temporal considerations in my analysis of the relationship between rural youth and social mobility. This was also when I became aware of some analytical tools that differed from the previous research on the schooling experiences of rural Chinese students. These included Honwana's (2012, 2014) waithood, Berlant's (2011) cruel optimism, and Xiang's (2021b) concept of "nearby" and his observation of the common phenomenon of "accepting fate without giving up" in Chinese society (B. Xiang & Wu, 2023).

I am presenting the personal challenges I have encountered in writing because these experiences have consistently shaped my theoretical reflections and analyses of the aspirations for social mobility among my participants. To distance myself from the analysis could give readers the false impression that the analytical tools adopted in the dissertation were carefully planned in advance. Instead, my analysis and writing were products of various contextual factors and somewhat accidental. In Lather's (2007) terms, my final representation of the research could be understood as a result of "getting lost." Lather (2007) claims that "a stance of 'getting lost' might both produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently" (p. 13). If I had not been stuck in a state of waiting, I might not have encountered the concepts of waiting and waithood. Similarly, if I had not experienced the cruelty of hoping for upward mobility myself, I might not have been able to as easily understand both the cruel and healing aspects embedded in the optimistic culture of my participants. I connect my personal situation to the analytical process in order to deconstruct the notion that the ethnographer's interpretation is definitive or

authoritative.

Thinking Through the Nearby

In addition to the personal challenges mentioned above, academic challenges also affected the slow process of analysis and writing. The first academic challenge came from the use of analytical tools. In my previous draft, I used terms such as neoliberal subjects and the "enterprising self" (Rose, 1996, p. 151) to analyze the construction of identities and subjectivities among my participants, who emphasized self-responsibility and individual effort in pursuing social mobility. An emphasis on individual responsibility and effort is often interpreted as neoliberal in Western contexts (Watts, 2022). I intended to situate my writing within this body of literature that is familiar to many English-speaking readers, seeking a more acceptable way, as what I first thought, to engage in dialogue with existing scholarship.

For researchers from non-Western, non-Northern contexts, it requires confidence to distance themselves from mainstream theories and concepts when narrating stories of the Global South (Swartz, 2022). In his interactions with youths from the Global South during his fieldwork in South Asia and teaching at a world-class university in England, Biao Xiang (2021b) found that these young people tended to fall into the contradiction between a desire for decolonization in knowledge production and an over-reliance on Western academic discourses. Xiang (2021b) writes,

> They are well versed with global affairs and committed to the 'decolonialization' of knowledge, but have difficulties in describing their parents, neighbours and childhood friends in detail. How can we decolonize knowledge if young people from the global South are unable to give accounts about their own life free from western jargon and

normative statements? (p. 149)

Xiang (2021b), therefore, emphasizes that turning to the nearby is a meaningful way of making sense of the world. What I learned from Xiang's claim is the importance of generating interpretations from concrete, lived local realities, rather than applying abstract concepts, often Western jargon, to explain stories that emerged from fieldwork. It was this uncomfortable reflexivity on theoretical and conceptual tools that made me pay closer attention to the local context, including my own situation and the day-to-day experiences of the participants.

By engaging in critical reflexivity and mobilizing the nearby as a scope of seeing (B. Xiang, 2021b) in my interpretations, I drew on Kumashiro's (2002) strategies of reading and rereading identity and oppression as specific methods of analysis. Kumashiro reflects on how different ways of reading can lead to different interpretations of multiple oppressions in stories and the everyday lives of queer activists. He offers his traditional readings and reflexive readings of these stories to show how he can look beyond his own analyses, theoretical frameworks, and assumptions. These reflective readings invite researchers and educators to trouble the notion of a single culture, examine the researcher's own desire for normalcy, and confront one's desire, resistance, and discomfort. I view Kumashiro's reading and rereading practices as reminders to constantly reflect on my "comfortable" reading practices and do my own "homework" (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 151) by bringing different theoretical perspectives and different selves together. Through multiple rounds of rereading, I hope that my ethnographic writing and interpretation can more accurately and responsibly represent the complexities and contradictions in the experiences of rural Chinese students.

The second academic challenge was about the representation in ethnographic writing. In

my portrayal of rural Chinese youth, I have been inspired by Lensmire's (2017) two commitments that he made in writing about the people from a rural farming community where he grew up in *White Folks*. The first commitment is about the connections that the author makes to the people who participated in the research. Lensmire attempts not to separate himself from the participants or indicate that he, as the author, is superior to the white participants in his writing. I am aware that my background—having been born in a rural village, gained the opportunity to leave through education, and returned to work as a researcher with rural students—may lead to the perception of superiority over my research participants. While I recognize this risk at times, there are occasions when I may not be aware of it. For instance, during fieldwork, I had to confront my own biases and engage in uncomfortable reflexivity to acknowledge the problems by using the phrase "*jia you*" to encourage students, as I described earlier.

Some existing studies reflect a problem of separation between the authors and the research participants in their representation of rural Chinese students, who are often described as problematic. This risk of superiority may also manifest in my writing, particularly in how I describe students who did not work hard and how I perceive their optimism in achieving upward mobility despite limited opportunities. Previously, I had agreed with some literature that rural Chinese students' optimism was a misunderstanding or a false consciousness stemming from their limited understanding of structural obstacles. However, I gradually realized that such an understanding resulted from separating myself from the participants and was rooted in my own sense of superiority as a researcher who possessed specific critical theories. As I engaged with this group of students, I recognized that I, too, was once an optimist like them. I found this previous view oversimplified and unfair to them, as it reduced their optimism to a mere fantasy.

The second commitment outlined by Lensmire (2017) in his work is "to represent the complexities and conflicts" inherent in white people's narratives of their racial experiences (p. 93). As discussed in the introduction chapter, the lived experiences of rural Chinese youth are often presented in a simplified manner in media and academic literature, with insufficient attention paid to the complexities and contradictions that rural students face in their daily lives. My writing will focus more on the multidimensional aspects of rural students' complex and diverse negotiations of upward mobility, which have not been fully explored in previous scholarship that has predominantly drawn on theories of cultural capital or resistance.

While analyzing the research materials, I did not follow specific methods of coding or theme selection, as I found them problematic for categorizing data. Drawing from Lather (2007), "I trouble(d) the ethics of reducing the fear, pain, joy, and urgency of people's lives to analytic categories. Exploring the textual possibilities for telling stories that situated researchers not so much as experts 'saying what things mean' in terms of 'data,' the researcher is situated as witness giving testimony to the lives of others" (p. 41). Therefore, I kept my analysis more open, aiming to avoid reducing the stories of rural Chinese students to simplistic representations. The subsequent three chapters present my reading and rereading of the complexities inherent in my participants' schooling experiences.

Chapter 4: Producing a Stratified and Waiting Space

It is school. It is hell. But it is heaven at the same time.
(这是学校，这是地狱，但同时这是天堂！)
A Watershed student, 2019-11-07, my translation

"For good students, it is our responsibility as teachers to help them achieve higher exam scores. However, many students here have lost interest in learning, and we struggle to find effective ways to improve their academic performance. I always advise teachers not to discriminate against this group of students. Instead, we need to show these students more care and love. It's important to make them feel valued and happy in their growth. We don't expect them to excel academically. However, if they feel loved and supported in school, they are still more likely to become kind, productive individuals in the future rather than turning to crime or other negative activities. This is why our school slogan is 'Let every life bloom happily.'" Principal Tong pointed to the wall where the school slogan was displayed.

It was a sunny afternoon in late December 2019, two months after my first meeting with Principal Tong. We walked in circles along the plastic track on the campus of Watershed, discussing what constitutes good rural education. Principal Tong shared his ideas and concerns about improving the quality of education in this rural mountain school. He earned the respect of most teachers and students at the school, having served as the principal at Watershed for six years—much longer than former principals who usually worked there for only one or two years before transferring to urban schools in the county seat. I heard many teachers comment that Principal Tong was dedicated to the education of rural students. They also mentioned that he was the only teacher who could recall the names of all the students in the school. My conversations

with Principal Tong were enjoyable, as he generously shared his experiences working at Watershed, including pointing out the problems at the school and his feelings of helplessness in solving these problems.

According to Principal Tong, the school faced two significant problems: how to send more students to the county's best high school and how to educate students who were not interested in learning. These issues were related to "being a Magpie or a Winter-Cry Bird," which I introduced at the beginning of the dissertation. To address these problems, Principal Tong introduced a teaching practice called "stratified teaching in mobile classes" (*fenceng zouban*, 分层走班) at Watershed. Simply put, this practice involved dividing students into two classes: a higher level and a lower level. The importance of this practice was emphasized by displaying it on the wall of the building on the south side of the campus.

Although Principal Tong acknowledged the adverse effects of this teaching strategy, such as limiting the academic progress of students who were not interested in learning, he still believed that it was the best approach for the school. Stratified teaching created two educational spaces within the same school that served different purposes. One was an academic-oriented space with the best resources to push students toward academic success. The other was a relaxed learning environment in which to develop "kind ordinary persons" (as Principal Tong put it). Consequently, students at Watershed received different types of education through the production of a stratified learning space.

This chapter explores how Watershed School created stratified learning spaces materially and discursively to cultivate different types of students in the teachers' eyes: the Magpie and the Winter-Cry Bird. The production of these stratified educational spaces contributed to shaping

distinct schooling experiences, aspirations, strategies, and life opportunities for rural Chinese students. I first introduce how the desire for educational success was spatialized at Watershed by examining the school's spatial practices. The spatialization of educational desire establishes the context for understanding what was valued at the rural school, which helps explain its seemingly unreasonable teaching practices. Next, I provide a detailed overview of two central teaching practices at Watershed: stratified teaching in mobile classes and labor education. These practices were significant ways in which the school created a stratified and waiting environment that served different educational purposes and had a significant impact on the students' life paths.

Spatializing Educational Desire

The transformative power of education is a deeply ingrained cultural belief in Chinese society that prioritizes education as a significant means of improving one's social and economic status. Anthropologist Andrew Kipnis (2011) describes the aspiration for more education in Chinese society as an "educational desire" and carefully examines how various cultural, historical, and political factors have governed this desire. Despite recent portrayals of rural education in China as low-quality and rural Chinese students being perceived as more likely to be disengaged in learning than their urban peers, the desire for education remains prevalent in rural society. By examining the production of educational spaces at Watershed School, we can quickly determine how educational desire has been spatialized within the rural school.

The school space at Watershed had been carefully designed to promote educational success. Upon entering the school, a large stone could be seen directly behind the school gate, with the school motto inscribed, emphasizing the importance of morality and good habits. Mr. Wu, one of the senior teachers at Watershed, shared that the stone held significant value for the

school for two reasons. First, the appearance of the stone resembled a boat, symbolizing the school's role in leading students on a long voyage to pursue their dreams. The school expected students to be able to travel the vast ocean of knowledge on this symbolic boat. Mr. Wu believed the stone represented a positive aspiration for students to achieve academic success.

Secondly, the stone was placed for safety reasons. The school gate faces directly onto the main road leading to the school, which some local people believe to be unlucky due to *fengshui* (Chinese geomancy, 风水), a traditional practice used in China to design the surrounding environment and ensure harmony carefully. The large stone was placed as a shield to protect the school and its students from bad luck, including lousy luck during exams. Mr. Wu explained that misfortunes could flood the school unimpeded without the stone. Additionally, two stone lions were placed on the roof of the elementary school building to protect the safety of the students and the school. In socialist China, such beliefs are generally considered superstitious and are not encouraged, especially in schools, as they contradict the goal of promoting scientific knowledge.

Similar superstitious beliefs were common at Watershed School, all held to promote educational success. For example, in front of the middle school teaching building stood three tall fir trees, approximately five stories high and perfectly straight, side by side. They were also viewed as a symbol of blessing because they resembled three incense sticks. In China, incense sticks are typically used in temples to pray for good luck, and people usually use three. The teachers did not mention whether this cultural symbol was deliberately considered when planting the three trees, but it is interpreted as such today. I heard a story from a Chinese teacher, Mr. Yang, that once a new principal planned to cut down the trees because their shadows significantly blocked the sunlight in the student and teacher dormitories located behind the trees.

However, many teachers opposed the principal's plan. Mr. Yang told me, "These trees quietly bless the school so students can learn well. How can we cut them down?"

The use of the stone lions and the interpretations of the big stone and fir trees could be criticized as superstitious beliefs in China, especially in schools where their primary goal is to popularize scientific knowledge. While in local practices, the school administrators and teachers at Watershed purposefully created the school space by adding these non-scientific meanings to express good wishes for the success of education. Watershed was one of many schools that incorporated awareness of *fengshui* into constructing a school space. Educational desire was spatialized through these cultural practices in producing a rural learning space.

In China's urbanization context, rural education faces significant survival challenges because of the decreasing rural population and the concentration of educational resources in urban areas. As a result, rural schools cannot compete with urban schools and are often labeled as "failing schools." At Watershed, teachers sometimes described their school as failing and on the verge of disappearing. Rural schools, such as Watershed School, pin their hopes on improving educational outcomes to gain even a tiny chance of survival. They spatialize their educational desires by deliberately designing the school spaces and sometimes resorting to superstitious thinking.

I heard repeatedly from teachers at Watershed that the ninth-grade students of the 2019-2020 academic year, the students who participated in this research, were expected to take responsibility for creating "the final glory" for the school. The teachers anticipated that this year's graduates would be the turning point for the school, both in terms of the number of students and their academic achievements. They believed that after this year's ninth graders, the

number of students would significantly decline, and students' academic performance would deteriorate before the school finally closed. The teachers often compared the ninth graders with the eighth graders, whom their teachers perceived as having poor academic performance. Their teachers were worried that almost half of the eighth graders would be unable to pass *Zhongkao* and, therefore, would be unable to attend vocational high school. This urgency to create the final glory legitimized the stratified educational practices at the school, even though the principal and teachers were aware of the problems.

The "Good" and "Bad" Classes

Stratification Within the School

In addition to the hierarchical education system in urban and rural areas, like many schools in China (Chung, 2012; Howlett, 2023; X. Xiang, 2020), Watershed School itself was stratified. It adopted a model called *fenceng zouban*, which could be translated as "stratified teaching in mobile classes." Usually, Chinese middle school students are assigned to a fixed classroom, where teachers come to teach specific subjects. Students do not need to move from one classroom to another for different classes. At Watershed, however, although middle school students had their assigned classes, this teaching model allowed them to choose different classrooms to learn each subject. According to the ideal design of this model, the school would offer two levels of classes of the same subject for students with different learning abilities. Students with better academic performance could choose higher-level courses. For example, some students of Class A might choose Mr. Yang's Chinese language classes, which taught more advanced levels of knowledge, and some might choose Ms. Yu's classes, which focused more on basic knowledge. The idea of this model was to provide students with a learning environment

that was most suitable for them.

In practice, however, the model of *fenceng zouban* could have been used better than it was described. Even worse, it justified educational inequalities within the school. Teachers divided middle school students into two categories: those with good grades and those with bad grades. Those with good grades were placed in Class A (a "good" class, in the words of teachers and students), while those with poor grades were placed in Class B (a "bad" class). Only some students ranked in the middle could choose the class they would like to join.[7] Both Class A and Class B were fixed classes. Students in Class B could not take classes with students from the other class. This model started for ninth-grade students in their eighth grade. After some important exams, such as midterm and final exams, students at the bottom of the ranking in Class A would be transferred to the other class because of their poor grades.

Meanwhile, a few top students in Class B would be allowed to move to Class A. The school purposefully made the stratified teaching model a little flexible to motivate students to work harder. This was because transferring from the "bad" class to the "good" class would be considered an honor, while switching in the other direction would be a shame for many students.

The county's Department of Education prohibited dividing students into stratified classes based on academic performance. Schools were required to randomly assign students to classes, meaning that creating "good" and "bad" classes within a school was not allowed at the policy level. Despite this policy, many schools in Shen County still found ways to maintain a stratified teaching system. I learned about this from Ms. Zheng, an English teacher from one of the two

[7] This seemingly free choice among the students ranked in the middle was unidirectional. Only those few students who were ranked at the bottom of the "good" class could choose to study in the "bad" class. Students who were placed in the "bad" class were not eligible for choosing the "good" class.

prestigious middle schools in the county seat, who worked as a volunteer teacher at Watershed during the year I conducted my fieldwork. She explained how parents in her school selected better classes for their children. Due to stricter supervision from the Department of Education, middle schools in the county seat were unable to classify classes as good or bad openly. Instead, they had to do it more covertly.

On the surface, the school where Ms. Zheng worked did not concentrate on students with good grades in only a few classes, unlike what Watershed School did—instead, the students were placed into different classes randomly. However, the way the school arranged teachers was unfair, resulting in some classes having better-qualified teachers. Ms. Zheng mentioned that the night before the new academic year, school administrators and headteachers had to stay up all night before students' class information was eventually released. This was because they were busy answering parents' questions and changing students' classes based on some parents' requests. Parents with good social connections could obtain more information about each class and were more likely to contact school leaders to have their children placed in better classes.

Compared to the schools in the county seat, the strategy used at Watershed was more direct. Watershed created the "*fenceng zouban*" model to conceal its true purpose of distributing better resources to more promising students who had the opportunity to attend County High, the best high school in the county. Although the strategies adopted at Watershed and other middle schools took different forms, they shared the same purpose—to help schools send more students to County High, as the number of students admitted there was commonly used to evaluate the quality of education in a middle school.

Consequently, students' educational experiences at stratified Watershed varied. The

following description of a morning at Watershed illustrates how ninth graders utilized the school space differently as a result of the stratification.

Learning Under Stratification

On a Thursday morning in December 2019, the bell rang at 6:15 a.m. as usual at Watershed. The bell was used to wake students up. Around 30 students lived on campus from Monday to Friday because their families were not close to the school. These students were called boarding students. At Watershed, only middle school students (from seventh to ninth grade) were allowed to live in school due to a shortage of dormitories. Getting up early on cold December mornings was a challenge for most students. Therefore, Mr. Liu, a teacher in charge of the dormitories and canteen, had to wake the students repeatedly with his loud voice every morning.

The bell rang again at 6:30 when all middle school students were supposed to start their morning reading class (*zaodu ke*, 早读课). This class was where students sat in classrooms to read Chinese and English textbooks loudly. Students were usually expected to use this time to memorize the knowledge needed for passing exams, such as English words, phrases, and Chinese poems. Like the teachers supervising the morning reading class, I walked out of my dormitory when I heard the bell. On the way to the teaching building, I ran into several students running to the classrooms quickly after being late. This was how I usually started my days at Watershed.

I came to the teaching building of the middle school classes and went up the stairs to the second floor. Then I turned left, passing the teacher's office, and arrived at the ninth-grade classroom of Class A. All the students had arrived. There were no absent students. Most students are engrossed in their textbooks, reading either softly or aloud with their heads bent down. Despite the dreary winter mornings, the crisp reading sound instantly recharged their energy. A

teacher was standing at the front of the room, looking around to make sure that the students were engaged in reading their textbooks.

Turning right at the stairs, I reached Class B, ninth grade, where I always saw a different scene. The classroom was quiet. Half of the seats were occupied. Only 12 students were in the classroom, where there should be 25 students. Some students in Class B were unwilling to come to school so early, so they asked for leave for the morning reading classes for the entire semester. Some were late, walking to the teaching building at a leisurely pace. The 12 students who had arrived at the classroom were not reading. Two students were sleeping, and a few were staring at the blackboard in front of the classroom. Some students put their hands in their pockets and shook their bodies to avoid the cold. I greeted students and encouraged them to open books to read, but this effort did not usually work. Feeling a little embarrassed, I walked out of the classroom to the hallway.

Mr. Wu walked to me when he saw me standing in the hallway. He was one of the core administrators of the school. It was his turn to inspect the school this morning. “Why there is no sound in this class?” He paused at the front door and glanced into the classroom. He did not criticize the students for not reading. It seemed that he was used to this situation. What he criticized was that there was no teacher in the room. The school stipulated that a teacher should supervise students in the morning reading class. Mr. Wu complained to me that the teachers of Class B had given up their students. In his 60s, Mr. Wu was one of the senior teachers at Watershed. He was not satisfied that the school only paid attention to “good students” in Class A. Leaning on the railing of the corridor, he shared with me the stories of his two sons who had bad academic performances at first but finally graduated from colleges and graduate schools after

careful teaching. He continued to share,

> There are no students who cannot learn, only teachers who cannot teach. If students in Class B do not like to study, teachers must change how and what they teach to create something truly useful and appropriate for the students. This is the only way students can improve and change their attitudes toward learning. Teachers can't just give them up.

After talking to me for a while, Mr. Wu walked into the classroom of Class B, trying to encourage the students to read. "You guys should open your books and learn whatever you can learn. You have already sat here, so learn something. Don't just sit and wait for the bell to end the class." His words did not work either. The students looked at Mr. Wu, not intending to follow his suggestion. Realizing that he could not motivate the students to open the textbooks, Mr. Wu walked to the front of the classroom, picked up a piece of chalk, and began to write on the blackboard. Like the students, I was curious about what he would do. Mr. Wu started to talk, "Well, since you're not learning anything and wasting time, let me teach you something useful. You'll borrow money from others or lend money to others in the future. In this case, you have to write a document. Do you know what type of document you should write?" Mr. Wu asked. "*Jietiao* (receipt for a loan, IOU, 借条)," a girl replied quickly. Mr. Wu seemed to be surprised to hear the correct answer. He proceeded to instruct the students on the proper procedures for drafting documents when they borrow or lend money. The students were interested in this "special class," listening carefully and interacting actively with the teacher.

The stories that unfolded that morning provided us with a microcosm of the students' daily schooling experiences at Watershed and their teachers' expectations. These stories shed light on the varying levels of participation in learning activities by students in different classes,

the differential treatment of students by teachers in these classes, and the differences in teaching content and methods. Except for a particular lesson taught by Mr. Wu, the situations I described above were typical at Watershed. In Class A, students obeyed school rules and worked hard with the support of responsible teachers. In contrast, students in Class B appeared to have shifted their focus away from academic learning and were not actively engaged in preparing for the upcoming streaming exam, seemingly just waiting for graduation.

Unfortunately, many teachers were not interested in providing academic-related help to assist these less engaged students in their learning; instead, they placed them in a designated learning space to avoid distracting other academic-oriented students. Mr. Weng was the headteacher of Class A and also taught natural science for both of the classes in the ninth grade. He honestly told me that teaching in Class B was a rest for him. He did not need to prepare lessons or check homework for these students. Few students would listen to him in class. They finished the homework by copying other students. Mr. Weng did not see the meaning of devoting time to preparing the courses for these students. Being the headteacher of Class A, in order to avoid interruptions from "bad" students, he did not even allow students in Class B to visit the Class A classroom. Nor did he allow students in class A to visit the other class.

At Watershed, like other middle schools in China, six courses were perceived as core subjects, including Chinese language, mathematics, English language, natural sciences, social sciences, and PE class. They earned the core status because students needed to take exams in these subjects before graduating from middle school. The scores of these subjects are then added up in *Zhongkao*, which is used in high school admissions to determine whether a student can enter an academic high school, a vocational school, or none at all. Other courses that are not

required to be tested in *Zhongkao* are music, arts, and information technology courses. Therefore, the school did not provide these non-core courses to students in Class A to focus more on the six core courses. The non-core courses were only offered to students in Class B, the so-called "bad" class.

However, the students in Class B did not learn any relevant knowledge in these non-core courses. According to the principal, the school used these fun classes to make the students feel that schooling is still enjoyable. Teachers who taught these courses did not need to prepare their lessons. For example, the art teacher only asked students to watch movies or television shows in class. He even did not show up sometimes. These movies and shows were usually selected by students themselves, with little educational value. The music teacher usually asked students to listen to pop music for the entire class. The information technology course was the favorite among students. Boys preferred to play computer games, and girls often used this class to read novels or chat with people online.

The students in Class B were not only not provided with the opportunity to learn relevant knowledge in the non-core courses but also the core subjects. In some Chinese language classes, their teacher allowed the students to spend the whole class watching TV dramas. Sometimes, these dramas were selected by the students themselves, and sometimes, they were chosen by the teacher for educational purposes. For example, the teacher asked students to watch the TV dramas adopted from China's Four Great Classical Novels. These four novels were included in the must-read after-school reading list and would be tested in *Zhongkao*. The students in Class B were not asked to learn the classical texts because the teacher believed that they were not interested in the novels or could not understand the texts. The teacher used an easier way to let

the students get familiar with the novels by watching the dramas, through which the students could only know the stories rather than the art of the Chinese language.

Working-class students with different school performances and attitudes toward education were described as "lads" and "ear'oles" in the 1970s Britain in Willis's (1977) ethnography. At Watershed School in rural China, more localized labels can be "Magpies" and "Winter-Cry Bird" to distinguish the differences. Although the teachers did not use the labels of Magpie and Winter-Cry Bird to describe their students, nor did the students use them to describe themselves, similar discourses were widely spread. In a meritocratic institutional setting, the school and teachers would always reward diligent students and use various negative words to describe other students, such as lazy, passive, and fatalistic ("*zuo chi deng si* 坐吃等死" in Chinese, which can be roughly translated to "sitting, eating, and waiting for death").

However, as we can learn from the stories of rural students at Watershed, being a Magpie or a Winter-Cry Bird was not merely an individual pursuit but a reflection, if not a result, of how the school was structured and designed. The school intentionally created an environment that fostered the development of different types of students. This reminds us of the importance of paying attention to the *doing* of space in a school setting (W. Wang, 2023; M. Zhang, 2022). In other words, the school had a significant role in shaping the students' identities beyond just providing an academic education. The school's emphasis on producing a specific learning space for the Magpie and the Winter-Cry Bird highlights the critical role that the spatiality of education played in shaping rural Chinese students' schooling experiences.

The Dilemma of a Poor Teaching Practice

The *fenceng zouban* model, which involved sorting students based on their academic

performance and placing them into different classes, raised concerns among many teachers at Watershed. They recognized the inherent disadvantages of this system, especially for students placed in lower-ranked classes. Many teachers observed that some students previously interested in learning began to lose motivation after being assigned to Class B, also known as the "bad" class. The teachers also noted that the students in Class B were often given up academically, perpetuating a cycle of underachievement and inequality in the classroom. Therefore, this model failed to cater to the individual needs of each student and hindered their academic progress.

This stratified education model had adverse effects on students but also on the professional development of teachers. The "bad" classes were often assigned to relatively inexperienced or older teachers, while the most qualified teachers were given priority for the "good" classes. The focus of teaching in the "bad" classes was not on promoting academic progress but on maintaining discipline, leading to a lack of interest in teaching and a reluctance to design effective courses. Consequently, teachers in these classes were less likely to gain good teaching experiences and obtain professional development. As a result, the model failed to provide adequate support and resources for teachers to help their students achieve the best possible outcomes.

While school administrators at Watershed knew that the stratified education model negatively impacted certain students and teachers, they believed it was the most effective method for the school. This was primarily because the teachers' work at Watershed was centered around helping students gain admission to County High. In recent years, only three to four students were admitted to this high school, and the number of students who were admitted to County High was the primary measure of success for the ninth-grade teachers. However, this singular focus on

admission to County High led to neglect of other vital aspects of education, such as providing all students with a comprehensive and equitable learning experience.

In the academic year 2020-2021, following the graduation of my participants from Watershed, the Department of Education in Shen County imposed a new requirement on schools. The focus of the new policy was to provide more attention to students who ranked within the bottom 30% of the county. These students were commonly referred to as the bottom 30% of students. The County Department of Education deemed this necessary to improve the educational quality and raise the county's rank among other counties in the city. Shen County received criticism from the Municipal Education Bureau for ranking last in the 2019-2020 *Zhongkao*. This prompted the Municipal Education Bureau to strongly encourage Shen County to vigorously promote educational quality improvement in the new academic year.

The new requirement meant that schools would be assessed based on the reduction in the number of bottom 30% students in the new academic year. To comply with the Department of Education's assessment, Watershed had to rethink its teaching practices. However, some teachers believed that this new requirement was impractical at Watershed. During an informal conversation with Mr. Yang and Mr. Gu, they shared their dilemma in meeting the assessment's new criteria.

> Mr. Yang: The problem is that our county has only one good academic high school. Why do we all focus on the top students? This is because if we don't try our best to teach these top students, they won't be admitted to County High. Now, the Department of Education is asking us to focus on the bottom 30%. It's correct from their perspective because last year we did not do a good job reducing the number of students in the bottom 30%. But

when it comes to our school, we definitely still have to focus on the top students.

Mr. Gu: I just spoke with Mr. Weng yesterday. Our school has only two options. The most important one is for our school to survive. To survive, we must have students admitted to County High. If no students from our school can get into County High this year, the school will collapse soon. No good students will come to study here. The second option is to work on the assessment, reducing the number of students in the bottom 30%. But this comes second.

Mr. Yang: Someone said that top students do not need too much teaching from teachers. These students can learn by themselves. But the top students at our school are not like that. They are actually taught by our teachers. Compared to students in the county seat, our top students are not actually top; they are just average students.

For Watershed, survival means sending more students to County High. Rural-urban migration in China has resulted in an increasing number of rural residents working outside their home villages. Consequently, there had been a decline in the number of students attending Watershed each year. Furthermore, some top-performing students opt to enroll in other middle schools after graduating from Watershed's elementary school. The school administrators realized the importance of ensuring teaching quality to retain good students. As a result, they saw the necessity of concentrating better on teachers and students in only a few classes to avoid distractions caused by disengaged students. This strategy proved helpful in retaining promising students, but it also meant that the needs of students in Class B could not be the school's primary focus.

Striving Versus Waiting: The Consequences

Waiting has become a constant and pervasive condition for many contemporary rural Chinese youth, who are growing up in an era of mass migration and a cultural emphasis on social mobility. As a not-urban-yet, they wait to move out of their rural villages and relocate to cities. As a not-middle-and-upper-class-yet, they wait to successfully climb the social ladder and become "a person above persons." There seem to be only two major strategies that they can adopt to deal with their aspirations for moving out and moving up: striving and waiting. They can either work hard, like the Magpie, to strive for their aspirations to come true. Alternatively, they may wait and do nothing, like the Winter-Cry Bird, to achieve their aims. In a meritocratic institution like a school, the former strategy is always encouraged, while the latter is discouraged.

Waiting, usually understood as a passive strategy, is not encouraged for "palatable" citizens, especially for young people (Kara & Mullings, 2023). Teachers at Watershed, for example, constantly urged their students not to wait, although their urges were often verbal without actual help. Students were expected to fully mobilize their bodies and energy to strive for their current goals. The differentiation of the "good" and "bad" classes represented the teachers' discouragement of waiting. Since teachers could not mobilize all students, they would concentrate their energy on mobilizing some willing to strive. For other students in Class B, it did not matter whether they worked or not. They were perceived to be unable to be awake in terms of academic learning and to be put in another learning space that could avoid their negative influence on the students in Class A.

The waiting conditions, consequently, were experienced differently by students at

Watershed. In other words, even though middle school students were in a similar period of waiting, the things they were waiting for and the ways they experienced waiting were different. For students in the "good" class who believed their journey of upward mobility would rely on education, they were waiting to achieve good scores in *Zhongkao* and be admitted to public academic high schools. The central theme in their waiting was related to anxiety: being anxious about whether they were able to learn well and get high exam scores. For other students, the goals they were waiting for seemed to have less clear directions, and their waiting period was characterized by boredom. They had nothing meaningful things to do at school.

The school became a specific space for waiting, or in Kara and Mullings' (2023) terms, it served as a "wait space" for students to explore their current and future imagined lives. Writing in the precarious context of Turkey, where uncertainties prevail in a neoliberal economy, Kara and Mullings (2023) use the term "wait space" to examine how a group of educated young women navigate waiting periods amid job market disappointments. The authors argue that this concept combines the spatial and temporal aspects of waiting strategies employed by individuals who lack power. The powerless, such as the educated young women who face limited satisfactory job opportunities in their studies, use waiting to carve out spaces for themselves. These spaces consist of different material practices that enable participants to save energy, envision new possibilities, or challenge oppressive social systems.

Unlike the wait spaces in Kara and Mullings' (2023) study, which were produced by the educated young women themselves, the wait spaces of my participants were largely a result of the arrangement of a differentiated learning environment. The educators intentionally developed different wait spaces to cultivate (or not cultivate) specific groups of rural students. Therefore,

whether students strive or wait is not solely determined by their personal endeavors. As Bottrell and Pessoa (2019) suggest, the act of waiting and the reasons behind it are closely linked with the issue of belonging. In the case of Watershed, the strategies rural students employed during their navigation of social mobility were intertwined with the ways the school space was produced. The production of a stratified school space largely impacted how these students developed relationships with the school, learning activities, and their aspirations for the future.

Who Was Laboring? Labor as a Hopeful Pedagogy of "Eating Bitterness"

Labor Education

The implementation of labor education, as a complementary strategy to the *fenceng zouban* model, was another attempt by Watershed School to address the issue of boredom and waiting among non-academic students. Students were expected to transform their idle time into meaningful and productive experiences by engaging in labor education. However, while labor education provided a space for students to engage in purposeful activities, it also reinforced the exclusion of non-academic students from learning opportunities, further exacerbating their frustration within the stratified education system. Thus, labor education, while beneficial in some respects, also highlighted the systemic inequalities that existed within the school.

On the first day of my fieldwork at Watershed, Principal Tong introduced me to Mr. Yang, a Chinese language teacher in the ninth grade and the Director of the Academic Affairs Office, and asked him to be my key gatekeeper in this research project. When Mr. Yang and I met at the school gate, he had just returned from the farmland with Mr. Wu, each carrying a hoe on his shoulder. Their shoes and trousers were covered with mud. After putting down the hoe, Mr. Yang enthusiastically introduced an innovative education project at Watershed: The Happy

Farm. The school had rented some farmland from local villagers since 2018 to carry out this project, which provided students with places to plant vegetables such as potatoes, corn, and cowpeas. The Happy Farm became a well-known featured project of the school because it had caught up with the wave of China's promotion of labor education (*laodong jiaoyu*, 劳动教育) across the nation. Watershed was the first school in Shen County to develop a course of labor education and integrate it into agricultural work.

Although labor education is receiving increasing attention in China, it is not a new education practice. Influenced by Marxism, the Chinese government has highly valued the connections between education and labor since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Labor education has served as a form of education for "cultivating the core values of and abilities in labor, as well as improving labor literacy" (Fan & Zou, 2020, p. 171). Although labor education has always existed as supplementary educational content in China's education system, its importance has only been fully emphasized recently. During the past 70 years, school education in China has been required to pay equal attention to the following four domains for achieving an individual's all-around development: morality, intellect, sports, and aesthetics. This changed when President Xi Jinping added labor to the above four domains at the 2018 National Education Conference. As a consequence, the importance of labor education has been greatly enhanced.

The Happy Farm project was introduced to Watershed as a part of the new form of labor education in this context. Mr. Yang and Mr. Wu were the first advocates of the project. Mr. Yang was aware of the limited opportunities that rural students had to achieve academic success. During his past 15 years teaching at Watershed, he had noticed that the school education meant

little to some of his students who were not interested in learning. These students did not see the possibility of becoming upwardly mobile through education due to poor academic performance. Therefore, they shifted their interest away from learning and moved to sleeping in class, playing video games, and participating in other activities unrelated to studying. In this case, the exam-oriented school environment did not prepare the students who did not continue their studies in high school or college for their future lives in society.

Mr. Yang hoped that the Happy Farm project would contribute to bringing meaning to the schooling lives of those students. Adding non-academic curricula relevant to rural students' life experiences was an alternative way, as Mr. Yang believed, to foster the development of non-academic rural students. For these students, unlike their peers in Class A, mastering bookish knowledge was no longer the priority at school (W. Wang, 2023). Instead, teachers (including many students themselves) believed that *social* knowledge and qualities, including social skills, perseverance, and a hardy spirit, were more relevant to these students' future. Therefore, teachers expected that education on the farmland could serve as a platform to cultivate these qualities for rural students, such as hard work and the ability to endure hardships.

Mr. Yang took pride in his work on the Happy Farm project, believing it provided a place for students uninterested in academic learning to enjoy their school lives. At the very least, they would learn to become accustomed to hardships in life and understand the value of hard work. Mr. Yang was one of the teachers who had a close relationship with the township. He began teaching at Watershed immediately after graduating from college and had since devoted himself to working there. Mr. Yang cared about the future of the young students there, as well as the future of the township. He deeply understood that not everyone could achieve upward mobility

through education. According to Mr. Yang's observations, many Watershed graduates had to work manual or service jobs. However, as long as they were willing to work hard, they could still lead fulfilling lives with their own hands. Mr. Yang shared,

> Not everyone can become a Ph.D. like you; not everyone needs to be a scientist, scholar, or doctor. Our society also requires ordinary people to deliver packages and make buns. For most people, learning mathematics, such as geometry and algebra, is unnecessary. The mathematical knowledge they require is knowing how much they must pay when going to grocery stores. What should our schools do to cultivate these ordinary people? It is futile to ask these students, who will finally become ordinary people, to memorize many English words and mathematical formulas. Instead of forcing them to learn from textbooks, it's better to teach them how to communicate with others, explain the importance of hard work, and make them feel cared for and valued. These things are more valuable for them once they enter society than textbook knowledge. If they work diligently in the future and refrain from stealing or robbing, they will be valuable members of society.

In addition to promoting the value of hard work, the labor education program at Watershed had a hidden purpose: to channel the energy of non-academic students toward constructive activities and prevent them from causing trouble. Mr. Yang once candidly mentioned to me the original intention behind designing the Happy Farm project:

> These students [in Class B] have little to do in school all day. We need to find some work for them to consume their energy. Otherwise, they may cause trouble. They do not show any interest in learning. So, having them do farm work would help them find something

engaging and keep them at school.

Mr. Yang's words explain why the labor education program only included students in Class B. Although the Chinese government emphasizes the importance of labor education for all students, it was observed that only students in Class B, which was considered the "bad" class, participated in the Happy Farm project at Watershed. Teachers viewed spending time on farm work for students in Class A as unwise because their main task was to acquire more knowledge from textbooks and then compete with their classmates and students from other schools in the upcoming *Zhongkao*. Students in Class A needed to utilize their brains instead of their hands fully.

Class B students were expected to be more willing to use their hands to make a living. Teachers at Watershed frequently commented that laziness had become a glaring problem among today's rural students. They criticized some rural students for not helping with household chores at home and for being unable to tolerate the hardships of learning in school. Thus, educating these non-academic rural students involved motivating them to overcome their laziness. Following this understanding of rural students' educational needs, the school space at Watershed was designed differently to meet the requirements of the head-hand division. Academic-oriented students were expected to spend more time in the classroom to learn bookish knowledge. In contrast, non-academic students were put in another learning space to prepare them for manual workers.

The head-hand division has a deep cultural root in Chinese society. This distinction between head and hand is a crucial way to understand social hierarchy in the Confucian tradition. Confucian culture emphasizes that society is composed of two groups of people: one is those

who work with their minds (*laoxin zhe*, 劳心者), and the other is those who work with their strength (*laoli zhe*, 劳力者). The two groups of people are viewed as distinguished by social hierarchical positions, with the former being considered more noble than the latter. Thus, the social division of manual labor (*laoli*, 劳力) and mental labor (*laoxin*, 劳心) forms the basis for a rationalized hierarchical society, considering mental workers as rulers and physical workers as the ruled. Mencius, one of the representatives of Confucianism, once said,

> Hence, there is the saying, "Some labour with their minds, and some labour with their strength. Those who labour with their minds govern others; those who labour with their strength are governed by other. Those who are governed by others support them; those who govern others are supported by them." This is a principle universally recognised. (*The Works of Mencius*, Teng Wen Gong, 5:4; Legge's translation, 1861, cited in G. Wang, 2024, p. 186)

At Watershed School, students began to experience the opposition between *laoxin* and *laoli* early on, which appeared to be a rehearsal of the division of labor they would encounter after completing their education. Along with the model of stratified teaching in mobile classes, labor education served as an essential way to create a stratified learning environment at the school. The aim was to cultivate different future citizens: academically knowledgeable professional employees and socially knowledgeable ordinary workers (G. Wang, 2024). The former approach produced an exam-oriented learning space that limited students' schooling experience to memorizing textbooks and preparing for exams. In contrast, the latter approach established a relatively relaxed educational environment that shifted its emphasis away from coursework.

As my discussion of labor education at Watershed may strengthen the notion of the reproduction of social injustice through rural education in China, I believe it is crucial to clarify that transformative change may also be possible, if well-designed, through projects such as the Happy Farm. These projects aim to establish connections between schooling and rural communities, as well as between rural students and their nearby surroundings. In the following section, I present a more detailed description of how Watershed utilized labor education as a teaching approach to educate rural students who had faced academic difficulties, thereby complicating the conventional role of schooling in rural society.

A Labor Education Class

May 20, 2020, was a harvest day for the ninth graders in Class B. The potatoes the students had grown on the school's farmland were finally ripe. In the morning reading class, Mr. Yang came to the classroom and told the students that their job this morning was to dig out potatoes from the farmland and then sell them in the market. They would spend part of the money they earned from the market to have a party in the afternoon. All the students were excited. A few said happily, "We don't need to dictate and recite the text in the English class." "Yay, we can skip classes for good reason." Amid the cheers, Mr. Yang turned around and wrote a line on the blackboard: Our Potatoes Are Harvested.

This class appeared informal, and Mr. Yang did not inform the students in Class B about the lesson plan beforehand. However, Mr. Yang had done some pre-planning for the class. He divided the class into groups to work on five main tasks: digging potatoes, carrying potatoes to the market, selling potatoes in the market, sending some potatoes to nursing homes, and cooking for the party in the afternoon. The potatoes harvested by the students after a semester of labor in

the farmland would be used in three ways: most of the potatoes would be sold in the local market, and a small part of them would be given to the elderly in the local nursing home, and the rest would be cooked for the party in the afternoon. The income from selling potatoes would be given to the students to cover the cost of the celebratory party. Mr. Yang told me before the class, "The main purpose is to let the students experience the joy of harvest and see the real rewards after hard work. Hopefully, they will learn that every effort will be rewarded."

Standing on the podium in the classroom, Mr. Yang introduced the five tasks that the students needed to accomplish and invited them to claim at least one task they would be committed to in today's class. The first part of the class was to divide the students into five groups; each group was responsible for one task. Many students were interested in selling potatoes. Therefore, Mr. Yang invited students to introduce how they would successfully attract local residents and sell potatoes to them to compete for limited team member spots. This part of the classroom activities was an impromptu idea that Mr. Yang had thought up on the spot. He later shared with me that he intended to allow students to practice their spoken language expression abilities. Finally, all students were divided into five groups according to the work they preferred to do.

When the students in Class B participated in this labor education course, their peers in Class A were immersed in a tense atmosphere as they were analyzing the first mock exam for the *Zhongkao*. The mock test had been administered by the county's Department of Education the day before to help students become familiar with the exam format, as the *Zhongkao* would take place in a month. The test scores would be announced and ranked, allowing students to get a rough idea of where they stood among all the students in the county. The students in Class A at

Watershed were busy correcting the wrong answers on the mock exam. They anxiously awaited their rankings to estimate their chances of admission to an academic high school. The students and their teachers were trying to make the most of every minute to improve their scores, as there was only one month left to prepare for the *Zhongkao*.

This anxiety, however, did not permeate students in Class B. The results of the mock exam did not make them anxious. They were glad they did not need to attend classes all day. They followed Mr. Yang to the farm, situated on a small hill south of the school campus and only a few minutes' walk from the school gate. Mr. Wu and two other senior male teachers had already arrived to assist the students. Before the teachers explained the correct way to dig potatoes, some students had already picked up their hoes and started digging. Regardless of whether they joined the small group responsible for digging potatoes, the students were eager to try their hand at it. Most students were unfamiliar with this agricultural work, so the teachers had to explain it again. The students were engaged in the task and quickly became familiar with the work. While some students dug potatoes, others picked them up and placed them into boxes.

When a few boxes were filled with potatoes, some boys carried them to the township market, which was around five minutes away from the farm. The day when the lunar calendar of each month ends with the number 2, 5, or 8 was the market day in Red Mountain Township. On the market days, many non-local small vendors and local villagers would bring goods to sell. Local residents often complained that the market was no longer as bustling as it used to be because of the many villagers going out to work. Now, the market had shrunk to a small square next to the township government office, unlike in the past when the entire central street was filled with vendors and customers. Students at Watershed would be glad when the market day

was on the weekend. They could buy fried chicken and other treats that were not available at local stores.

The students in charge of selling potatoes quickly found a place and neatly arranged boxes of potatoes. Some villagers did not understand why teachers asked students to plant vegetables on the farmland. In their view, students should focus on academic learning in the classroom rather than wasting time working in agriculture. When a few parents saw their children in the market, they blamed them for not studying at school. However, some residents were supportive. Even though they grew potatoes themselves, they bought from the students to show their support. At first, students were shy and uncomfortable talking with other adults. After receiving encouragement from Mr. Yang, they began to embrace their new role and actively talked with other villagers. The students spent around two hours selling most of the potatoes and had some left for the afternoon party.

Figure 3: Students in Class B selling potatoes in the market

Students' different experiences in Class A and B on the same day resulted from the production of a stratified learning space at Watershed. Mr. Yang, the main advocator for the Happy Farm project, designed the labor education course to cultivate alternative capacities for

his students, focusing less on academics. His attempt helped connect “school-world” and “life-world” knowledge (Zipin et al., 2021, p. 153) by reaching out to the nearby. The design principles behind these non-academic courses were multifaced. On the one hand, they aimed to enrich the school experiences for disengaged students and foster a greater sense of belonging among them, serving an educational purpose. On the other hand, they also served to channel the energy of students uninterested in traditional learning, thereby mitigating potential disruptive behavior. While these courses lacked systematic design and their objective were intricate, they offered glimpses into the initial efforts of rural education to forge connections with their nearby.

More Stratified or More Porous?

Labor education is considered a progressive teaching practice in China today because it is believed to help promote the overall development of students. It is also seen as having the potential to alleviate, to some extent, the drawbacks of an education system that only emphasizes exam-oriented learning. By adding labor education to the national curriculum, educators expect to give students opportunities to develop practical skills and gain a better understanding of the real world.

The labor education program at Watershed had a positive impact on the relationship between rural students and their communities. The program emphasized the importance of the connection between earlier generations and the land and provided students with opportunities to work on farmland. For many middle school students, this was a new experience, as their families had moved away from agriculture upon migrating to urban areas. In the age of technology, students spend most of their time indoors, playing online games and using their smartphones. This changed the relationship between rural youth and their communities significantly, making it

difficult for them to connect with each other.

Xiaotong Fei (1992), a renowned sociologist, described rural Chinese society as “a society without strangers” (p. 41). However, during fieldwork in Red Mountain Township, it was challenging to find students’ homes because many local residents did not know where they lived. This suggested that rural students were strangers in their communities to some extent. To locate students’ homes, they suggested using their parents’ names. This further highlights the need for programs like Watershed’s labor education to bring rural students closer to their communities and strengthen their connection to the land.

While participating in the Happy Farm project, students gained exposure to traditional rural lifestyles and contemporary means of earning a livelihood. For instance, during a classroom exercise where potatoes were sold, one student became intrigued by the prospect of becoming a mobile vendor in the future. Given that running a small business, whether it involved being mobile (such as a food truck or street vendor) or not (such as a small breakfast shop), had become a crucial source of income for many rural residents, the student found this line of work appealing. The student also believed that engaging in project activities, mainly through conversing with adults and unfamiliar individuals, was a good opportunity to improve their communication skills and overcome shyness.

The design of the labor education program at Watershed was driven by the rural educators’ concern for the development of the local community. Mr. Yang, the leading designer of the Happy Farm project, aimed to bring about positive changes in both the school and the surrounding area by involving students in farm work. He shared, “Most students with the ability will not live in the rural township when they become adults. The majority of those who will stay

in the township will likely be students who do not perform well academically. However, the township's future holds promise if this group of students can work diligently."

Additionally, teachers shared their life experiences with students while working on the farm, highlighting how they overcame challenges through hard work and persistence. The relationship between teachers and students transformed during farm work, as educators became more than just instructors imparting textbook knowledge; they also mentored students through challenges on their paths toward a fulfilling future.

This form of education in rural China could bring about transformative change, as it allows for greater flexibility and adaptability within the learning environment, making it more "porous and elastic" (Tong & Zhou, 2023, p. 491). In practical terms, this means that the traditional norms of academic learning had been expanded to include other forms of knowledge, such as knowledge of the farmland and society. By encouraging non-academic students to engage with rural lifestyles, the school space could be "repurposed and restructured" (Kara & Mullings, 2023, p. 1048), challenging the problematic separation between school and rural community to a certain degree. The binary between school and rural society is not unique to China but is prevalent globally, as Corbett (2016) argues that it perpetuates the notion that the role of schools is to prepare students for an abstract knowledge-based economy society.

In my previous research at two rural schools in China, I found that the hegemonic spatial norms entrenched in these institutions, prioritizing academic knowledge as the only legitimate form of knowledge, excluded non-academic students, leading to the development of disengagement among them (W. Wang, 2023). Both schools produced an exam-oriented learning environment that only valued bookish knowledge, leaving rural boys who appreciated social

knowledge, such as social skills, undervalued. I observed that teachers at Watershed were aware of this issue in their learning environment and made an effort to create a more flexible school space that catered to the diverse needs of their students. This is why, in my observations, the punishment from teachers at Watershed was less severe than that in the two schools from my previous study.

However, initiatives like the Happy Farm project could only truly fulfill their transformative role when carefully and thoughtfully designed. Unfortunately, at Watershed, the current labor education program primarily created differentiation among students and perpetuated educational inequality by providing unequal learning opportunities. While it cannot be denied that the program had some positive effects on the schooling experiences of certain students, significant improvements were necessary.

The school divided ninth-grade students into two groups: those who worked with their heads and those who worked with their hands. The former was expected to improve their cognitive abilities, while the latter were expected to perform physical labor. This division appeared to have been intentionally designed to cultivate different types of citizens for future employment, with some students preparing for white-collar jobs and others for blue-collar jobs upon graduation.

The Chinese government promotes labor education to lessen the differences between manual and mental labor, providing students with opportunities to engage in physical work at school. Schools are expected to teach students that both types of labor are valuable, as contemporary Chinese society places greater importance on mental labor while devaluing manual labor. However, at Watershed, this difference and labor hierarchy were reinforced by

allowing/requiring only some students to participate in the Happy Farm project. Only those who struggled in academic learning were needed to engage in physical labor, further dividing students for different futures.

The students had mixed feelings about participating in the school's labor education project. Some found the farm work engaging and enjoyable, making their schooling lives more interesting. For those who struggled with academic learning, the project provided a constructive way to spend their time and avoid the dreariness of textbook learning. However, it also allowed students to learn about agriculture work that may not have been available within their family contexts.

However, some students expressed a negative attitude toward the labor education program. Students in Class B viewed their farm work as back-breaking labor or "*kuli*" in Chinese. When the school needed help moving desks and chairs, the ninth graders in Class B always asked for assistance. They often joked that they were the school's "coolies." Some students in Class B complained that they were the only ones asked to do physically demanding tasks. Despite this, they understood that students in Class A were exempt from such labor due to their heavier academic workload. Sunhao, a student who transferred from Class A to Class B in the second semester of his ninth grade, shared,

> They [students in Class A] need to study. It's impossible to ask them to waste time doing this kind of work. Sometimes I'm quite envious of them. They can sit comfortably in the classroom and study. I think it would be better for me if I had studied a little harder so that I wouldn't have to work so hard outside of the classroom like these good students.

Sunhao felt he had no other option but to do the tiresome physical labor, a situation

similar to that of less-educated youth who can only perform unskilled or semi-skilled physical jobs in society. He internalized the head-hand division and convinced himself that the arrangement at the school was reasonable. Unlike the "lads" in Willis's (1977) study, who developed a dismissive attitude toward their academic-oriented working-class peers, Sunhao displayed his envy toward students who could "just sit comfortably in the classroom and study." For students like him in Class B at Watershed, physical labor seemed to be their only path.

The farmland, therefore, became a space where students in Class B coped with boredom and explored the possibilities of their future selves. It served as a "wait space" for these students. This was an underlying motive behind the project, as it provided enjoyable activities to consume the students' energy and keep them at school.

The Consequences: Life After Watershed School

The two days of *Zhongkao* finally came in June 2020. Both students and teachers at Watershed took the exam seriously due to its high stakes. For some students, the previous nine years of study were all for passing the exam and gaining satisfactory scores. The top students at Watershed competed for the five seats at County High. Other students in Class A strived to get admitted to other academic high schools. Students in Class B were waiting to see if they had the chance to attend the local vocational school. My participants knew clearly that their life roads would start to be different after the two days. Most of my participants had known each other since kindergarten or grade 3 at Watershed. They spent the past ten years together and did not notice much difference among them. However, the differences would be more evident upon graduation from Watershed.

Similar to the students, teachers at Watershed took the exam seriously, holding

ceremonies to express their value for it and to wish the students good luck and success. In China, various ceremonies and traditions are associated with important exams, including *Zhongkao* and *Gaokao*. For example, mothers may wear cheongsams during the exam period. Cheongsam is a type of traditional Chinese clothing that became popular in the 1920s, and its Chinese name sounds similar to the phrase "*qi kai de sheng*" (winning the battle flag, 旗开得胜). Similarly, at Watershed, there were also ceremonies that reflected teachers' desire to do everything possible to ensure their students' success on this crucial test.

Three days before the exam, all the teachers who taught the ninth grade went to a famous local temple to light incense and pray for their students. During the exam days, Mr. Weng, the headteacher of Class A, wore a black Nike T-shirt, the back of which read "*man fen*" (perfect scores, 满分) with a Nike's swoosh under it. The swoosh is similar to the mark that a Chinese teacher gives to students when they answer questions correctly. He bought this new T-shirt for that day's exam and hoped it would bring good luck to his students. Mr. Yang brought a *zongzi* (a sticky rice wrap, 粽子) and tied it over the classroom door where students rested before the exam. When students walked out of the classroom, they jumped to hit the *zongzi* with their heads, expressing the wish of "*gaozhong*" (entering their dream schools, 高中).

For the ninth-grade teachers, this year's *Zhongkao* was a success. They believed that they had reached the goal of creating "the final glory" since they had sent the largest number of students to County High. In previous years, usually only three or four students were able to be admitted by County High, while this year, the number increased to five. Even though only five students finally attended the best high school in the county because Watershed School only got five quotes, a total of 11 students scored above the admission score for County High after

benefiting from the 70-point preferential policy for mountain students. The number of students who passed the County High admission score had never been seen in the history of Watershed School in recent decades. A total of 15 were students admitted to academic high schools, including 14 students in public academic high schools and one in a private academic high school.

Contrary to teachers' celebration of this year's *Zhongkao* results, the exam was perceived to be a failure for the majority of students in Class A who failed to attend academic high schools. As I have discussed in this chapter, Watershed students in Class A were assigned better educational resources and, therefore, trained for the academic track. Going to the vocational high school after the entrance exam was considered shameful for these students. However, they had no other choice but to continue receiving vocation-oriented training in China's dual-track educational system. Except for the six students who did not pass the *Zhongkao*, all the remaining fifty-five students who were not admitted to academic high schools were admitted to the vocational school. Of the six students who failed to pass the *Zhongkao*, two found opportunities outside Shen County to attend vocational high school.

Even though students who went to the vocational track entered the same school since there was only one vocational high school in Shen County, they continued to experience a stratified learning environment within the school, similar to the "good" and "bad" classes at Watershed School. There were three different programs for each major at the vocational high school: "3+2" classes, innovative classes, and ordinary classes. The "3+2" program was the school's most competitive and required the highest scores. Students admitted to this program would spend three years in the vocational high school and another two years in vocational colleges without taking the Vocational College Entrance Exam (VCEE). The innovative classes

mainly prepare students for taking the VCEE. The ordinary classes were designed to provide two years of training in vocational skills and another one-year internship in factories, hotels, and kindergartens. Students in this program usually would not take the VCEE and end their school education after high school. Among the fifty-five students from Watershed who entered the vocational high school, 23 were admitted to the "3+2" program, 12 in the innovative program, and 20 in the ordinary program.

Beyond Social Reproduction

This chapter describes how stratified learning spaces were produced at Watershed and the consequences of the stratification within the school. Although education in rural areas is often perceived as a failure in Chinese society, the desire for educational success still prevails among teachers, parents, and students in rural China (Kipnis, 2011; Kong, 2016; Y. Liang, 2022). This educational desire was evident in how the school space was deliberately designed at Watershed. Such desire influenced the ways in which the educational space was materially and discursively produced at the school to create different spaces for different students. For academic-oriented students, the school produced an exam-oriented space to promote academic performance. For less academically engaged students, the school created a more relaxed learning space to cultivate non-academic qualities, or in other words, to educate students to be socially knowledgeable. Both efforts instilled hope in rural students. Creating a stratified educational space contributes to the making of different "aspirational identities" (Frye, 2012, p. 1598).

These discussions complicate our understanding of the role of schools in rural China. In the existing literature on China's rural education, researchers often highlight that schools function as mechanisms of sifting and sorting, ultimately leading to the failure of most rural

students. This process reproduces the marginal positions of rural youth and exacerbates rural-urban inequalities. The stories from Watershed School can be used to support this view. The school used stratified educational practices to prioritize top students' academic success, ignoring the opportunities for other students to receive a quality education, which essentially blocked their access to upward mobility through education. Using stratified teaching in mobile classes and labor education in farmland had accelerated the complete abandonment of studies by students who already experienced learning difficulties.

However, the above stories also showed another more transformative effort of the school, even though this effort in its current form sometimes turned out to be fruitless. In addition to producing a learning environment that meets the need for exam-oriented education, teachers at Watershed had the good intention of making the school space more "porous and elastic" (Tong & Zhou, 2023, p. 491) for academically non-engaged students by integrating rural characters to its official curriculum. They realized that the official curriculum in schooling was disconnected from the prospects of the majority of Watershed students. Some teachers hoped that schooling could give practical meaning to those who fail, rather than simply repeatedly asking students who had lost interest in learning to regain interest in learning. Therefore, they turned to the local rural community and the nearby for solutions, which can potentially promote educational transformation in rural places, even though this attempt with current poor designs did not necessarily lead to meaningful changes. Rural teachers expected academic-unpromising students to be willing to work hard, emphasizing it as a key indicator for future success even with academic failure. The school continued to invest hopes and dreams in rural students and serves as an institute that contributes to "selling a feeling of hope" (Pettit, 2023, p. 20).

In this sense, similar to Paiva's (2021) ethnography in Chile, I found that Watershed School "bring[s] together two competing forces attached to educational efforts: namely, the search for social justice and the power of social reproduction" (p. 54). It is too simplistic to consider rural schools only as institutions of social reproduction while ignoring the efforts made by some teachers. Although immature, these transformative efforts of turning to the nearby will bring new possibilities into the reform and development of rural schools.

The navigation and negotiation of social mobility by Watershed students and their waiting for a bright future unfolded in this educational background. The production of a stratified educational space significantly shaped the schooling experiences of these rural students and their vision of the future. The production of the school space resulted from the disparity of rural students' learning outcomes, which is one of the factors contributing to the disparity. This understanding helps to explain why some students could develop into diligent individuals like the Magpie, while others might exhibit characteristics similar to the Winter-Cry Bird. The following chapters will look in more detail at these two types of students to further explore how they developed similar and different strategies to navigate and negotiate the imperative of social mobility in a stratified Chinese society.

Chapter 5: Striving

> *[W]e live an ethic of hope, and that becomes an ethic of deferring joy which fits in very much with the idea of saving and deferring gratification…(whereas) enjoyment being subjected to the logic of capitalism—you suffer now in the hope you might enjoy later without this enjoyment really ever arriving.*
>
> Hage, 2003, see: Cuervo, 2016, p. 168
>
> *In having hope we become anxious, because hope involves wanting something that might or might not happen.*
>
> Ahmed, 2010, p. 183
>
> *There used to be two people, one worked very hard and the other was idle. Later, the one who worked hard had already achieved his goal, while the other regretted it deeply.*
>
> A Watershed Student, 2019/11/28, my translation

In the previous chapter, I have outlined a stratified and waiting educational system created for students at Watershed. The following two chapters shift the focus from students' external educational environment to their personal feelings, aspirations, and life stories. Both chapters center on addressing these two research questions: 1) How do rural students link their personal lives to the broader structures of educational, class, and spatial inequality? and 2) How do rural youth navigate and negotiate the complexities of stratification and social mobility in and outside school? What identities, subjectivities, and youth culture develop?

The following two chapters zoom in on two key practices that the students at Watershed employed to negotiate and navigate the tensions between social mobility and stratification: striving and waiting. For students who were able to experience academic success at school and imagine changing their life destine through education, their primary strategy was striving, like the Magpie we described in the fable at the beginning of the dissertation. While students who developed a different relationship with education, those who did not see a close connection between their current schooling and future lives were awaiting alternatives while simultaneously

maintaining hope for a promising future. These students, like the Winter-Cry Birds, were often criticized and sometimes self-criticized as being irresponsible for themselves. Nevertheless, through the following stories we learn from Watershed, we will develop a different and more complex understanding of this seemingly negative and passive practice of waiting.

These two chapters will illuminate the discursive and embodied experiences of rural Chinese students during their journeys toward imagined social mobility (through or not through education) and address the challenges created by various social differentiations. These experiences will help us understand the importance of dogged optimism in these rural young people's lives. Both groups of students—the ones who strived like the Magpies and those who stayed await like the Winter-Cry Birds—had developed dogged optimism to respond to the complicated tensions between the imperative of mobility and the pushback stemmed from multiple ways of stratification.

I begin by exploring Watershed students' comprehension of the role of education in their social mobility project. Their perceptions of the universal significance of education and their recognition of the more personalized impact of education on themselves were key factors influencing their adoption of striving or waiting strategies in school. The students generally accepted the notion that education serves as the easiest path to upward mobility, whether they were academically ambitious or not. Considering varied academic performances, however, these students developed different relations with schooling. Some were confident in accessing benefits from education and, therefore, saw the meaning of striving at school. While some students could only dare to expect a minimal benefit from schooling, such as getting a high school diploma to obtain the most basic ticket to further employment. Some students knew that the school was not

the right battleground in their upward mobility journeys, having already deemed it a failure and seeking alternatives.

The remaining sections in Chapter 5 focus on the practice of striving. Based on their belief in the value of education, some academic-oriented students adopted striving as a primary strategy and studied strenuously to pursue a hopeful future. Striving at school usually means postponing enjoyment, a learning norm highly advocated at Watershed. As the quote from Hage at the beginning of this chapter indicates, "an ethic of hope" in education finally became "an ethic of deferring joy" (Hage, 2003, cited in Cuervo, 2016, p. 168). The rural students who took this practice were *willing* to sacrifice enjoyment in exchange for the potential rewards of investing effort in dull learning. As we will see below, the term *willing* here signifies more than aspiration. This willingness to self-sacrifice also required an essential prerequisite: the ability to foresee that such sacrifice would eventually yield returns. Due to the diverse perceptions of the value of education and varying academic performances among these students, only those Magpie-type students could willingly partake in such sacrifices and embrace deferred gratification. They were able to embody the concept of meritocracy as their academic performances demonstrated the potential for reaping rewards through hard work. Furthermore, their relatively outstanding academic achievements continued to bolster the prevailing narratives of meritocracy within the school.

However, this does not mean these academically ambitious rural Chinese students had wholeheartedly internalized a dominated meritocratic discourse. The following section explores the cracks in these students' acceptance of meritocracy, examining how they had connected their lives with broader structural inequalities. They had cultivated a critical understanding and

embodied experiences of social differentiation, fully aware that they were born with disadvantages compared to their urban peers. To a certain extent, it was their awareness of social stratification and unequal opportunity distribution that continually strengthened their belief in striving diligently. Their goal was to offset the disadvantages arising from their lower social positions and ultimately achieve upward mobility through academic achievements. Impressively, this group of striving students remained optimistic even after acknowledging the deep-rooted injustices, encouraging themselves to believe that their journey toward social mobility would eventually succeed.

The final section of this chapter discusses striving as a cultural price paid by these rural Chinese students for the social mobility imperative constructed in contemporary Chinese society. As Willis (2020) argues, while the students who waited like the Winter-Cry Birds were likely to pay material prices with limited educational credentials, the Magpie-like students needed to pay a cultural price for their "success" at school.

Education: The Easiest Path to Upward Mobility

> "For a girl from a family like hers, the only way to change her destiny is to focus on study and go to college. She then can see a bigger world outside and encounter more possibilities. Otherwise, she will likely have to enter society right after finishing high school. If so, her life will have little hope. If she later unluckily meets a bad man, she will spend her life in such a muddle." (Principal Tong, March 4, 2020)

On our way back to Watershed after visiting Yunjin, a girl in Class A, Principal Tong shared the above comments about Yunjin. In early March 2020, Principal Tong asked me to accompany him to visit some students at their homes. Watershed was closed from February until

mid-April 2020 due to the COVID-19 outbreak, disrupting the normal return of students to school after the Spring Festival break. All roads connecting each village to the outside world were locked down. This caused a lot of anxiety for the ninth-grade students and teachers because the *Zhongkao*, an entrance exam that would greatly affect the fate of many students, was only four months away. After a delay of a few weeks from the originally scheduled start date of the spring semester, the school finally reopened online. This was a great challenge for both teachers and students as they had no previous experience with online classes. Principal Tong was concerned about whether the ninth graders would be able to study in a self-disciplined manner at home to adequately prepare for the upcoming *Zhongkao*.

The principal's concern deepened after he returned from Yunjin's home visit because he found that even previously diligent students, like Yunjin, were unable to eagerly engage in learning during the online session as the teachers had hoped. Yunjin, once one of the top students at Watershed and a strong contender for one of the school's five spots in County High, saw her grades plummet when the school moved to online teaching. Yunjin's teachers reported to Principal Tong that she sometimes failed to submit assignments on time. This prompted the principal to feel an urgent need to visit her home during the school closure, as soon as he was permitted to see students when the villages were no longer under complete lockdown. He hoped his visits could motivate Yunjin and other promising students to reengage in their studies.

In Principal Tong's view, education was "the only way" to change the destiny of a rural girl in Yunjin's situation. Yunjin grew up in a single-parent family, living only with her father since childhood. Her mother left the family when Yunjin was just beginning to form vague memories (around four or five years old), and she had never been seen again since then. Yunjin

spent her childhood and the first two years in elementary school in Red Mountain Township before she moved to a neighboring province, where her father worked as an electrician in a power station. She spent the rest of her elementary years in that neighboring province and was sent back to Red Mountain Township because she was not eligible to enter a public middle school without a local *hukou*.

Yunjin had been living alone in the township since she started middle school at Watershed. Three of her relatives lived in the same village, and her father asked them to occasionally look after her. Yunjin's family house was an old two-story wooden structure that had not undergone careful repairs in over a decade because her father worked away from home all year, and there were no other family members living there. When Principal Tong and I arrived at her village, it took us some time to find her because she was not staying at her own house. She explained that her house lacked internet access, so she had to go to her relative's place for online classes, which greatly inconvenienced her studies during the two months of remote learning.

From Principal Tong's perspective, Yunjin's family background underscored the urgency of her educational pursuit. The principal firmly believed that education offered the most promising avenue for rural students with limited resources to escape poverty and reshape their futures. He hoped that, through his and other teachers' collective efforts, Watershed could empower these academically ambitious students and positively influence their journey toward a bright future. These students' families faced challenges of equipping them with the essential resources needed to thrive in society, encompassing economic, cultural, and social aspects. Given these circumstances, rural students were compelled to rely solely on their own diligent endeavors in their educational pursuits.

Trust: The General Value of Education

Principal Tong's remarks regarding Yunjin represented a prevailing perception of education within Watershed. Among Watershed students, education was widely recognized as a fundamental route to upward social mobility. Many students believed that while education was not the exclusive means to advance, it was often perceived as the easiest path. However, the term "easiest" in this context did not imply that they regarded educational progression as devoid of challenges or that it stood as the most attainable option for achieving their desired futures. Instead, they considered education to be comparatively less burdensome and less fraught with hardships when contrasted with alternatives such as *dagong* (working for others, 打工) or engaging in small business ventures. The consensus was that more years of education usually correlated with increased opportunities. This notion found resonance not only among academically inclined students but also permeated the perspectives of those with limited academic enthusiasm.

This perception was evident in many of my conversations with the students. Here are quotes from interviews and students' writings.

> If I didn't go to school, I might be a farmer just like my parents. Then my life would be difficult. But it's possible for me to change my fate through education…I think studying is the easiest way out, the most convenient, and it doesn't require too much risk. If you start a business, there are so many people doing that, and now there are many big companies, such as the Fortune 500. If you start a small company, it could easily get dominated by those big companies; it's not that easy to succeed, right? So, it's better to go to school or *dagong*. (Pingping, a girl in Class B)

Our teacher once said that learning is not the only way out, but it must be the easiest way. I think that's what education means to me. (Lei, a boy in Class A)

If you study hard, you'll have a better future, more opportunities, and the chance to pursue different things that are far from your current life. (Xinhan, a girl in Class A)

Perhaps studying is to allow your future self to have more options. (A student wrote in *Shuoshuo*, 2019.12.26)

Studying is for the sake of having a better future and breaking free from the constraints of fate. (A student wrote in *Shuoshuo*, 2019.12.26)

The quotes above demonstrate that education was perceived to be closely connected to the future lives of rural students. Pingping, for example, knew clearly that she could not be admitted to an academic high school as early as she started the ninth grade. This was why she decided to transfer to Class B even though her grades allowed her to stay in Class A. She believed that it was not worthwhile to suffer in a strict learning environment without seeing the possibility of getting the desired outcome. Even though she spent little effort improving her academic performance, she still believed in the efficiency of education, seeing education as "the easiest" and "the most convenient" way to a promising life.

Many students in Class A shared their perception of education in their *Shuoshuo* on December 26, 2019, as their Chinese language teacher had set the writing topic for that day to be about their views on education. As anticipated, the rural students in Class A, during their last year of rigorous preparation for *Zhongkao*, overwhelmingly displayed a strong enthusiasm for the idea that education could alter their future prospects. They expressed views similar to those of the rural high school students in Xiang's (2018) study, emphasizing that schooling held

significance for achieving future well-being and self-worth in the future, providing the freedom to make choices, and honoring their families' sacrifices.

Trust in education was apparent in studies at all levels of academic commitment, including those who had stopped studying altogether. Yuchao was a boy in Class B. What impressed me the most was that he spent the majority of his time at school sleeping with his head on his desk. He humorously labeled his sleep pattern as "American time," implying that while it was daytime in China, it corresponded to nighttime in the United States. A typical day for him at Watershed involved playing video games late into the night, often until four or five in the morning. With only one or two hours of sleep, he would attend school, starting yet another day of snoozing in class. He had never considered attending college. His aspiration during his ninth-grade year at Watershed was to gain admission to a vocational high school, as he believed that a high school diploma was a fundamental requirement in today's society. In my interviews with him, I could still find a robust faith in the overarching importance of education.

WW: If you have children in the future, what kind of dad do you think you'd be?

Yuchao: Well, I'd probably be strict when it comes to discipline. I wouldn't let my kid touch a phone until he/she is in middle school at least. I can't let my kid turn out like me, struggling with academics. I'd definitely push him/her to study. I have to demand that from him/her. As for playtime, I'll make sure he/she gets plenty of that too.

WW: So, deep down, you still believe that studying is really important?

Yuchao: Yeah, when you look at the facts, all the successful people out there are well-educated.

Merely acknowledging that Watershed students placed importance on the value of

education was a superficial and oversimplified understanding. A more nuanced examination is needed to thoroughly explore the perspectives of these rural students regarding education and its role in shaping their life trajectories. For instance, we have yet to comprehend why, despite the widespread recognition of the value of education among most students, a prevalent lack of interest in learning persisted within this rural school.

Doubt: "Do I Really Want to Study?"

The students at Watershed could be described as embodying what Kipnis (2011) terms the "educational desire" within Chinese society. This desire, on the one hand, inspired certain students to invest great effort in their studies, as we will explore further in the following sections. On the other hand, this desire for education starkly contrasted with the prevailing disinterest in learning among many students who encountered academic challenges, including students placed in Class A, the intentionally produced learning space.

The complex perceptions of schooling among Watershed students were vividly demonstrated in a self-reflection essay by Jingjing. After an important exam in the final semester at Watershed, Mr. Yang, the Chinese language teacher in Class A, asked his students to write an essay to reflect on their preparation for the exam. In this self-reflection essay, Jingjing explored her thoughts about education and learning. She started by candidly admitting her lack of enthusiasm for studying and questioning the practicality of education in today's Chinese society. Subsequently, she reluctantly acknowledged that aside from studying, she had no other option. She found herself compelled to tread the path of education, which was considered a route to a promising future, even though she believed she was nearing failure on this path. The only glimmer of hope was pinned on the possibility of unexpected good luck in the upcoming

Zhongkao. She recognized the necessity of putting forth her utmost effort and striving hard for her future, yet she was equally aware that she was surrounded by confusion. She concluded her reflection with the words, “I really don’t know.”

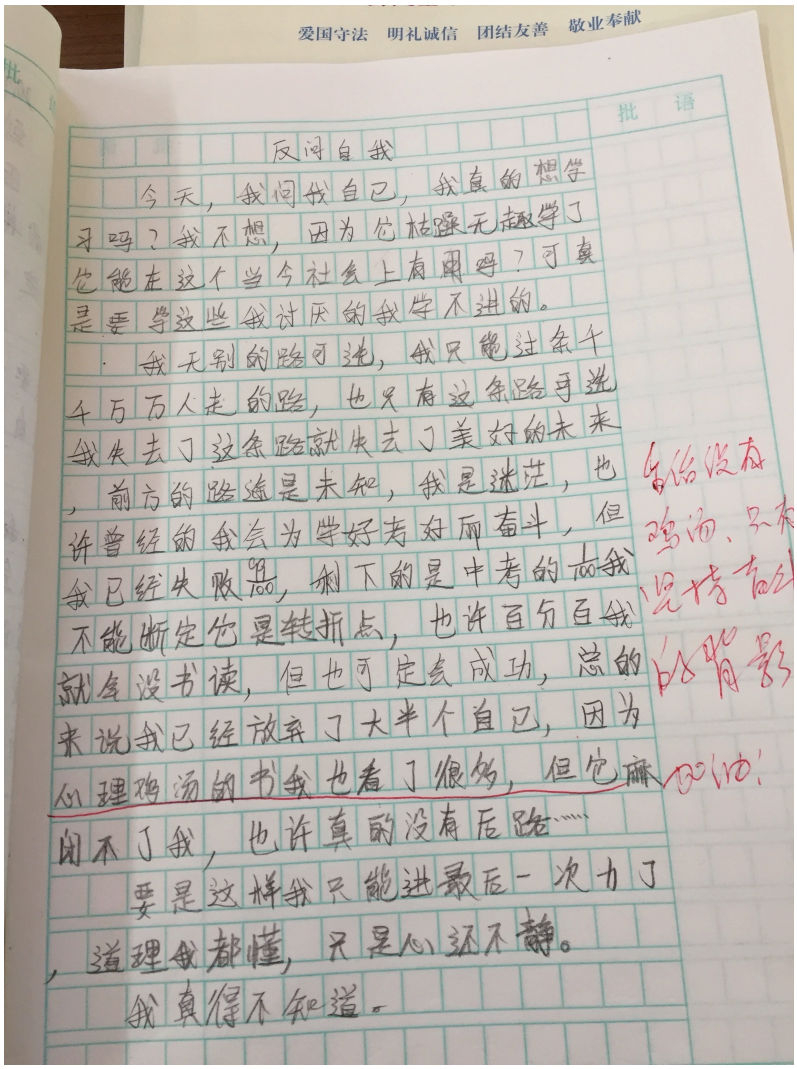

Figure 4: An essay entitled “Questioning Myself”

Questioning Myself

Today, I asked myself, do I really want to study? I don’t want to because it’s dull and uninteresting. Will studying be useful in today’s society? But if I have to study these things I

despise, those that I can't grasp, then how can I excel?

I have no other options; I can only walk the path (of education) that countless others have walked before me, and it's the only path available. If I lose this path, I'll lose a bright future. The road ahead is unknown, and I feel lost. Maybe I used to strive to study and excel in exams, but I've already failed 99 out of 100 times. Only the final 1% remains for the high school entrance exam. I can't determine if it's a turning point; perhaps I'll end up without any further education, or maybe I'll succeed. In the end, I have already given up on a large part of myself. I've read many motivational books, but they haven't comforted me. Perhaps there really is no way out…

If that's the case, I can only make one last effort. I understand the reasoning, but my heart is still unsettled.

I really don't know.

—An essay from Jingjing, a girl in Class A

[The red comment written by Mr. Yang says, "Life lacks chicken soup; there is only the silhouette of perseverance and struggle. Keep going!"]

This essay illustrated many emotions experienced by Jingjing under the constructed desire for education: anxiety, self-doubt, and a sense of loss. Even though she embraced the belief that education leads to a bright future, she still could not fully motivate herself to engage in learning, as the contents taught in school were considered boring, tedious, and probably useless in the real world. For Jingjing, the value of this form of education was largely manifested in its role as a ticket to high school and, later, to a better future. To get the ticket, Jingjing believed that the current life—a dull schooling life at school—*should* be tolerated to the greatest

extent in order to make the dream life come true. Borrowing from Xiang's (2021a) term, Jingjing saw the need to *suspend* her current (normal) life by focusing more on boring learning to strive for the future. This was why she reminded herself of the need to make "one last effort," even though she had almost given up on academic achievement.

"Suspension" is a term developed by Xiang (2021a) to conceptualize a life strategy and a lived experience that contemporary Chinese people take. As Xiang (2021a) writes, "In suspension, people move frequently and work tirelessly in order to benefit from the present as much as possible, and escape from it as quickly as they can" (p. 234). Consequently, the present life, if needed, can be sacrificed, which can be reduced "to an empty vehicle to the future" (B. Xiang, 2021a, p. 239). This is similar to what Hage refers to as "an ethic of hope" or "an ethnic of deferring joy," a normative and sometimes cruel belief that seeks to persuade individuals that "you suffer now in the hope you might enjoy later without this enjoyment really ever arriving" (Hage, 2003, cited in Cuervo, 2016, p. 168). By constantly pulling herself back from deviating off the track of studying to dull learning, Jingjing's school life could be understood as a state of suspension. Moreover, this state of suspension was a norm constructed within the school through the widespread idea that "education is the easiest path to upward mobility."

Within this utilitarian-driven school education framework, the natural enjoyment and meaning of learning were obscured. As soon as students struggled to envision how the practical value of education can tangibly influence their personal lives, they were more likely to give up on learning. Their motivation to stay in school was largely driven by the goal of obtaining the basic educational credentials demanded by society. Additionally, the prospect of achieving a higher level of education without facing excessive financial and time constraints was certainly

attractive. This partially explains why many students at Watershed acknowledged the significance of education yet did not invest substantial effort in their academic endeavors—a seemingly contradictory phenomenon.

From the perspective of students at Watershed School, the value of education predominantly materialized in the diploma it ultimately granted. They acknowledged that advancing their education, pursuing employment, and even relocating to new cities in the future all hinged on possessing educational credentials. Many students imbibed from both educators and parents the imperative of obtaining a high school education in today's society since the majority of job opportunities necessitated a high school diploma. Consequently, many Class B students clung to the aspiration of gaining admission to a vocational high school despite the waning interest in their studies and the realization that a meaningful learning experience would not be forthcoming during their high school years.

The following conversation occurred in April 2021, approximately a year after Yunjin and her friends had graduated from Watershed. Yunjin had become a first-year student at a local public academic high school, although it was not as prestigious as County High that she had envisioned. Meanwhile, Xiaolu, Yaqin, and Weiyao had enrolled in the vocational high school, each pursuing a distinct major. Xiaolu had chosen Agricultural Tourism Management, Yaqin majored in Applied Arts, and Weiyao focused on Accounting. During our group chat, I inquired about their perspectives on how their chosen majors would connect with their future careers. All three girls expressed a shared view that they anticipated minimal direct correlation. For them, the primary significance of high school centered around obtaining a diploma.

WW: Do you think the work you'll do in the future will be related to your current major?

Yaqin/Xiaolu/Weiyao: Not really.

Yaqin: I don't want to draw pictures anymore.

Weiyao: What I'm going to do has nothing to do with what I'm learning in high school, that's why I'm thinking about dropping out. we all have to *dagong* after high school. It's all the same.

Xiaolu: But you must get that piece of paper, the high school diploma. If you want to change your *hukou* (household registered residence) to another city in the future, you at least need a high school diploma; it's the minimum requirement in other cities.

Yaqin: But even a high school diploma might not be enough.

Xiaolu: For example, if you want to change your *hukou* to Hangzhou, you must have a high school diploma.

Weiyao: Then I won't bother, I feel it's good to just stay in our small county town.

Yaqin: I still think a high school diploma is necessary.

Xiaolu: Yeah, a high school diploma is definitely necessary.

All three girls attending vocational high school saw little connection between their future careers and their current majors. In Shen County, a small rural mountainous county, there are not many job opportunities that are directly related to the student's chosen field of study. For these girls, the familiar female individuals in their lives were mostly employed in the service sectors, working as waitresses in restaurants, attendants in bubble tea shops, or cashiers in grocery stores. These jobs do not require the (limited) training they received in high school, such as accounting, management, or drawing. However, as China's higher education expands and academic qualifications continue to depreciate, an increasing number of jobs, even in the service sectors

with relatively low technical requirements, now demand a minimum of a high school diploma from employees. This led Xiaolu and Yaqin to firmly believe that finishing high school had become a necessity. Xiaolu even knew that if they later preferred to relocate and obtain citizenship in other cities, they were required to have a minimal high school diploma. This information was from her brother, who ran a small business in a bigger city.

As first-year students at the vocational high school, both Xiaolu and Yaqin had not thought about using their diplomas to further their education, as aspiring to higher education seemed too ambitious for them. There were many uncertainties that affected their path to college. For example, they might not even have the opportunity to remain at school during the third year if they cannot pass the streaming exam (*fenliu kao*, 分流考) at the end of the second year. This exam would determine whether some students with better academic performance could continue their studies at the school to prepare for the college entrance exam (*Gaokao*), while others would have to begin their one-year internships outside of school.

For Weiyao, who considered herself less ambitious, her thoughts differed from those of Xiaolu and Yaqin. She was the only student among the four girls who doubted the value of high school education. After spending nearly a year at the vocational school, she faced considerable pressure from classmates and teachers. Additionally, she did not perceive the significance of persisting with accounting studies, given her certainty about not pursuing a career in that field. Therefore, she gradually reinforced the idea of dropping out and searching for employment.

In this dialogue involving both academic and vocational high school students, discussing the purpose of education and its connection to their future, I could distinctly sense the difference in perspectives among the girls attending different types of high schools. In our later

conversation, I asked them a more general question about their perceptions of the usefulness of studying. Their views varied. Yunjin, as an academic-oriented student who aspired to higher education, demonstrated a high level of trust in the value of education, believing it to be the only dependable opportunity for individuals like her from disadvantaged backgrounds. Like Principal Tong, Yunjin believed that attending college after high school was necessary. On the other hand, Xiaolu and Weiyao, who were studying at the vocational high school, did not dare to hope that education would bring them significant opportunities. In their vision of the future, high school was likely the final stage of their educational journey. They found it difficult to envision education leading them toward a more promising future. Consequently, Xiaolu and Weiyao disagreed with Yunjin's perspective on education, suggesting that once they entered society, they might discover that education was not as beneficial as they had imagined.

Yunjin: (Studying is) quite useful.

Xiaolu: But once we enter society, it won't be as useful as we thought, not much.

Yunjin: But we're not the kind of people with a million-dollar family fortune; we can only rely on education.

Xiaolu: People like me won't need what we learn in school in the future.

Weiyao: Unless you really want to work at those kinds of companies, then you have to study. For us, we'll probably end up working at a bubble tea shop or as cashiers in a supermarket, so there's no need to study.

Xiaolu: Look at the major I'm studying now (Agricultural Tourism Management), if I were to do an internship in senior year, most of us won't enter this field; we'll mostly end up in the service industry, like hotels, restaurants, so what we're learning is practically

useless.

Weiyao: Yeah, studying doesn't really have much use.

When considering the role of education in the lives of young individuals, all four girls concurred with the notion that education plays a pivotal role in paving the way toward a promising future. This viewpoint aligns with the perspectives shared by Pingping, Lei, and Jingjing, as previously described. This understanding of education was widely embraced among the students at Watershed, largely influenced by the continuous endorsement of this perspective by both their teachers and parents.

However, their perspectives diverged when contemplating the practical impact of education on their own lives. Yunjin exhibited a profound faith in education, anchoring her aspirations of transcending her disadvantaged circumstances on its potential. Conversely, Xiaolu and Yaqin acknowledged the limitations of the benefits they could derive from education, given their awareness of the constraints on their educational journey. Consequently, they placed their hopes on a high school diploma as a ticket to securing job opportunities. In contrast, Weiyao perceived a tenuous connection between education and her forthcoming life, recognizing that her career ambitions would not lead her toward "those kinds of companies" that rigidly require educational certificates.

Seeking Alternatives

When education became less reliable than it was supposed to be, Watershed students had to look for other options. Like Weiyao, many rural students could not rely on education to fulfill their dreams of changing their destiny and, therefore, had to seek alternatives. This is similar to the youth in Chile in Paiva's (2021) study who developed alternative dreams that rely less on

education in the face of the failed promise of neoliberal schooling, such as becoming a footballer, singer, or YouTuber. The alternatives taken by students at Watershed included starting to work early, training to master more useful and concrete skills, and developing their social abilities. These youth who deviated from traditional formal school education at a young age did not hold significantly different views about education. Collectively, they held the belief that education, in general, carries significant value. It stands as the ideal path for individuals who can pursue it consistently. Regrettably, it was not the right path for them personally. This, however, does not diminish the broader value of education in fostering social mobility. It is simply that the benefits education could provide them were somewhat limited.

Five students (four girls and one boy) did not complete high school (or other forms of formal school education) and started to work early. The few students who chose to begin to work early were usually girls. Weiyao finally dropped out in her second year of high school and started to work in a bubble tea shop in another city where her father worked. She believed that she would benefit more from working experiences in society rather than just wasting time in school. Lihuan was another girl who dropped out after spending a week in the vocational high school, planning to work in another province with her mother. She shared a similar view of education with Weiyao, pointing out that a three-year education at a vocational high school would make little difference for her.

> I told my mom that I'd decided to work outside with her. For me, whether I go to high school or not makes no difference. Even if I attend vocational high school, it's pointless, and it's just a waste of money. After all, we're all going to work in society later on. My thinking is that I could start working a few years earlier than those who go to high school,

so I'll have more diverse work experiences. Those employers surely prefer people with rich work experience. It's the same when you come out after finishing high school or college, right? So I think it's better to start a few years earlier.

Huihui and Wenjie were two girls who did not continue any further education after they graduated from Watershed. Based on her usual academic performance, Huihui had a very good chance of being admitted to the vocational high school. However, before the *Zhongkao*, she had decided to discontinue her studies and intended to go to Shanghai to work with one of her cousins. Wenjie, as her close friend, made the same decision. They were finally unable to make it to Shanghai for some reason, so they stayed in Shen County and worked at local milk tea shops.

A few students paid more money to learn practical skills instead of continuing in vocational high school. The vocational high school in Shen County had a poor reputation. Parents and students commonly perceived it as a place of less meaningful learning, offering limited opportunities for students to acquire usual technical skills. Junhua was admitted by an elite class in the vocational high school majoring in Computer Applications, while he turned down the opportunity for formal education and instead enrolled in an expensive private school located in the provincial capital city, dedicated to learning culinary skills. He spent 75,000 yuan to enroll in a three-year program at this school, specializing in classic Chinese cuisine. This was not an easy decision for him and his family, as it involved not only the high tuition fees but also the choice to forego a potential college education for a career in physical labor: that of a chef. Considering the slim chances of entering a desirable university through vocational high school and his strong interest in cooking, this shy 16-year-old teenager ultimately chose a culinary school located two thousand kilometers away, with the support of his parents.

Junhua: Our teachers often say that children from mountainous areas are different from those in cities. They say that in various aspects, like living conditions, we mountain kids aren't as fortunate as the city kids. So, I'm thinking about getting out.

WW: Have you thought about how to get out?

Junhua: Initially, I thought I had to rely on studying. But by the time I reached the ninth grade, I realized that if I could only go to vocational high school, it won't be very helpful. If I couldn't get into academic high school, it would be quite difficult to get into university after three years at vocational high school. So, I decided to leave school and learn some skills instead, after all, technical skills stay with you.

This conversation occurred in April 2021, when Junhua had been studying at the culinary school for nine months. We arranged to meet at a Starbucks in the county seat. His change was not significant; he remained rather shy and introverted, with the most noticeable change being his permed hair. He shared with me his training and life at the school, proudly mentioning that he consistently ranked within the top three in skill assessments among a class of 30. Although he was quite content with his current life and had confidently identified his future career path, it was evident that learning the culinary craft at this young age remained his secondary choice after formal education. At the culinary school, Junhua no longer had subjects like Chinese, mathematics, or English. All the training revolved around culinary skills. He said, "Now I'm learning skills, whereas before, at Watershed School, I was studying. I'm not studying now."

The third alternative was to focus on developing social capabilities rather than increasing bookish knowledge (Hong, 2022; W. Wang, 2023). Many students at Watershed had long abandoned the expectation that the path of education would lead them somewhere meaningful.

They comprehended that education could not extricate them from poverty or materialize their life ideals. Nevertheless, the majority still clung to the hope of enrolling in high school, even though they were acutely aware that they would persist in dozing off during classes and gaining minimal practical knowledge. Beyond the high school diploma's role as a job requirement, as previously mentioned, certain students, particularly boys, aspired to further cultivate their social skills within the school environment. They saw this as the groundwork for preparing themselves for their entry into society a few years down the line.

These students expected their high school experiences would allow them to make new friends and widen their social circle. Entering vocational high school was more about experiencing a new and colorful life than learning. This echoes Hong's (2022) study with a group of students who "believed that knowledge, skills, and experience they should and could learn from the real world mattered more to their future development" (p. 61). The following quote was from Hongbin,

> You know, my dad knows that I can't really get into studying, so he's cool with me going to vocational high school to hang out and make some buddies. I mean, it's way better to have pals than to step into the real world later with none, right? I'm kind of aiming to get the knack of expanding my social circle too.

Hongbin was worried about whether he could be admitted to the vocational high school during the ninth grade. As a student who showed little interest in learning and spent most of their time dozing off in class, his eagerness to continue high school study was not to acquire academic-related knowledge but rather to accumulate social experiences. The secondary motive driving his desire to pursue further education stemmed from information he had gathered

indicating that possessing a high school diploma could enhance the likelihood of gaining acceptance into the military. Local villagers generally believed that joining the military was a good option for many boys disinterested in academic pursuits. Additionally, this path could open doors for future social mobility.

Even if he was not ultimately selected for military service (given the intense competition for military positions within the local area, with only one or two openings available in Red Mountain Township each year), he held the belief that three years of high school education were still worthwhile. This conviction stemmed from his potential to accumulate distinctive life experiences and cultivate a broader perspective through this educational journey. He expected to meet different people and refine his interpersonal skills.

Yonghai was another boy who aspired to attend high school but had little interest in schooling. He identified himself as a "type of person who just can't really grasp and learn." He had tried a couple of times to push himself in academic learning, but these efforts all failed. When he started the eighth grade, he found he could not understand anything the teachers taught in class as the contents "got harder and harder" for him. He described his struggle with comprehending the teachers' lectures in class in this way, "It's kind of like there's a wall in my ears, and I can't really catch onto what the teacher is saying. It's just not getting into my head, you know?"

His self-identification as a person of "being not capable of learning" did not decrease his belief in the general value of education, in spite of acknowledging that this value would not apply to him. In our interview, when he was a ninth grader at Watershed, he felt a little strange about the question of whether he thought education was useful or not. His strange came from his

belief that anyone who answered this question would say a straight "Of course!" But he then added that education was not the right path for him and he would seek alternatives.

Yonghai: It's useful, of course! Education has its uses, but it's just not a path I can take. Aren't there many successful people who didn't go to school? Who says you have to study to make money? These are old-fashioned ideas from the older generations, saying that education is the way to succeed, but that's from a long time ago. Nowadays, there are many paths to success without studying, and you can still make a lot of money.

WW: Are there many paths?

Yonghai: Yeah, as long as you have the right capabilities. I mean, just studying all the time isn't enough, you know? If someone can only read books and can't talk or interact with others, they won't really get far in society. It's more about having those skills; that's what helps you earn respect in society and do well out there.

The capabilities and skills Yonghai mentioned were all socially oriented. Despite admitting that education plays a vital role in people's success, he was not depressed when he realized that education was not the right path for him because he believed that there were many alternatives available. He believed that he could still rely on social capabilities to achieve his life goals.

A Candy or a Stick? Striving Through Bitter Study

In the previous section, we have briefly discussed the influence of an ethic of hope, or a lived experience of suspension, in many rural Chinese students' schooling lives. These students who aimed to change their fate by relying on education were expected, if not required, to strive through self-sacrifice and postpone their desire to have fun. Stories in this section will further

illustrate how striving and enjoying life became two seemingly incompatible choices, especially in rural China. In the case of Watershed, striving at school meant wholeheartedly focusing on studying textbook knowledge and being willing to endure the pain of exam-oriented learning. This construction of a learning norm required students to engage in a form of *kudu* (苦读), a local term that can be literally translated to English as "bitter study," which conveys the idea of strenuous and dedicated studying. As we will see below, *kudu* constitutes a core component in the striving practice of academically ambitious rural Chinese students in their pursuit of social mobility through education.

The subtitle of this section—A Candy or a Stick?—was inspired by the stories of Shulan, a top student at Watershed. Shulan's stories, similar to those of other academic-oriented students, illustrated a key element in the strategy of striving: You can only deserve candy if you have been struck by a stick first. Striving at a rural school like Watershed requires suspending their current lives and making sacrifices by delaying joy in their preparation for exams. This requirement was another version of the Chinese proverb, "Bitter first, sweet later" (*xian ku hou tian*, 先苦后甜).

Bitter First, Sweet Later

Shulan had long black hair and was always dressed plainly. Like most students at Watershed, she never wore makeup or any extra decorations on herself, including hairpins. The rubber bands that tied her hair were always the most common black rubber bands, without any other decorations. Her skin was slightly dark, and her baby-fat face often blushed when she smiled. Sometimes, she seemed a little shy. However, as the core student cadre of Class A, she could communicate cheerfully and loudly with her classmates and managed the class in an orderly manner. She was kind to her classmates and was popular in the class, and many of her

classmates respected her by always calling her by the title of her cadre position.

Shulan's schooling journey would be described as a typical example of the success of *kudu* by her teachers. Shulan grew up as a typical "left-behind child" and spent little time with her parents during the past 16 years. Before Shulan was 12 months old, her parents left her to run a small breakfast shop in another city, leaving her to live with her aunt in Red Mountain Township. When she started school, her parents sent her to an off-campus private hosting center, where a young couple was responsible for the study and life of more than thirty children. She spent eight years in this center until she started the ninth grade and moved to the school dormitory. At the time of my fieldwork, there were three off-campus supervision centers in the township. They provided life care and homework assistance to unaccompanied or unattended children, including elementary and middle school students.

Shulan lived up to her expectations in the *Zhongkao* and was one of the five students admitted to County High. The struggles she had suffered and the effort she had put into studying eventually had their rewards. In teachers' eyes, Shulan's success came from her persistent efforts. Therefore, her life experiences confirmed a classical *kudu* narrative—hard work always pays off.

Shulan's belief in *kudu*, or more accurately, the profound importance she experienced for relying on education to change her destiny, was exemplified in an essay she wrote for a test. In this essay, she shared her struggles in learning, her understanding of the relationship between pay and gain, and the necessity to immerse herself in *kudu*. Shulang wrote,

This is life: You have to be struck by a stick before you can get a candy.

This is why I am currently being struck by a stick. The results of three years of middle school will be displayed in June, and I am preparing for it now. Spending half a day on a math

puzzle is a regular part of my daily routine. Sometimes, I have to use my fingers to keep my eyes open in class when my eyelids become too heavy to lift. I often find myself doing homework with classmates at 11 p.m. or even later. During moments when I feel exhausted and find myself full of complaints, I hear Kobe's voice in my ear saying, "Have you seen Los Angeles at 4 a.m.?"

I was slumped in my chair with math questions in front of me, and the messy answer sheet was crumpled up on the ground. I slammed it down heavily and tried to hold back my tears but failed. The tears tasted salty. At this time, a classmate approached me with two candies wrapped in colored glaze paper and asked, "Would you like to have candy?" Candy? I paused for a few seconds. Yes, I wanted a candy, a sweet candy. I took the candy and put it in my mouth. I quickly picked up the answer sheet from the ground to restart and said to myself, "I want a candy, but definitely not just the one in my mouth."

Since then, whenever I feel like giving up, relaxing, or putting down the pen, I ask myself, "Would you like to have candy? Then you need to get a stick first."

But can I do it? Absolutely. There is no doubt about it. Madame Curie spent decades in the laboratory, day after day, extracting radium, and eventually won the Nobel Prize. The Red Army climbed through grass and snow-capped mountains, ate grassroots, and eventually won the Long March. Monkey King, Tang Seng, Zhu Bajie, and Shaseng[8] *carried luggage and traveled hundreds of thousands of miles without complaining or feeling tired and finally discovered the Truth. Compared to them, the high school entrance exam is trivial. I can definitely make it.*

In my life, I will face more than just one "stick." Furthermore, what I want is more than just one candy. However, as long as I persist and endure, I will savor the pleasure of a candy

[8] They are four figures in a well-known Chinese traditional novel entitled *Journey to the West*.

melting in my mouth. Lastly, would you like to have a candy first?

In this essay, Shulan did not exaggerate the efforts she had made and the hardships she had experienced at school. She was one of the most industrious students at Watershed. Together with a few of her classmates, including Ying, Xinhan, and Yunjin, she usually arrived at the classroom to study before 6 a.m. and went back to her dormitory after midnight during the last few months before the *Zhongkao*. To achieve her dream of attending County High, Shulan had to fully motivate herself, and, in many cases, that meant mobilizing her body. As she wrote in the essay, she had to use her fingers to keep her eyes open in class when she was too sleepy due to insufficient sleep. Waking up early was difficult, as she only slept around five hours a day. The quote from the American basketball player Kobe Bryant, "Have you seen Los Angeles at 4 a.m.?" inspired this 15-year-old rural Chinese girl to stop complaining about the difficulties of learning and keep working harder.

For the high-achieving students at Watershed, the need for rigorous studying originated from the intense competition in *Zhognkao*, and this competition was largely internal to the school. If they slacked off even slightly, their grades might decline, putting their chances of getting into their preferred high school in jeopardy. Even at a small rural school like Watershed, competition was exceptionally fierce, especially among the top-performing students. Rankings held immense significance for them because only the top five students could gain admission to County High. In the *Zhongkao* in 2020, there were ten students whose scores had passed the entry line to County High. However, only the top five were able to enter this high school because of the limited allocated enrollment quota. The story of Yunjin, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, exemplifies this intense competition. Initially, Yunjin was a strong contender for one of

those five spots, but due to falling behind in some courses during online classes amid the pandemic, she ultimately missed the opportunity to attend County High she had long anticipated, although her scores were higher than the enrollment mark.

Kudu, therefore, remained a keyword in the schooling experiences of rural Chinese students like Shulan, who had high expectations for education. Within the school setting, the most straightforward demand of *kudu* was that students should devote as much of their leisure time as possible to studying. Shulan understood that she needed to resist the temptation of living a relaxed life at school because only hard work could lead her to a successful future. She consistently reminded herself that she had to get a stick before she could deserve candy. The candy is a metaphor for a comfortable and relaxed life, and the stick refers to the hardships she had to endure and the effort she needed to make.

Shulan was aware of various challenges she faced in the coming *Zhongkao*, such as the limited number of places for her dream high school,[9] and relatively low academic performance compared to top students in the county seat, especially in English and mathematics, which she was not good at. While recognizing many uncertainties, Shulan still believed that she could, in her own words, "absolutely" make her dreams come true. But the prerequisite was that she had to work hard. She started the essay with her struggles and a sense of failure while ending it with confidence: "I can definitely make it."

Growing up in rural China, the question of "to have a candy or get a stick first" became inescapable for many students. Shulan chose to get a stick first, understanding that she had to

[9] Watershed was only allocated five places for County High, compared to over sixty spots in each urban middle school in Shen County.

give up a piece of candy to achieve academic success and subsequent upward social mobility. Chinese children are taught from an early age to endure the bitterness first and enjoy sweetness last. The ethos of "bitter first, sweet later" has been deeply embedded in various aspects of Chinese life (C. Wang, 2022). This lesson is considered especially important for rural students who live in a disadvantaged situation. Teachers and parents tell us repeatedly that we can only taste enough sweetness after having enough bitterness. Therefore, the academic failure of rural students, in the eyes of many parents and teachers, is due to their lack of willingness to endure the hardships of learning. This explanation for academic failure is also internalized by many students. Resisting immediate pleasure in exchange for an imagined bright future is a significant project for rural Chinese students who aim to achieve upward mobility through the channel of school education.

In fact, however, choosing to get a stick first was not as accessible as many teachers and parents thought. Shulan not only made her *choice* to eat the bitterness of studying before leading a relaxed school life, but she was also *allowed* to make such a choice in a stratified learning space. As we will find below, striving through *kudu* had limitations, excluding many rural students from taking this strategy and could only wait. In other words, some students adopted a waiting strategy not only because they were unwilling to strive but also because they had no opportunity to strive.

***Kudu*: A Learning Norm and Its Limitations**

In Western literature, students such as Shulan are likely to be labeled as swots. In *Schooling Ordinary Kids*, Brown (1987) describes three groups of working-class students in South Wales: rems, swots, and ordinary kids. Swots are academic students who accept the formal

culture of the school institution and work hard to "get out" of their working-class origin. The term "swot" is often considered pejorative by students who fall into this category. In Brown's (1987) study, working-class students who are labeled as "swots" are typically perceived to be "morally deviant," which is not because of their ambition to move socially upward but because of the "*excessive* work" they do to achieve academic success and social mobility (p. 99, emphasis in original). The excessive work done by the swots is morally condemned because these students' success is seen to have come at the expense of other students.

However, the students at Watershed would perceive this Western attitude toward doing "excessive work" at school as unreasonable. How could diligence and hard work be morally problematic? How could someone be condemned for putting in great effort? My participants would find this perception toward hardworking students difficult to understand because they had learned from a young age that they themselves should be immersed in excessive work. They tended to blame themselves for not being able to do this. "I also want to focus on studying like those good students, but I just can't. I'm not the type to study," said Hongbin, a boy in Class B who rarely took his pens out of his desk, even during test days. He shared this sentiment when we talked about his perceptions of the top students at the school.

In China, a new term to label this corresponding group of students—the swots in Brown's (1987) study—has been coined in recent years: small-town swots (*xiaozhen zuotijia*, 小镇做题家). Small-town swots refer to a group of young people with rural or small-town backgrounds who get admission into China's prestigious universities by working extremely hard to pass *Gaokao*. Literally, *xiaozhen* means small town and *zuotijia* means a person who is (merely) an expert at answering questions in exams and getting high scores in China's examination-oriented

educational system.

The term was initially coined by some frustrated rural college students who were aware of the limitations brought about by their non-urban and lower-class backgrounds on their own future development. Although they got into the same elite universities as their urban and middle- or upper-class peers by making a great effort to pass the entrance exams, they soon realized a big gap between them in terms of resources, characteristics, and visions. All of these gaps significantly shape different future possibilities. They used the notion of small-town swots in a self-mocking way to express their frustration at realizing these differences and the difficulty of breaking through the "class" ceiling. Later, this term was also used by some people with some privilege to belittle rural college students, describing them as a group of students who are only good at taking exams but lack creativity, sufficient social abilities, and broad visions.

When Shulan and some of her top-performing friends enter high school or college, where they will encounter more social differences in relation to class and urban-rural divide, they are likely to self-label or be labeled as small-town swots. However, the negative meaning attached to the term "swot" was never applied to them at Watershed. Compared to the ways in which academic working-class students are perceived by others in Brown's (1987) study, putting in more effort and engaging in excessive work for learning in the context of Watershed were not considered problematic. Instead, they were morally commendable. Shulan, Ying, and a few other top students were the most popular among their classmates. None of the students at Watershed described them in terms of disrespect. I often heard that some boys regarded as "troublemakers" by teachers expressed that they were honored to get along with "good" students like Shulan and Ying.

The absence of the negative perception of academically oriented students at Watershed was related to the historically existing culture of *kudu* in Chinese society. According to Du and Peng (2022), the culture of *kudu* was one of the key components in China's Imperial Examination, a civil service examination system that had lasted for over 13,00 years before it was abolished in 1905. In Feudal China, the Imperial Examination was the most important pathway for people born in the lower class to achieve social mobility. The primary focus of this examination was the memorization of Chinese classics, particularly those from the Confucian tradition. Candidates typically needed to prepare for the exam by monotonously memorizing the huge amount of classic texts over years or even decades. Therefore, in the ancient Chinese imperial examination system, learners were expected to dedicate themselves to diligent and rigorous study as a societal norm. The culture of *kudu* has, therefore, developed in this historical context and become a basic requirement for learners, especially those from relatively lower social positions (Du & Peng, 2022).

The idea of "enduring the bitterness first and enjoying sweetness last" and Shulan's strategy of "getting struck by a stick first and having a candy later" are two contemporary examples of the culture of *kudu*. Adopting a Western term, this culture can be understood as an example of meritocracy, instilling the belief that greater effort leads to greater rewards for individuals. In the case of Watershed, the idea of *kudu* was promoted by teachers and, at the same time, internalized by the majority of the students, which made excessive work and extra efforts morally justified. Actually, doing excessive work for academic learning was not only morally justified but also constructed as a norm, as we have discussed in Jingjing's self-reflection in the previous section. Investing excessive efforts in dull academic learning at the cost of sacrificing

joyful youth life was encouraged at school.

However, a long-term sacrifice through the practice of *kudu* was not easy, even for industrious students like Shulan. In our later conversations when Shulan was in high school, she shared many struggles in continuing this form of bitter study. She was not a top student anymore in high school because her entry scores were much lower than most of her classmates. There was a 70-point bonus to the top five students at Watershed in *Zhongkao* for admission to County High. This preferential policy was designed to support students from mountainous areas. Therefore, even though Shulan was admitted to County High, her *Zhongkao* scores were lower than those of most students in her class. Facing tremendous pressures at school and anticipating little chance of improvement in studying, she was seriously considering dropping out of high school in the second semester of the tenth grade, which was her first academic year in high school.

> There was a period last semester when I really, really didn't want to continue studying. I felt like there was no point in it. I'm putting in all my efforts to study right now just to get into college. But even if I do get into college, it won't be a good one. There are so many college graduates; going to an ordinary college doesn't have much value. If I drop out now and skip high school and higher education, I could have an extra six or seven years of working experience compared to those who go to college. So, during that time, I really thought about not studying anymore.
>
> We had to go back to school for classes every Sunday afternoon, but I never wanted to go. There were a few weeks when I didn't even want to do my homework. I really thought about what I would do if I didn't study, but I couldn't come up with anything. I

> thought about maybe learning photography, but it didn't seem like a good idea either……I told my deskmate about my thoughts of dropping out, and she earnestly advised me not to overthink it. She told me something like that: just keep studying hard, get into college, and if you really want to learn photography, you can do it in college. If you can't even handle three years of high school, you won't be able to succeed in anything in society. Later, I also looked up some real examples of high school dropouts online, and they all said they regretted it. In the end, I decided to focus on getting into college and stop overthinking it. Now, I don't have the idea of dropping out anymore.

Even students who were highly motivated in academic learning would experience risks of deviating from the path of education within a school environment that relies heavily on an ethic of suspension and deferring joy. As we can imagine, for students like Hongbin and Yonghai, who struggled academically to a much greater extent, the challenges of employing the practice of striving by strenuously studying at school would be beyond imagination.

The Chinese phrase *kudu* consists of two characters: *ku* and *du*. *Ku* demands that learners embody a spirit of being willing to endure hardship and bitterness, while *du*, particularly in the context of exam-oriented education in rural China, primarily refers to repeated recitation. The content that students were required to recite included, but was not limited to, a large number of ancient Chinese and modern poems, common literature knowledge, full texts, English vocabularies, phrases, and a lot of knowledge in history and political classes. Reciting Chinese texts was crucial to Watershed students' entire primary school, continuing into middle school. In middle school, the need for recitation extended beyond Chinese language classes to encompass subjects such as English, history, politics, and even science. Except for mathematics and physical

education, nearly all subjects in *Zhongkao* included assessing the memorization of textbook contents.

This method of learning excluded educational opportunities for many students who were uninterested in rote memorization. When students identified themselves as not capable of learning, in many cases, they meant that they were not able to recite texts. This partially explained why many of my participants shared that they started to give up learning in grade four or five when the Chinese texts got longer. When students fell behind in their performances, teachers tended to lower their academic expectations for them. They did not require these students to master content that demanded higher levels of learning skills, such as comprehension and application. Instead, they emphasized the memorization of "basic" knowledge with lower cognitive demands. Teachers believed that as long as those students with poor grades could memorize this knowledge, which did not require critical thinking, they could still earn some points in exams. This emphasis on rote memorization further alienated students who already had an aversion to mechanical memorization, causing them to lose interest in learning.

WW: Why do you think you're not putting much effort into your studies?

Kai: Well, I'm just not that into it. Plus, there's this whole aspect of memorizing stuff, and I'm not a fan. If the teachers taught in a different way, I'd probably be more into it. But there's so much memorization, and they even quiz us on it. I'm not really up for that. I barely memorized anything during my three years in middle school.

WW: Is it a lot of stuff to recite?

Kai: Yeah, it's been like this since elementary school. So, I really can't stand memorizing stuff. I started getting fed up with it back in elementary school, and I've disliked it ever

since. That's why my scores aren't so great. Even with English, I didn't memorize anything. English words, they seem to know me, but I don't know them. It's definitely the way the teachers teach that's the issue. My intelligence is normal, maybe even a bit above average.

Kai was a tall, slim, and bright boy in Class B. For a brief period during the last few weeks of the first semester in ninth grade, he moved to Class A due to his scores passing the requirements to study in the "good" class. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in the second semester, classroom capacities were limited to prevent overcrowding, leading him to swiftly return to Class B. He mainly attributed his lack of motivation at school to his disinterest in rote memorization, which had been a predominant aspect of his entire learning journey.

Thus, it was unfair that some teachers blamed these students for being lazy and having low aspirations. Waiting for school to end and for graduation to arrive rather than striving to improve academic performance was less about willingness and more about learning opportunities. These students were pushed out of the competition due to the lack of appropriate teaching methods being offered to them. Put another way, these academically disinterested students did not choose to wait but had no opportunity to return to the racing track of education. In a school setting like Watershed, as we can see from Chapter 4, the educational needs of the academically struggling students had not been paid enough attention.

In this sense, acting like a Magpie was not only about willingness, as some teachers would blame academically disinterested students as lazy and having low aspirations. Not everyone was *able to* become a Magpie in a stratified learning environment. As we will find from the stories of another top student, Ying, in the following section, we will somewhat sadly

discover that being able to become a Magpie-like student was perceived to be a kind of fortune to them. *Kudu*, as a significant form of striving in school, offered opportunities for social mobility to a few students but excluded these opportunities for the majority. This is one of the limitations of the culture of *kudu* constructed in China's rural schools.

Kudu, or studying strenuously, moreover, is not what every Chinese student has to endure. The extent to which students rely on the method of *kudu* also demonstrates an unequal distribution of this form of bitter learning between urban and rural areas in China. Some students can escape *Gaokao* and participate in higher education abroad by attending international high schools or international programs in public schools (S. Liu, 2020; S. Liu & Apple, 2023; Soong, 2022). Some urban students can benefit from a new discourse of childhood that "seeks to redefine childhood as a time of play and relaxation rather than study or toil" (Naftali, 2010, p. 589). Schools in metropolitan cities are equipped with more educational resources to practice "*suzhi*" education—a form of education that emphasizes all-around development in students and is perceived to be opposite to exam-oriented education—and goes beyond a narrow focus on test scores (C. Tan, 2019a, 2019b).

According to a news report by *Southern Weekly* on September 2, 2023, some middle-aged parents from mainland China are increasingly pursuing relatively easier master's degrees in Hong Kong (Y. Zhang & Wei, 2023). Their goal is to obtain Hong Kong residency status, which would enable their children to have the opportunity to take the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE). Compared to the high-pressure *Gaokao* in mainland China, the HKDSE is less stressful, and it offers a more diverse path to further education. This strategy increases their children's chances of gaining admission to prestigious

universities in Hong Kong. By pushing themselves to go back to academic learning, these middle- and upper-class parents are providing their children with an alternative track to the fiercely competitive *Gaokao* and strive to keep their children within the middle class.

Rural Chinese students, however, can benefit from none of these ways of learning or child-raising. The teachers at Watershed sometimes helplessly admitted that they understood the downsides of their pedagogy, knowing that their students were experiencing a grueling schooling life. However, they had no other more effective teaching methods to prepare the academically interested students for entering an ideal high school. They usually used the word *mo* (grind, 磨), a local dialect, to describe their teaching strategy. To *mo* means to teach or learn through monotonous repeated actions. This word also appears in a well-known Chinese idiom, "If you work at it hard enough, you can *grind* an iron bar into a needle." This word indicates an important aspect of the culture of *kudu*: persevering in a learning routine even though it is difficult and dull. *Kudu* was the only reliable form of strategy during their strive for a different life path. Rural schools like Watershed need to rely on fostering a culture of *kudu* to empower their students and enhance their competitiveness in the pursuit of further education. However, this culture of *kudu* often excludes many rural adolescents who fall behind in their academic pursuits due to a lack of access to adequate learning resources.

This uneven distribution of *kudu* between rural and urban China leads to its second limitation: fragileness. Du and Peng (2022) argue that the culture of *kudu* is fragile as it is closely attached to a particular social system. The effectiveness of such a culture would be challenged when the dominant rules in a society change. This is particularly evident in a transitional period of society. In today's Chinese society, the practice of *kudu* may not guarantee the rewards that

school education has promised as the student evaluation system is undergoing gradual change. In contrast to the characteristics of diligence and hard work developed by rural students with limited resources, privileged-class urban children have the opportunity to nurture other attributes such as creativity, critical thinking, and a global perspective through international and elite education programs (Soong, 2022; C. Tan, 2019a, 2019b). These perceived "advanced" qualities have gained increasing prominence and seem to be gradually replacing the qualities that were originally required to excel in an exam-oriented educational system. The derogatory use of the term "small-town swots" is an example.

Kudu was one of the primary forms of striving for rural Chinese students and was a fundamental requirement for those seeking social mobility through education. For the group of students who pinned their hope to take the path of education, striving and learning to defer joy were key projects they had to learn before their dream of class travel could come true. The need for striving originated from their disadvantaged original positions within a stratified society. In other words, striving is closely connected with rurality, economic disadvantages, and low social positions. How did this group of striving students make sense of their journeys when they realized this fact? In the next section, I explore their embodied experiences of adopting the strategy of striving, including frustration and optimism.

"But Someone Was Born in Rome": Embodied Stratification

Striving in a Stratified Society

On a warm afternoon in early winter 2019, the ninth-grade students of Class A enjoyed an unregular class. Their Chinese language teacher, Mr. Yang, organized a poetry presentation for the students to coincide with their lessons on poetry appreciation. The students completed their

work after two classes dedicated to writing their own poems. This presentation provided a platform for the students to share their poems with the class. Mr. Yang encouraged the students to read their poems and share the stories behind their writings. At the beginning of the presentation, the teacher divided the students into groups and asked them to share their poems within the group. Each group was then invited to choose at least one poem from the group members to present to the entire class. Many students actively participated in this activity. The themes of their poems varied, including friendship, environmental protection, natural beauty, daily school life, and their understanding of society. Among the poems, the one that impressed me the most was entitled "Rome," written by Ying.

After a few groups of students finished sharing their writings, it was Yin's turn. As in the previous few days, Ying was wearing a khaki woolen coat and loose green cropped jeans, and a small yellow drop-shaped hair clip was pinned to the right side of her short hair as always. Ying walked up to the teacher's desk at the front of the classroom, bowed to everyone, then lifted her glasses and began to read her poem aloud:

Rome

I'd never seen Rome before
So I told myself,
"I'm going to Rome"
To see what the adults had said
A holy, noble, radiant place

I walked through a withered civilization
Passing by fresh hopes
I loved the epiphyllum in the short night
And missed the stars in April

Finally
I arrived in Rome at the end
When I lost my flawless self

I saw
A holy, noble, and radiant figure walking towards me
He said, "I was born here"
In his clear and limpid eyes
It reflected a me covered in wounds

—Translated from Ying's poem "Rome"

After reading her poem confidently and affectionately, Ying began to explain the reasons for writing it,

> The inspiration for this poem came from a sentence shared by my desk mate, "All roads lead to Rome, but someone was born in Rome." I believe that each of us has a Rome we aspire to reach. Ironically, even if I do reach my own Rome, I'm likely to lose many things. I may lose my innocence and my true self. At last, all I might see is a wounded body, a self I dislike. I've been working so hard…

Ying appeared too emotional to continue and paused briefly, using her notebook, in which she had written her poem, to cover her face. After a few moments of composing herself, Ying continued, "I just feel that I am so diligent, yet some people can effortlessly attain what I have to work so hard for. It feels too unfair." Her classmates all looked at her, listening intently. I believed that many in the audience, myself included, resonated with her words at that moment. After elucidating the meaning of her poem, Ying walked back to her seat from the teacher's desk amid the resounding applause of her classmates. Seated at the rear of the classroom, I applauded her vigorously. I was astonished that this fifteen-year-old girl could articulate her thoughts on society and her life journey in such a lucid and insightful manner.

Ying was one of the top students at Watershed. At the time of writing this poem, she was in the last year of middle school and was preparing for the coming *Zhongkao*. Although she was

one of the students most likely to be admitted to County High, the best high school in the county, she still felt anxious and worried that she might not be able to attend this dream school. To ease her anxiety and fear of failing the entrance exam, she decided to study even more diligently. In the last few months preparing for the exam, Ying's typical school day began before 6 a.m. and ended at midnight. Students in Class A, which Ying was in, had an extra self-study night class compared to their peers in Class B. Teachers expected students to use this extra class time to complete homework and revise textbooks independently. Therefore, students in Class A left school later at 8:50 p.m. However, Ying and a few of her classmates usually stayed in the classroom to continue studying for three extra hours until midnight. Following the headteacher's advice, Ying moved into the student dormitories on campus when she started ninth grade to save commuting time and have more time for studying. When the weather got cold, teachers would allow Ying and other students who stayed to study after school to use the shared teachers' office so they could turn on the air conditioning to keep warm.

In this poem, Ying expresses a class-based embodied feeling of learning and growing up in rural China. As one of the students most likely to achieve upward social mobility through education among her peers at Watershed, what Ying had experienced through her journey toward moving up was more about a sense of loss rather than a positive feeling of honor or pride. Having grown up in a similarly rural background, I understood Ying's sense of loss on the road of striving for a "brighter future" (Frye, 2012). Achieving educational success and upward mobility is difficult for rural students, who have to make greater efforts to make up for the disadvantages caused by their lower socio-economic backgrounds. As an academic-oriented student, Ying had not given up the hope of arriving at her "Rome" and achieving success.

Meanwhile, she understood her road to "Rome" would take more twists and turns. She had also realized that going down this road would cost not only a great deal of effort but also significant changes in feelings of the self (Morton, 2019). In the pursuit of success, she believed that she would end up with a "wounded" body, a body that is different from the "holy, noble, and radiant figure" who was born with unearned privilege. It was during her striving to become the "Romans" that she lost her previous naivety, purity, and flawless self.

Chinese students are familiar with the English proverb "All roads lead to Rome." This proverb inspires, especially young people, to dare themselves to try and achieve success. In reality, however, people face various inequalities brought about by social differences. These inequalities make people realize that even though there may indeed be many pathways to succeed theoretically accessible to all, the costs individuals must bear can vary significantly (Morton, 2019). Therefore, when this proverb meets the Chinese context, someone banteringly adds a sentence after it, "All roads lead to Rome, but someone was born in Rome." The newly added words suggest that individuals born with privilege do not need to exert similar effort to reach a destination that others may have pursued throughout their entire lives. The rewriting of the proverb expresses Chinese people's disappointment and dissatisfaction with the social injustice caused by different family backgrounds. It was my first time hearing this updated version of the proverb when Ying shared it in class.

This adaptation of the proverb has a similar meaning to another popular sentence that has resonated widely with young people in the past two decades, "I'm finally able to drink coffee together with you after 18 years of endeavor" (see W. Wang, 2014 for more detail). I jotted this sentence down quickly in my notebook when Ying was sharing her thoughts on writing the

poem. This sentence was the title of an article written by Maizi (a pseudonym used online), a rural-born youth who finally strived to become a white-collar employee in China's most prosperous city, Shanghai. In this article, which once went viral on the Internet in China, the author described how their experiences of growing up and gaining a middle-class position were different from those of people who were born with an urban identity. It took 18 years of hard work in school and work before the author could finally sit in a Starbucks with their Shanghai-born peers and drink coffee. Starbucks and coffee consumption typically symbolize a middle-class lifestyle in Chinese society. Confronting significant disparities compared to their urban counterparts and grappling with the setbacks and challenges arising from these differences, the author sighs and reflects, "Why wasn't I born in Shanghai?" Perhaps Ying, at some point, pondered a similar question: "Why wasn't I born in Rome?"

The two sentences from Ying and Maizi indicate the classed trajectories of young Chinese people with a rural background who constantly negotiate between their original social positions and desired destinations. Similar to Maizi, Ying was aware of the differences between the "Romans" and rural students like herself. In my later interview with Ying, she talked about her understanding of the ways in which her negotiations to change her social class position would differ from those born in "Rome." She shared,

> For those born in middle-upper (*zhong shang*, 中上) families, they have culture and knowledge. Definitely, they are better in terms of quality (*suzhi*, 素质). For those of us born in rural villages or backward small townships, we're already lagging behind at the starting line, and some may not even be able to reach the starting line to compete with others…I feel that we were born with differences. It's really like that some students were

> born in Rome, but we rural students have to climb a long way [to arrive in Rome]. Some are still lucky, like us, we have the opportunity to go upward by making great efforts in school. But we have also paid a great price. We need to require ourselves always to do the right things. We saw a lot of bad things, things that we didn't like to see, but we still saw them. A lot of things made us feel that the world is not worth living.

In our conversation, Ying used the term "middle-upper" to refer to people who are different from her. Although she did not directly use the word "class," Ying had insight into the impact of social class inequalities on the individual, understanding that she had a different starting line from that of students born into middle-upper families. To arrive at the place where those privileged students started, Ying paid the price of controlling herself to "always do the right things" through everyday techniques of self-discipline. In negotiating her path toward upward mobility, she was not able to afford to be on the wrong track, as she later explained, to develop skills in her non-academic interests and hobbies. She, therefore, woke up earlier and stayed up late to recite textbooks, memorize English vocabulary, and finish piles of math worksheets. No matter how tired she was, she would stay in the classroom to continue to study.

For rural students at Watershed, especially those in Class A, the "right" things were always academically related. These "right" things included spending more time preparing for the exam, memorizing more knowledge in textbooks, and getting familiar with skills in answering questions in exams. The production of a stratified educational space at Watershed, as I have described in Chapter 4, reinforced the necessity of focusing on a narrow meaning of learning (W. Wang, 2023). Academic-oriented rural students were not allowed to "waste" time freely developing hobbies. Nor did their families provide this opportunity.

As all teachers expected, Ying was one of the five students at Watershed who were finally admitted to County High after *Zhongkao*. In the county's best high school, class-based social divisions became more evident since most of Ying's classmates came from the county seat, a more urbanized center of Shen County. Only a small number of students, like Ying, were from rural schools. In our second formal interview, Ying shared the story of Tiao, her classmate at County High, who knew about many sports activities and eight musical instruments. When Ying was still learning high school English textbooks, Tiao started studying college English courses independently. Ying was not surprised at Tiao's achievement when she knew that he was from a wealthy family and his mother was an academic researcher. In Ying's description, Tiao was gentle, calm, and decent. Ying described this young male student as someone who had a different *qi chang* (aura, 气场), which can be interpreted that Tiao embodied a distinctively class positionality or characteristic. This embodiment of a middle-upper-class disposition, according to Ying, evolved gradually through meticulous parenting and family investments, something her own family could not afford. When talking about Tiao's story, Ying half-jokingly said,

> I once heard a sentence, "Only after finishing the things you have to do can you then do the things you love to do." However, for some students, their parents have taken care of the tasks they need to do, leaving them to focus solely on the things they love to do.

Due to different educational resources and experiences of upbringing, rural students' embodied practices and dispositions were easily considered inferior, if not pathological. Ying described the embodied differences as follows:

> We grew up in rural villages (she lowered her voice when saying "rural villages") and stayed with our grandparents. What we learned from them were how to quarrel with

> people on the street and how to bargain in the market. These things will slowly enter your body and soul. Finally, what other people [from upper- and middle-class] gain are inclusion, an open and inclusive mind, and something decent. But what we have gained are dirty words. You will not even think about who you would like to be. Nor will you feel about learning hard. People around you won't instill this idea into you. As a result, children from rich families become better, and children with poor parents will follow their parents' pathways if the children themselves don't have this idea or consciousness of change.

Previous literature has discussed rural youth's deficit view of rural communities in the Global South, understanding the rural as less "developed" or "civilized" (Crossouard et al., 2022). During her upbringing in rural China, Ying held a similar belief that individuals from rural areas were inevitably associated with indecent habits and dispositions. In contrast to middle and upper-class students who practiced inclusive and open-minded behavior, rural students were more likely to adopt habits that were considered uncultured. Ying's attitude toward her current rural community paralleled that of a group of rural and working-class students in China's elite universities in Jin's (2022) study. Drawing on Skeggs (1997), Jin (2022) explores the dis-identification developed among rural college students, who expressed negative views of their communities of origin and aspired to escape them. Through this similar dis-identification, Ying, in my study, demonstrated her understanding of the rural-urban divide and social class inequalities that contributed to distinct embodied dispositions.

The understanding of social differences and stratification was rooted in Ying's narratives. She expressed the need to strive for her due to the stratified social and educational system. This

perception of society was not only a result of Ying's lived experiences of growing up but also an expected result of schooling at Watershed. A primary teaching strategy at Watershed was to make the students realize their disadvantages, which was used to rationalize the need for *kudu*, as I discussed in the previous section. Teachers at Watershed expected their students to be aware of the disadvantaged social positions in which they were placed. In their daily school lives, teachers would remind the students that their lack of competitiveness stemmed from being rural. They hoped that this awareness would serve as a strong motivation for the students to strive to catch up with the privileged and change their destiny. Many teachers at Watershed had a rural background, and they used their own experiences to prove the effectiveness of such "catching up" discourses.

The students captured this information well. Xinhan, another top female student who was also admitted to the County High, once shared that her teachers often reminded them of their rural and mountainous identities. In an interview, she said,

> When our science teacher was teaching mechanics, he had pictures of Ferris wheels and high-speed trains on his slides. He asked if any of us had ever been on one. I suddenly felt a bit awkward and somewhat inferior, as if I hadn't experienced stuff like that. Plus, Mr. Yang (another teacher) likes to keep reminding us that we, as children from the mountains, need to work even harder.

Knowing their disadvantages had become a key lesson that the rural Chinese students at Watershed needed to learn. This was particularly important for the academic-oriented students, for whom their teachers expected that a discourse of catching up would mobilize their motivations to keep learning through *kudu*. Teachers transmitted a message that their

disadvantages would be altered if they were willing to work hard and buy the ideology of meritocracy. My fieldwork supports Paiva's (2021) findings in her ethnography of working-class students in Chile that "notions of merit and the recognition of social class inequalities may actually coexist" (p. 223) in public educational settings. In the next section, I discuss how the co-existence of recognizing stratification and beliefs in meritocracy influenced the striving students' aspirations and understandings of life opportunities.

Remaining Optimistic

Ying's understanding of social differences was one of the most prominent aspects of her narratives. After the poetry-sharing class, I spoke with Mr. Yang about his thoughts on Ying's poem. Contrary to what I expected, he did not appreciate it as much as I did. He felt that the poem expressed an overly negative attitude toward life. He explained that today's students face overwhelming pressure to navigate the competitive education system, particularly those who seek to improve their social status through schooling. However, after several conversations with Ying, I realized that Mr. Yang's interpretation did not fully capture the complexity of the message that she was attempting to convey in her poem. Although Ying spoke at length about the disadvantages of being a rural student, this did not mean that she was pessimistic about her future. She was not simply complaining about the inequalities she had faced. Rather, her experiences and thoughts vividly illustrated the dogged optimism that guides the lived experiences of many rural Chinese students, a key concept that this dissertation explores.

I had the opportunity to discuss the poem with Ying further after the poetry-sharing class. I asked her to explain the meaning of a self "covered in wounds" or "a wounded self" in the poem. Her response was surprisingly optimistic.

WW: At the end of the poem, you mentioned a self "covered in wounds." What does that mean?

Ying: I hope I don't end up like her [the girl in the poem]. It doesn't matter where your starting point is. After all, many people are in similar situations [of being in lower positions]. You have to consider those below you, those who are in worse conditions. Some people, from birth to death, don't even know what Rome is or where it is, or they even haven't thought about Rome. They live in a haze. When you compare yourself to them, you will realize how lucky you are. So, if you're willing to work hard, go upward, and arrive in their (people born with privilege) places, even though they were born there or have been staying there for a long time, I think it doesn't matter. After all, I am on the path to my own Rome, right? I have learned many things they can't understand, things they haven't experienced. So, it's a different kind of gain. But, if you lose all the good things you brought about when you were born, if they are all gone, even if you reach Rome, I don't think it's…[pause]

Ying lowered her head down and stopped talking as if she could not find the right word to describe her complicated feelings of gain and loss. Silences usually have their meanings, as Ngutuku (2022) finds in her research with children in poverty in Kenya, "silences in the conversations as well as hesitations, sighing, breaks and tonal variations…were imbued with affect, … [which] enabled a perspective on the diverse dimensions of children's voice beyond what they said" (p. 228). Understanding Ying's silence is important to make sense of her unsaid voice. From Ying's earlier expression, I guessed that the missing word could be "worthwhile." Ying seemed to be searching for a balance between feeling wounded and successful.

What Ying shared in the above dialogue appears to be contradictory. On the one hand, she believed that she was fortunate because she knew that there was still a possibility for her to achieve her dreams, and she could rely on education to finally get the ticket to her Rome. On the other hand, the "price of the ticket" (S. Friedman, 2014, p. 352) seems to be too high. To reconcile this contradiction, the development of dogged optimism is significant in this context. Although the costs of upward mobility are high, losing the optimism of achieving mobility (through education) is even more costly (Jakimow, 2016). The consequence of not remaining optimistic seemed to be difficult to afford for rural students like Ying. Regardless of how unworthy it may seem, most rural students will do their best to seize every opportunity to change the disadvantaged situation brought about by their rural background. That is because maintaining an optimistic attitude toward their future lives is one of the least expensive strategies for these students to deal with negative emotions and challenges in the present (Jakimow, 2016).

Ying concurred with my observation that there was a prevailing spirit of optimism among her peers. When I asked her to elaborate on her optimistic thoughts during our subsequent interviews when she studied at County High, she responded, "We just try not to think too much. If we think too deeply (in our thoughts), we might… [silence]." She paused again and shrugged her shoulders with her brow furrowed as if to suggest that overthinking could lead to feelings of depression and helplessness. After a moment of silence, she continued,

> I don't dare to think too much. Our head teacher [in high school] is quite pessimistic. He always tells us that we have no future and we won't be able to attend four-year universities. He says that many of us will end up in three-year vocational colleges... Sometimes we just want to live in the moment (*jishi xingle*, 及时行乐), do more

enjoyable things, and leave future worriers for our future selves to deal with. Sometimes we are indeed *blindly optimistic (mangmu leguaan*, 盲目乐观*)*.

Ying believed that her strategy of not "thinking deeply" or "thinking too much" was a way to escape from the harsh realities she faced. She saw this "state of 'thoughtlessness'" (Mains, 2012, p. 46) as a form of blind optimism, a term that had been used to describe their aspirations for their imagined futures by many of my participants from Watershed. In my interview with Shulan when she was in her second year of high school, she also used the term "blind optimism" to describe herself. However, based on my fieldwork at the school, I found that the rural students' optimism was not as blind as Ying and Shulan believed. This is not to suggest that these students had a high chance of realizing their expectations in reality. Rather, it implies that the production of such optimism was not based solely on unrealistic ideals. To label it as blind would likely ignore the social context in which this seemingly out-of-place optimism was produced in the process that rural students negotiated their positions in the stratified society within and outside of the school.

As I understand it, they included "blind" before "optimism" as a modifier because, on the one hand, they recognized that their rosy visions might not materialize. On the other hand, it served as a self-deprecating strategy to preemptively counter potential ridicule from the outside in case their aspirations were unfulfilled.

Striving as a Price

The constant state of striving at school seems positive at first glance, depicting academically ambitious students as proactive and energetic compared to those who passively waited away their days (further described in the subsequent chapter). However, striving comes

with a price. These students' embodied experiences of striving were marked by a sense of failure and loss. Rural Chinese students like Ying, Shulan, and Xinhan were aware that their need to strive through *kudu* resulted from their disadvantaged social positions. They keenly recognized the self-sacrifice required and perceived it as rooted in broader social injustices. Within the societal notion that "all success comes with a price," the costs associated with the striving of rural students—be they physical, cultural, or psychological—were justified and framed as "necessary sacrifices" on their paths to success.

Striving, in the form of *kudu*, was the price that academically ambitious rural students had to pay to alter their lower positions and attain their aspirations of social mobility. The price becomes especially evident when contrasted with urban children from more affluent backgrounds and their rural peers who lack interest in academics. The following sections discuss how striving emerges as a price when compared to two groups of Chinese students: the privileged urban youth and the academically disengaged rural youth.

Striving Differently in Rural and Urban China

By emphasizing the significance of striving in the experiences of rural students, I am not suggesting that only students in rural China must employ this approach in their life journeys. Rather, I am proposing that the strategies of striving adopted by rural students at Watershed differ from those of more privileged students who have greater access to resources from their families. The urban-rural divide in China is not only evident in economic and educational disparities but also in the different forms of striving among student populations. More advantaged urban students and those from higher social classes must also engage in striving within Chinese society, where it has become a cultural, moral, political, and economic imperative. Striving has been

constructed as a desirable trait that every aspiring citizen is supposed to develop in contemporary China. Chinese young people are expected to participate in the process of becoming "striving individuals" (Y. Yan, 2012, 2013).

As described in this chapter, the primary form of striving at rural schools like Watershed involves working hard through *kudu* and sacrificing present gratification for the pursuit of an imagined good future. Watershed students, driven by a fervent desire for academic advancement, had to improve their exam scores through rigorous practice, particularly in rote learning.

However, students from urban and upper-middle-class families are more likely to strive beyond exam preparation. Some researchers have depicted a contrasting picture of education in urban China (L. Liang, 2023; S. Liu, 2020; X. Xiang, 2020). Beyond the school environment, parenting and child-rearing practices significantly differ between rural and urban areas. While academically driven students in my study spent most of their time doing homework and watching TV dramas during their weekends, urban Chinese students enjoy more opportunities to cultivate habits and participate in activities considered more valuable. For example, Liang's (2023) study highlights a 10-year-old girl from an upper-middle-class family in Shanghai who participated in eight extracurricular activities over the weekend, including arts (such as drawing, Chinese dance, piano lessons, and flute practice), academic pursuits (Math Olympiad, English tutoring, and classical Chinese), and sports like Judo. These structured and often expensive activities, perceived as essential norms for urban children, do not align with the priorities of rural students like Ying, who cannot afford to "waste time" on non-textbook-focused pursuits.

Striving takes on a different form within the school environment as well. In her multi-sited ethnography, Xin Xiang (2020) explores how learning is unequal in China's stratified

educational system. She identifies four paradigms of learning in four types of middle school in rural and urban China: Learning in Family and Communal Endeavors, Learning through Formal Instructions, Learning in Organized Activities, and Learning in Child-Initiated Games. Rural students and others attending non-elite schools are more likely to participate in exam-oriented formal instruction, while children from metropolitan middle-class communities have more opportunities to participate in Learning in Organized Activities, a learning paradigm redirects its focus from memorization-heavy methods and instead aims to cultivate organizational and leadership skills to reproduce future elites.

Additionally, urban middle-class Chinese parents have the option to escape the highly competitive educational system for their children. Literature has documented how these privileged families opt out by sending children abroad (Tu, 2022), to Innovative Schools (S. L. Friedman, 2023; W. Xu & Spruyt, 2023), and International programs in elite public schools (S. Liu, 2020). These alternatives serve to circumvent the perceived issues in China's educational system, which many middle-class parents consider problematic. This shift allows for a departure from an exam-oriented learning environment toward cultivating other qualities deemed more relevant for attaining or maintaining an elite social position, such as practical knowledge, critical thinking, and creativity.

It is worth noting that despite urban and upper-middle-class children having more opportunities for flexible and creative learning, exams still remain significant in urban schools. Previous literature has observed that this exam-focused education is prevalent in urban school settings as well (Hu & West, 2015). However, as Xiang's (2020) ethnography suggests, even though the paradigm of Learning through Formal Instructions for examination preparation is

dominant in both elite and non-elite schools, the specific forms of learning vary. In non-elite schools located in rural townships and counties, the focus of teaching and learning was "focused almost exclusively on preparing for examinations and relied heavily on memorization" (X. Xiang, 2020, p. 100). While in urban elite schools, teachers tend to pay more attention to conceptual understanding and reasoning instead of memorization, embracing the reforms of *suzhi* education that emphasize students' all-around growth rather than narrowly focusing on test scores.

Even though my rural participants earnestly embraced and practiced striving ethos for social mobility, the rewards they reaped were significantly different from those of their urban counterparts. While urban Chinese youth aim for admission to top-tier universities in China and world-class universities abroad, my rural participants could only dream of attending an ordinary four-year college as their best outcome. They recognized that they had to persistently strive to compensate for the disadvantages of their upbringing, while others born with silver spoons in their mouths did not need to exert such arduous effort to achieve accomplishments they might never reach. This realization brought about a pain no less profound than the struggles induced by the prevailing norms of self-sacrifice and deferred joy in education. At times, they thought about giving up, as illustrated by the story Shulan shared during her high school years when she seriously considered dropping out to seek employment. Students like Ying and Shulan had to convince themselves to persevere.

The price paid by rural striving students often fails to guarantee returns in the long run. Even though their efforts may be temporarily rewarded during middle and high school, rural academically ambitious students can find themselves at a disadvantage again when rules change.

For example, after entering colleges, where creativity, social skills, and broad visions are emphasized—qualities for which rural students may not have been adequately prepared during their schooling—they are more likely to struggle to adapt to the new environment compared to their urban peers who have experienced *suzhi* education.

Paying a Material or/and Cultural Price

Will the state of suspension lived by the striving rural Chinese students ever come to an end? Will these students finally lead lives that honor their self-sacrifice and enable them to embrace joy without delay in the future? In *Being Modern in China: A Western Cultural Analysis of Modernity, Tradition and Schooling in China Today*, Willis (2020) provides a somewhat pessimistic answer to these questions. In his discussion of the schooling experiences of academically conformist Chinese students, he writes,

> In their climbing upwards, these young people have a particular relation to modernity, one of duty, delay and sacrifice—perhaps without end, as these habituations potentially nullify forever modernity's meaning as sensuous gratification and expanded self. Perhaps they will be forever self-sacrificing. (pp. 172-173)

Willis (2020) continues to argue that unlike the non-conformists who "pay a heavy material price" while "find(ing) an immediate arrival of sorts at a cultural modernity," the conformists pay "a cultural price of late, partial or lopsided arrival, or no arrival at all" (p. 173). In Willis's (2020) analysis, the non-conformists, understanding that they would not become "modern" and move socially upward through education, turned to other daily cultural practices to develop their relationships with the future and China's modernity. By actively embracing smartphones, the Internet, and consumerism, these non-academic-oriented students found their

path toward modernity. However, the conformists, who have to resist the temptations of consumption and the Internet to prioritize academic learning, take "a longer route to modernity" compared to their non-conformist peers (Willis, 2020, p. 173).

Willis (2020) describes the schooling life of the conformists as "a projective and precursive way of living" (p. 81). This interpretation is similar to the notion of suspension discussed in this dissertation. Willis uses the term "G-Routers" to identify the group of academically oriented and conformist students who aspire to navigate the path of *Gaokao* for social mobility. The state of suspension in the lives of these Chinese students is also examined in *Being Modern in China*, as Willis (2020) writes,

> For the G-Routers the future is a permanent work under construction, though enormous burdens are loaded upon it, strangely banishing the present and, perhaps more widely, helping to form that widespread feeling in China of provisionality, transience and invisibility of the here and now. (p. 81)

While academic-oriented students such as Ying, Shulan, and Xinhan had to postpone present enjoyment by dedicating themselves to *kudu*, their peers who held low expectations of achieving social mobility through education experienced a contrasting school life. For non-academic-oriented students, "to have fun first" was their fundamental faith at school. They were aware that the rewards of investing effort in education would never materialize for them. Therefore, studying arduously like Ying seemed futile in the perception of these waiting students. They anticipated that upon graduating from Watershed, if not admitted to vocational high school, they would immediately enter the workforce, possibly engaging in physically demanding labor after three years. In the words of some students, they would begin to "eat bitterness" (*chiku*, 吃

苦, endure hardships) after leaving school. Thus, these students believed that the remaining few years at school would likely represent the best and most carefree period of their lives.

There was a saying circulating among Watershed students, “If you can’t endure the hardships of studying now, you’ll face the hardships of society in the future.” Taihang, a boy in Class B, once remarked, “I know I’ll certainly have to eat bitterness in the future, so I’d rather not eat this at school right now. Otherwise, life would be too ‘bitter,’ and I’d always eat bitterness.” Pingping shared a similar view with Taihang. She was initially in Class A at the beginning of her ninth grade but decided to transfer to Class B a couple of weeks later. When I asked her about the reasons for this decision, she explained,

> I was sure that I am not able to go to an academic high school. Also, I sat at the very back of the classroom in Class A. Teachers usually would not notice me, knowing what I was doing. So I often didn’t listen in class and fell asleep. But sometimes, my teachers would wake me up. This was so embarrassing.

To avoid this embarrassment and find a place where she could sleep in class without reproach, Pingping transferred to the “bad” class. When I asked why she did not try harder and stay in Class A, she responded,

> To have fun is more important. I just want to seize the day. Even though I work hard and eat bitterness at this time, I feel like I’ll still have to eat bitterness in the future [laugh]. No matter what work I do, I’ll have to suffer because I can’t be a big boss. Anyway, life is bitter for me. The difference is the way and the degree of suffering.

“Bitterness” was a recurring theme in my conversations with Pingping. Eating less bitterness before adulthood was also her motivation for transferring from the best private school

in Shen County to Watershed in the eighth grade. Pingping explained that the private school was renowned for its rigorous discipline, with teachers who pushed too hard. She chose to return to Red Mountain Township because she could not tolerate this demanding style of education. Being forced to study subjects she had no interest in was distressing for her. She did not see the meaning of enduring hardship at the private school, knowing she was less likely to attend an academic high school. Moving to Watershed offered more freedom and chances to have fun.

Drawing from Willis (2020), I understand that Pingping was unwilling to pay both "a heavy material price" in the future and "a cultural price" in the present (p. 173), especially when she realized that the rewards seemingly promised by education might never materialize. Students like her rushed toward modernity by engaging in various cultural practices. These practices typically involved wearing makeup, watching TV dramas, and idolizing celebrities for girls. For boys, they involved drinking, playing video games, and forming romantic relationships.

However, these experiences were largely absent in the school lives of striving students. To avoid paying a material price, these rural students who strived at school paid "a cultural price of late, partial or lopsided arrival" (Willis, 2020, p. 173) of China's cultural modernity. They anchored their hopes of achieving social mobility in education. Unlike some non-academic students who believed in the existence of many alternatives to success (see Yonghai's interview in the first section of this chapter), these academically oriented students tended to display less confidence in such alternatives.

The cultural experiences of rural Chinese students in elite institutions have garnered significant attention in academic discourse recently (J. Chen, 2021; Cheng, 2018; Liao & Wong, 2019). Much of this body of research has concentrated on comprehending the cultural losses

encountered by rural students as they undergo arduous journeys to secure admission to prestigious universities in major metropolises such as Beijing and Shanghai. However, despite sharing similar experiences of paying a great cultural price, my participants represent a distinct group that has received limited attention in existing studies. After completing their education at Watershed and undergoing three years of academic high school studies, none of these students, who were initially among Watershed's top performers, succeeded in gaining admission to China's top-tier universities. After the *Gaokao* in 2023, the student who achieved the highest scores among the striving students who graduated from Watershed was admitted to an ordinary four-year college in a less-developed province in a third-tier city. Only a few managed to secure positions in four-year institutions. Exceptional students like Ying and Yunjin, who had outstanding academic records at Watershed, ended up attending three-year vocational colleges.

As middle and high school students at this life stage, Ying, Shulan, and her friends would definitely not accept that their sacrifice in *kudu* would come without a satisfactory reward, in spite of occasionally doubting the likelihood of gaining the expected reward. Otherwise, they might find their effort without meaning. After the *Gaokao* in 2023, only four students who graduated from Watershed in Ying's cohort finally entered four-year colleges (*ben ke*, 本科), and none ended up getting into top-tier universities. Ying was not admitted into a four-year college and ended up in a three-year college (*zhuan ke*, 专科). Even though she experienced disappointment like this moment, Ying did not turn into pessimistic about her life. Rather, she set a new goal of upgrading from a three-year college to a four-year university (*zhuan sheng ben*, 专升本). She started a new project of *shang'an*. *Shang'an* (上岸), which literally means going onto the shore, has become a key theme among educated Chinese youth. For Ying, failing to *shang'an*

in the *Gaokao*, she had to continue this project in her college life and probably needed to continue a similar project in getting into graduate school and seeking a stable civil service position in the future. During these projects, as Willis (2020) anticipates, the state of suspension in the lives of students such as Ying will be "without end," and they will have to "be forever self-sacrificing" (pp. 172-173) of the meaning of the present.

Chapter 6: Waiting

Life is full of tears,
The harder you strive, the more bad luck you have.
The more you pursue, the more miserable you are.
Do you feel tired from struggling without hope?
Why not just slump onto the bed and sleep?
(生活你全是泪/没死就得活受罪/越是折腾越倒霉/越有追求越悲催/垂死挣扎你累不累/不如瘫在床上睡)

Ne Zha, a Chinese animated film, my translation

Don't consider someone poor just because they lack wealth;
consider them truly poor if they lack social connections.
(人家穷勿算穷，门路穷算真穷)

A local proverb, my translation

Waiting indicates that we are engaged in, and have expectations from, life.

Hage, 2009, p. 1

This chapter shifts its focus to the strategy of waiting. Compared to the proactive approach of striving, waiting was a tactic more prevalently adopted by students at Watershed, spanning both Class A and B. A significant number of these students often felt bored and unmotivated during their academic journey, leading them to spend their school days sleeping or engaging in frivolous activities. Many patiently waited for the end of lessons, the end of school days, and the outcome of *Zhongkao* to determine their next steps—either attending vocational high school or venturing into society. They perceived limited opportunities to shape their immediate and near futures, anticipating a shift toward ambition and determination only after leaving the education track. For now, waiting was their strategy.

Despite their disengagement at school, their aspirations for upward social mobility remained undiminished. The rural students at Watershed, even with less satisfied academic performance, maintained a sense of optimism about their futures. Utilizing the concept of "waiting" as an analytical tool (Janeja & Bandak, 2018; Jeffrey, 2010; Masquelier, 2019;

Masquelier & Durham, 2023a), this chapter examines a seemingly contradictory phenomenon observed among some rural Chinese students in middle and/or high school: they harbored hopes for a promising future yet often refrained from actively pursuing it.

This chapter begins by introducing the rise of a "slacking off" subculture in today's Chinese society. Contrasting with China's traditional emphasis on hard work, the recent surge in this subculture, particularly pronounced during the uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic, starkly challenges the ethos of striving entrenched in official political narratives. Through an examination of Watershed students' attitudes toward both the perceived "positive" striving and "passive" slacking narratives, I analyze the similarities and differences between their practice of waiting and the emerging subculture of slacking off. I subsequently explore the mobility expectations of these students, painting a picture of a paradoxical schooling life: aspirations without active pursuit. This is further illuminated by the detailed narratives of Hongbin, a male student at Watershed, showcasing the intricate relationship between aspiration and waiting that rural Chinese youth grapple with. The final section underscores the value of employing a "waiting" framework to comprehend the academic journeys of rural Chinese students. I argue that this strategy of waiting differs fundamentally from the concept of resistance (Willis, 1977)—an important analytical lens used in Western contexts to interpret the educational experiences of working-class youth.

An Emerging Slacker Subculture

Houlang Versus Qie Guevara

On the evening of May 3, 2020, the night before China's May Fourth Youth Day, my WeChat Moments was flooded with a four-minute-long video titled *Houlang* (The Next Wave, or

The Rear Wave, 后浪). Many of my university friends were sharing the video on the Moments platform to celebrate the coming Chinese Youth Day. The word *houlang* came from a well-known Chinese saying, "The next wave of the Yangtze River pushes the front ones forward" (长江后浪推前浪), symbolizing the idea that the younger generation outpaces the old one. This short popular video was released by the Bilibili website—a popular video-sharing platform, which defines itself as the "dream land of Generation Z"—as an ode to the young Chinese generation. In this video, the 52-year-old national-level actor He Bing gives a speech to passionately admire China's younger generation because of their confidence, creativity, and diverse worldviews. Representing the older generation, He Bing highly praises the outstanding achievements of the young generation and directly expresses his envy of the youth currently living in an era full of opportunities. The term "*houlang*" subsequently became a hot Internet idiom to represent today's Chinese youth. In the speech, He Bing says,

> You have been exploring your interests since you were children. Many of you clearly knew what you wanted in your childhood. You knew exactly what you liked or disliked. Boundaries between people are broken down…Now you have the right that our older generations have always dreamed of—*the right to choose*. Your life is all about what you love. You are fortunate to be born in this era. (my translation)

In addition to these words of praise, the video uses many symbols to demonstrate the excellence and vitality of Chinese youth, including using electronic products (iPad and Apple Pencil) to learn a foreign language by themselves, making their own action figures, traveling abroad, playing traditional musical instruments, diving, and skydiving.

However, the video intended to praise Chinese youth did not resonate collectively with

the younger generation as expected. It drew criticism from many young people because the symbols and the overly glorified depiction of youth life in the video were considered to be too urban-oriented. Therefore, they were seen as only partially representing the lifestyles of some middle- and upper-class youth growing up in urban China (Gullotta & Lin, 2022; Pang, 2022). In other words, the young people in the video are considered to be urban youth and young people from wealthy families. For this reason, when *houlang* was proposed as a term intended to positively refer to all young Chinese, it met with widespread resistance. Many young netizens who did not see themselves reflected in the inspiring video felt that they were inappropriately "being represented" (*bei daibiao*, 被代表).

I was curious about how the video and the buzzword *houlang* were discussed among the rural students at Watershed. Students at Watershed were definitely familiar with Bilibili's website, and many of them were its users. They used the website to watch anime videos, gaming recordings, or other interesting live broadcasts. Most of them had watched the *Houlang* video. However, despite the popularity of the word *houlang* on the Internet, I heard few discussions about it among my participants. Nor did they use the word to identify themselves. When I tried to bring the topic up in our daily conversations, the students usually did not show much interest. Many of them responded to my question about their feelings after watching the video with a short answer, "No feeling" (没什么感觉).

Hongbin, a boy in Class B who was considered low-achieving academically, gave me a longer response by saying, "It's good. It looks like full of positive energy *(zheng neng liang*), but it has nothing to do with me. I think they want us to be positive like this." He understood the political meaning of the release of the video, as he was aware of the encouragement of gaining

“positive energy,” a phrase that has been constructed as an official culture in recent years (K. C. Tan & Cheng, 2020; Yang & Tang, 2018). Unlike many of my university friends who shared the video on WeChat Moments, Hongbin acknowledged that the video failed to evoke any emotions, sentiments, or empathy for the lives of the young people portrayed in it.

In stark contrast to the narrowly disseminated urban- and elite-focused discourse of “*houlang*” at Watershed, a different cultural phenomenon, also originating from a short video released a couple of weeks before the Youth Day of 2020, deeply resonated with Watershed students. This video, which garnered much discussion among the students, featured a rural electric bike burglar humorously dubbed “Qie Guevara.” It played a partial role in sparking a critical conversation about *dagong* (working for others) and subsequently influenced the broader emergence of the collective identity of *dagongren* (laborers, 打工人) within Chinese society. The pronounced disparity in students’ reactions to these two videos offers important sociocultural insights, providing a lens through which we can better understand the perspectives of these rural students on society and their individual lives.

After two months of school closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Watershed finally reopened in mid-April 2020. On the second Monday morning of the Spring semester, I was chatting with Hongbin by the railing outside the back door of Class B during the ten-minute break after the first course session. When Yonghai, Hongbin’s classmate, came out from the back door, he walked to us and suddenly said in an excited tone, “It’s impossible to *dagong*” (打工是不可能打工的). It seemed like he was shouting a slogan with a funny accent. He shook his head slightly as he was speaking, trying to put on a somewhat serious expression, which made his behavior full of humor. I had no idea what was going on. But Hongbin immediately understood it

and quickly responded in the same comical vein, “I’ll never *dagong* in my whole life” (这辈子都不可能打工的). They both laughed out loud. This confused me even more.

Hongbin then educated me about the two sentences that were widely spread on China’s short video-sharing platforms, such as Douyin and Kuaishou, during that time. These words came from Liqi Zhou, a 36-year-old man who had been put in prison multiple times for theft. In an interview after he was arrested by the police because of stealing electric bikes in 2012, a reporter asked him why he did not go to work but went to steal, he gave the above two sentences as an answer. The video of this interview suddenly went viral in 2016 when Zhou was jailed again for robbery and theft. Zhou’s attitude toward work or *dagong* is clearly “deviant,” especially in a society that constantly emphasizes striving for success with one’s own hands. It was this open and serious expression of such a nonconformist idea, combined with Zhou’s strong Southern accent when speaking Mandarin, that gave the video a reason to be rapidly spread on social media and attracted people to imitate what Zhou said.

The ninth graders at Watershed learned about Liqi Zhou’s story in April 2020, when the man was about to be released from prison, and his words were widely circulated for the second time. During those weeks, I repeatedly heard the students bring up these words about *dagong*. Sometimes, they replaced the word *dagong* with “study” or “do homework” when teachers asked them to concentrate on their studies, jokingly saying, “It’s impossible to study, I’ll never study in my whole life.” The students usually jumped at any chance to use the sentence to demonstrate a sense of humor. During an evening self-study class, for example, when the teacher asked the students in Class B to quiet down and start studying, a boy who spoke loudly and imitated Zhou’s accent, saying, “It’s impossible to do homework. I’ll never do homework in my whole

life." Then, there was a roar of laughter in the classroom. The teacher, recognizing the teasing nature of the students, also joined in the laughter without blaming them for disrupting the class.

On the Internet, Zhou's words were given critical cultural meanings and interpreted as a form of youth resistance (Gao, 2021; G. Zhang, 2021). The Wikipedia website, for example, introduces Liqi Zhou as a "Chinese slacker culture influencer" as his attitude toward work made him a typical example of trying to "reap without sowing" (*bu lao er huo*, 不劳而获), a life attitude that has long been criticized in Chinese culture. In addition, Zhou was celebrated as a "spiritual leader" in a non-serious way by some young Chinese netizens because of his rebellious thought of never working for someone else (Gao, 2021). His remarks about *dagong* were seen as a blunt expression of dissatisfaction among young workers, especially young migrant workers who move from villages to cities to make ends meet through hard manual labor, over-growing inequalities, low wages, and poor working conditions. Some Chinese people jokingly nicknamed Zhou "Qie Guevara" (*qie* means 'to steal') as his hairstyle and beard looked like the Cuban revolutionary leader Che Guevara. "Qie," a Chinese word for steal, sounds similar to "Che" in Mandarin pronunciation, capturing Zhou's identity as an electric bike thief. Chinese netizens have edited Zhou's face onto posters of Che Guevara, usually with red as the background color because red traditionally symbolizes a revolution in China.

The popularity of "Qie Guevara" is regarded as an important supplement to the emerging culture of slacking off in Chinese society, which has become a concern to the government in recent years (Gullotta & Lin, 2022; Su, 2023). Interestingly, my dissertation research started at a time when the ethos of striving had not been widely challenged in Chinese society. However, during my fieldwork years, I observed the emergence of increasing resistance to such positive

discourses, witnessing the evolution of China's culture of slacking off. Chinese young netizens use various buzzwords and cultural symbols to articulate their sense of failure and frustration within the context of an increasingly competitive and stratified social landscape. This allows them to distance themselves from mainstream expectations that encourage a perpetually positive outlook (K. C. Tan & Cheng, 2020; Z. Zhang & Li, 2023). These words include *sang* (mourning, 丧), *xianyu* (salted fish, 咸鱼), *foxi qinnian* (Buddha-like youth, 佛系青年), *tangping* (lay flat, 躺平), and *bailan* (let it rot, 摆烂). All these memes are counter-narratives of Chinese youth in the face of increasing precarious and uncertainties, serving "as a passive revolt against both the Chinese hardworking culture and the neoliberal entrepreneurial subject" (Pang, 2022, p. 95).

While these narratives were typically associated with urban settings and primarily focused on challenging working conditions, they significantly impacted the lives of my participants, both at and beyond Watershed. My school fieldwork was conducted before the emergence of some of these buzzwords. In my follow-up interviews, which took place after my participants graduated from Watershed, they frequently used terms such as *tangping* and *bailan* to describe their current lives. "I've already *tangping*" and "I continue to *bailan*" were answers I repeatedly received from Watershed graduates when we talked about their experiences at the vocational high school.

Evidence of students engaging in "slacking off" was particularly pronounced in the Class B classroom. Students often slept through lessons, copied homework, discreetly played video games on smartphones during lectures, favored basketball or other activities over attending classes, and left some exams entirely unanswered. It was common to see more than half of the students in Class B dozing off in subjects like English, Chinese, and social studies, likely due to

the more lenient approach of these teachers. During evening self-study sessions, while some in Class A were engrossed in their homework, Class B boys often opted out, preferring to play poker, compete in push-up challenges at the back of the room, or casually stroll through the hallways. Concurrently, some girls immersed themselves in romantic novels, chatted with nearby classmates, or honed their skills in embroidery and knitting.

Sunhao and I arranged a meeting at the end of the summer of 2023, just after he had finished his part-time job as a food delivery driver and was about to embark on his three-year college journey. He was one of the few students who were transferred from Class A to Class B at the beginning of the second semester of the ninth grade due to lower scores in the final exams. Reflecting on his school years, Sunhao described his middle and high school experiences in the following way:

> I've always been someone who doesn't really strive or push hard. Maybe it's just my personality. To be straight up, I wasn't too ambitious, kind of drifting through life. This summer, I started doing food deliveries, and it gave me a totally different feeling, like nothing I've felt in my first 18 years. I mean, in my earlier school life, you could sum it up as "lazy" (*daiduo*, 怠惰), always putting things off and just chillin'. To be harsh, it was even somewhat "degenerate" (*daiduo*, 怠堕), super laid-back and decadent.

Sunhao used many negative words to describe himself, aiming to highlight how lazy, idle, and lacking in ambition he was during his past student years. He tended to seek reasons for his own dissatisfaction with his disposition. In contrast, some students were more likely to explain their current idleness with boredom. A significant emotional facet of slacking off was the sensation of boredom. Discussions about feeling bored frequently surfaced in the daily

conversations of Watershed students. They often shared that this ennui was not limited to their school activities; it extended beyond the school gates, manifesting even during prolonged video game sessions. In a conversation I had with Hongbin about his recurrent bouts of boredom, he described what this emotion truly felt like for him.

> WW: It seems like you guys often use the word "boring." Why does life always feel that way?
>
> Hongbin: It's like there's not much to do. You know, it's like we're bored to the point where we just end up lying down and sleeping. We'll sleep right until noon, and then it's time to go home from school. Same thing at home; all that's left is sleeping. Then I don't even know what I want to do after waking up. So I just go back to sleep. When it's class time, most of us are just resting our heads and dozing off. There are probably only six students in our class who actually study. Well, it's not really studying; they just understand what the teacher is saying. Even those six also fall asleep during classes.

The contrasting responses of Watershed students to the two cultural trends— their apathy toward *houlang* and their fervent embrace of Liqi Zhou's expressions—underscored their fluctuating affiliations with the mainstream narrative and the more informal slacking off subculture. Emerging youth movements like *tangping* and *bailan* appear to reflect elements of these students' academic journeys. Yet, as I will detail below, the widespread tendency to slack off or display a lack of drive at Watershed should not be exclusively viewed through the lens of youth resistance—a fundamental aspect of the contemporary pessimistic subculture. Rural students from Red Mountain Township adopted a strategy of waiting without completely challenging the striving ethos inherent in dominant narratives.

"Isn't He Setting a Bad Example?"

Applying the subculture of slacking off or youth resistance to explain the widespread of Liqi Zhou's words among the rural students at Watershed may be in danger of over-interpretation. This is not to say that feelings of failure were not present in the cultural expression of this group of rural students; in fact, as we have illustrated in the previous chapter, the sense of loss was embedded in the students' narratives of their lives and intricately intertwined with their desire for success. More precisely, based on my understanding, the reason why the students were interested in using and paraphrasing Zhou's words was more out of a playful attitude. Interestingly, although there were many voices that were in sympathy with Liqi Zhou on social media, the students at Watershed held a skeptical attitude toward Zhou being celebrated as a youth icon. When introducing Zhou's story to me, Hongbin said,

> When the reporter [in the interview] asked him what life was like in prison, he even said it's good, because there was free food and drink, and only interesting people ended up in prison. You wouldn't believe how proud he sounded when saying this. I just don't get it—isn't he setting a bad example? Isn't this video spreading toxic thoughts? Now, he has become an Internet celebrity, and I've heard some companies are even offering him millions to hire him…That's a lot of money. He's truly realized his dream of not working for anyone else.

Unlike some young netizens on the Internet who portrayed Zhou as a "spiritual leader" or "Qie Guevara," Hongbin believed that Zhou was "a bad example" whose words were "spreading toxic thoughts." For Hongbin, Zhou's notions about being put incarcerated and the individuals in prison were not accurate and could potentially mislead some teenagers. At the same time, Zhou

also showed people a completely different path to "success" in the age of the Internet. When Hongbin saw the news that some companies were willing to spend millions to hire Zhou, he admitted that he had thought about the possibility of becoming an Internet celebrity in the future. He joked,

> I was thinking maybe I can also go to steal an electric bike, and then say some golden sentences (*jin ju*, 金句) when I'm caught by police [laugh]… Then I will also become an Internet celebrity after I get out of prison three years later. But I don't think I can make it, cause I don't know what golden sentences to say, I don't know how to act in front of the camera.

I heard other students in Class A and Class B make similar points about the popularity of Liqi Zhou. This was a ten-minute break before a PE class. When I was sitting on the plastic track in the sports court with five students, three girls and two boys from Class B, waiting for the start of the PE class, they mentioned Zhou's video. On the one hand, they felt that Zhou's story would lead to the development of an unhealthy social ethos, which probably would make some young people think they do not need to work hard anymore. On the other hand, they also expressed envy for the high salary Zhou might receive after he was released from prison, through which they saw another pathway to make a living after graduation.

From the students' perspectives, they did not reference Liqi Zhou's words as a form of resistance or an expression of gloom about their current situations or anticipated futures. Instead, they critically evaluated the surging popularity of this cultural trend. Simultaneously, they saw an alternate route to success within this "slacker" ethos: becoming an Internet sensation. This stance contrasted with the core values of the pessimistic slacking-off culture. The attitudes expressed by

Watershed's rural students appeared to blend aspirations for social mobility with a continuous pursuit of success. When these students articulated a wish to abstain from work, it was not out of skepticism of potential exploitation in their future work. It signified an optimistic aspiration for a life imbued with more freedom and control.

Therefore, it is risky to rely solely on a resistance framework to understand the sentiments of the "Winter-Cry" students from Red Mountain Township; doing so might inadvertently depict them as a group of disillusioned youth who had fully developed a critical understanding of Chinese society. They showcased skepticism toward the idea of gaining without effort, an idea accentuated by Liqi Zhou's unexpected path of social mobility. Given their reservations about the viral nature of Liqi Zhou's video, they appeared largely aligned with the mainstream ethos of striving and positivity. Thus, their viewpoints cannot readily be labeled as counter-narratives to the dominant discourses. While at the same time, watershed students could not relate to the *Houlang* video, distancing themselves from the state-endorsed youth discourse it represented.

Subsequent sections of this chapter explore the ambivalence of this optimistic and pessimistic contradiction in the aspirations of rural Chinese students. Utilizing "waiting" as an analytical tool, the chapter unpacks the intricacies of the students' disengagement in their mobility projects. Stories from Watershed demonstrate how the students' waiting diverged from the emerging pessimistic subculture, described as marked by "feelings of defeatism and loss" (K. C. Tan & Cheng, 2020, p. 86) or "a sense of depletion, and a general inability to move forward" (Masquelier, 2019, p. 3).

All Roads Lead to the Middle: Aspiring While Waiting

"It (my path) might be bumpy, or it might be flat, but in the end, it must be upward."

—Lei Zhang described his thoughts on his future road

May is usually a cozy month in Red Mountain Township. The temperature has not risen too high yet. Ahead of the upcoming plum rain season, the clear weather can easily make people in the rural mountain place feel pleasant. In such fine weather, students who had lunch in the school cafeteria always chose to spend some time on the campus after the meal. On one such day, I came to the sports court as usual to spend the lunch break with the students. Some male seniors were playing basketball, some girls and boys were playing badminton together, some were sitting around chatting, and some were chasing and playing. Most of the students were with friends, rarely alone. I saw Lei Zhang, a boy in Class A, in the corner of the court, walking alone with his head down and hands in the pockets of the school uniform, looking as if he was thinking about something serious. Not long after I came to Watershed, I noticed that Lei was an unpopular student in his class. He was not tall compared to other ninth-grade boys. He had short hair and dark skin. His classmates and the head teacher, Mr. Weng, often criticized and even excluded him because he sometimes smelled bad after not taking a bath for a relatively long time. After I got to the school, I became his friend, someone he could often talk to.

Lei approached me slowly upon seeing me, and we chatted about our day. His articulation was a bit unclear, as he spoke relatively fast with a slight accent. I sometimes needed him to repeat what he had just said. When we talked about his class this morning, he said that a question had been bothering him. He was a little serious but still asked me with a smile, "The textbook says that we'll achieve the goal of fully building a moderately prosperous society in all respects

(*quanmian jiancheng xiaokang shehui*, 全面建成小康社会) by 2020, but why is my family still so poor?" His question reminded me of the social science class in the morning, where the students in Class A learned about China's milestone development goal for 2020. Lei continued, "It seems that everyone is rushing toward a moderate prosperity society (*ben xiaokang*, 奔小康), but my family doesn't seem to be getting any better." While we were talking, not far away, a male teacher drove his Porsche into the school gate and parked it in front of the cafeteria.

I did not know how to respond appropriately to Lei's confusion at the moment, though it seemed he did not expect an answer from me. Lei came from a village about a twenty-minute walk from the school. He stayed in the school dormitory from Monday to Friday and went back home on Friday afternoons to live with her grandma and elder sister. His father suffered from some mental illness and, in Lei's own words, was "locked up" in a mental hospital in the county seat. He had not seen his father since the beginning of ninth grade. Before Lei went to kindergarten, his mother divorced his father and returned to her home province, which is more than 1,600 kilometers away from Red Mountain Township. Since then, Lei has only seen his mother a few times. His sister, who was attending the vocational high school, stopped talking to the family after experiencing some relational conflicts with her grandma. The income in Lei's family mainly came from two sources: one was the government's subsistence allowance, and the other was the meager income his grandma earned from making handicrafts.

I asked Lei how he felt when he realized that society as a whole was going to achieve *xiaokang* soon, while his family remained stagnant. His answer was unexpectedly optimistic.

> Maybe in the near future my family will also achieve *xiaokang*. It may be that the country hasn't seen (my family's situation). I think one day, we'll also become (*xiaokang*). My

> grandma keeps telling me that the future of my family rests on my shoulders. When I enter society, I'll need to rely on my own hands to make my family better. I believe that our future will definitely be better than our present.

Lei maintained a positive outlook for his family's future, believing they would someday attain *xiaokang* status, even if their current situation seemed less promising. However, Lei's school experiences did not seem to support this hopeful vision. While he was enrolled in Class A, which emphasized academics, he often appeared disinterested and detached. Occasionally, he would bring his grandma's old smartphone to class to play video games and would drift into sleep during English and social science classes. Unlike more diligent students, such as Ying and Shulan, he did not maximize his learning opportunities during school hours. In Lei's narratives, we encounter an intriguing contradiction that was common among the "Winter-Cry Birds:" Despite nurturing high aspirations, their drive to actively chase these dreams often waned. This section examines this mindset of aspiring while waiting: Why aspire, and why not strive?

Not Yet: Waiting for Participation

An optimism toward the future, similar to Lei's, was prevalent at Watershed. Some students were aware that education could offer only limited support for their mobility endeavors; nevertheless, they maintained the belief that they would not be left behind in the future. This resonates with Hong's (2022) study with rural middle school students in Southwest China. Regardless of their diverse academic performances, the students in Hong's study exhibited a strong belief in fulfilling their desired life goals. Despite acknowledging their current lower social positions, many students still imagined that they would eventually overcome their disadvantaged situations and move up socially.

The following dialogue took place in Hongbin's home village in the second semester of his ninth grade. When I asked him about his social position, his initial response was "the lowest." However, he promptly amended his answer, saying that he was not as disadvantaged as the lowest and corrected himself by saying, "A little better than the lowest." Afterward, our conversation turned to his vision of the future. He used the same words as Lei: *ben xiaokang*. He was confident in his ability to achieve a life of *xiaokang* by the age of thirty.

WW: You feel like you are kind of at the lower end of society right now. What about the future?

Hongbin: Well, in the future, I'm definitely aiming for *ben xiaokang*. Right now, I'm not quite there yet, just take a look at the house I'm living in.

WW: So you're sure that you'll finally *ben xiaokang*?

Hongbin: Yeah, exactly. *Ben xiaokang*—having a house, a car, and a girlfriend. Life would be pretty good then.

WW: What kind of life do you think is considered good?

Hongbin: A good life is one where you're not bothered by a lack of money. You see, even if you get sick, you wouldn't worry about money—you can just get treated and be fine if you have enough money.

WW: When do you think you'll achieve this kind of good life?

Hongbin: At the age of thirty, I think I should be able to get there.

WW: How do you think you can achieve that?

Hongbin: I'm not sure yet. I haven't really figured it out. I'm kind of too early to think about this. Anyway, there should be many ways to achieve this. Trying each one might

waste time, so later on, I'll need just one path and then achieve it all at once.

Other students did not use the political term *xiaokang* to portray their desired future lives. Instead, many of them used a spatial and hieratical phrase—"the middle"—to name their future social destination. Yuchao described himself as the "*shehui diceng niuma*" (社会底层牛马, society's underdogs), an Internet idiom that refers to people from the lower socioeconomic strata who experience a difficult life and are treated extremely unfairly. But he also believed that he would move to the middle, as he said, "(I will move to) the middle position. I dream of becoming a high-end individual in society."

Girls shared similar views of their futures. When I asked Pingping about her current position in society, she smiled bitterly and said, "The lowest. In my mind, those with high social status are the ones who have already fulfilled all their material needs and live very freely. But that's not me; I'm stuck and don't have money to spend." Her vision of the future was also a relocation to the middle of the social hierarchy. "The middle level. The upper level is for people like Jack Ma, who have big corporations. I'll be content in the middle, working for them, haha."

Wenjie's imagination of her future life was positive as well. She was a girl who started to work after graduation from middle school and did not continue to high school. We had a follow-up interview in December 2020, around a year after she left school. At that time, she had recently quit her job at a bubble tea shop and embarked on a new role as a cashier at a small 24-hour convenience store, where she worked night shifts every day. We met at the largest shopping mall in the county seat. Accompanying her was a friend she had met after she started to work, who had dropped out of middle school.

Throughout our conversation, Wenjie did not bring up any topics related to the difficulties

of her job. Instead, our discussion mostly revolved around the excitement of entering society: her romantic relationship with her current boyfriend, exposure to experiences she had not encountered during her school years, and the formation of new friendships. She mentioned several times that her life "is pretty good." When I pressed for specific reasons behind her contentment, she replied, "I don't really know why it's good. I just feel that it's quite good now." The following is our discussion about her perceived social status.

WW: What social position do you think you currently hold?

Wenjie: [Speaking loudly] The lowest of the low. (I'm a) *dagongren* (打工人, laborer or working people). Working people, working soul, working people are persons above persons (打工人, 打工魂，打工都是人上人[10]).

WW: How do you feel about being a *dagongren*?

Wenjie: Pretty good. I'll gradually (*manman di*, 慢慢地) become rich, and slowly, I'll have my own small store. I plan to open a store selling snacks so I can enjoy snacks every day [laugh].

When thinking about what jobs would bring them to the middle of the social strata, not all students imagined a white-collar job, such as Pingping, who hoped to work for a big company. Students like Wenjie and Hongbin aspired to arrive in the middle position without middle-class jobs. Owning their own small business was a primary road for many students, both

[10] This is a popular internet phrase. Together with terms such as *houlang* and *neijuan* (内卷， involution), *dagongren* rose to become one of the top ten buzzwords in Chinese society for 2020. For numerous young individuals, it serves as a pivotal expression of their identity and subjectivity. The phrase captures the collective essence of ordinary youths who did not have the advantage of being born into privilege. This identity is characterized by a blend of pride, determination, and a hint of resignation associated with the "worker" and "labor" status. Both online and offline, such sentiments have fostered a deeply connected emotional community (X. Li & Liu, 2022).

boys and girls, to achieve a hoped-for life. After some years of *dagong*, they believed that they could accrue wealth that afforded them to start their own small business. From being a *dagongren* to an entrepreneur, these students developed an alternative script of success that did not rely on traditional pathways such as educational achievement. Starting from working for others (*dagong*) became a "plausible future" (Zilberstein et al., 2023, p. 348) for them.

Similar to Wenjie, Hengliang, a boy who was enrolled in the "3+2" program at the vocational high school after graduating from Watershed, also planned to start a business in the future. Although he would obtain a college graduation certificate (*zhongzhuan* diploma) in the field of electricity, he did not believe his college education would secure him a stable and decent job. At the end of high school, he had already developed a clear plan: to save money by *dagong* after graduation from college and then become a boss by opening his own restaurant.

> Actually, the place I'm going to can't be strictly called a university cause I'll only be there for two years. I don't think it'll make a big difference for me. After my time there, I'll head to a factory for an internship to see if it's a good fit. If it's not, I'll find other jobs to earn money. My plan is to save up after a few years of *dagong* and then open a restaurant. Restaurants can really make a lot of money. The fried food store I'm working at this summer is always packed…I don't want to *dagong* my whole life; it's too exhausting, and I can't make enough money only by *dagong*.

In Hengliang's perspective, *dagong* was seen as a viable means to reach his desired future rather than a valuable one (Zilberstein et al., 2023). In essence, *dagong* was considered a temporary strategy. For Watershed students, the future should stay open, enabling them to envision possibilities and potentials even amidst uncertainty. In early November 2019, two

stylishly dressed young men paid a visit to their former teachers at Watershed. Having graduated from the school two years prior, they were now third-year students at the vocational high school in Shen County, majoring in E-Commerce. The teachers warmly welcomed them into their office for a chat. These two graduates were on the verge of departing for Hangzhou, the provincial capital, where they would work as delivery personnel for China's largest online shopping festival, the Double 11. This work experience would become a part of their internship requirement before high school graduation. One of them joked, "I'll be working for Jack Ma." A teacher reminded them that their major encompassed more than just package delivery, encouraging them to consider starting their own businesses. The other young men responded, "Package delivery is certainly just a temporary gig." He continued,

> Anyway, we still have dreams. We all want to sit in an office, feet up on the desk. Who can predict the future, right? You say I'll do well, but maybe I won't. You say I won't do well, but maybe I'll actually do great.

The optimism among Watershed students was primarily based on their anticipation of what lay ahead, the "not-yet." It is similar to the underlying meanings of an old Chinese saying, "The emperors take turns doing it, and next year it's my turn." (皇帝轮流做，明年到我家). This saying is an example of the optimistic dimension of traditional Chinese culture (L. Li & Cheng, 2023), indicating that everyone can become an emperor or a high-ranking official, enjoying a luxurious life. Li and Cheng (2023) argue that Chinese traditional culture is cyclic-oriented, which normalizes ups and downs, twists and turns, in people's life stages. Put another way, no one will remain in a state of adversity indefinitely. Much like the students at Watershed had hoped, regardless of the difficulties they currently faced, they had the potential to ultimately

surmount challenges and attain a positive turn of fate in life.

This optimistic culture has modern manifestations in a socialist society: waiting for participation. In the introduction chapter, I mentioned Xiang's analysis of social stratification in China as a form of "mass participatory differentiation" (B. Xiang & Wu, 2023, p. 244). Chinese people do not feel excluded even though they have not benefited from China's reform era. Their lack of feeling excluded has resulted from their perception that they are still in the process of participating in the competition game. In other words, they develop "a strong sense of entitlement to participate in the competition" (B. Xiang, 2014a, p. 188). Xiang reminds us that we should understand this model of participatory partially as a legacy of China's socialist reforms, which had an "inclusive and egalitarian starting point" (B. Xiang, 2021a, p. 246).

The optimism that Watershed students had developed, as I understand it, is a result of the combined influences of the traditional culture and modern socialist egalitarianism. Different from the cyclic-oriented of the optimistic Chinese traditional culture, as Li and Cheng (2023) argue, socialist optimism is more future-oriented, under the influence of Western time consciousness, especially the introduction of Marxist philosophy. It is difficult to distinguish whether Watershed students' optimism was more about a cyclic- or future-oriented belief. Both views underline changes and dreams, which were two key elements in the optimism of the rural youth at Watershed. Actually, they are two sides of the same coin in terms of these students' optimism.

How does this optimism correlate with the students' understanding of social justice in Chinese society? Is this hopeful imagination borne from a lack of critical awareness of societal stratification? These questions are crucial for comprehending the optimism of rural Chinese

students in the context of China's significant rural-urban inequalities. As Lei and I sat on the track discussing why his family seemed left behind in the nation's journey to *xiaokang*, he never touched upon his sentiments regarding fairness. When I probed him about his feelings of equality, particularly upon realizing his family had not yet attained *xiaokang* status despite the nation's announcement of achieving this goal, he sidestepped a direct answer. Instead, he echoed his social science teacher, Mr. Gu: "There is no absolute fairness in the world, right?" Lei added, "Even if someone knows that they are facing unfairness, what can they really do about it?" Given the inherent inequalities of the world, Lei saw little value in ruminating on his situation's fairness. He chose to acknowledge the inequality and channel his energies into uplifting his family from their disadvantaged position.

In addition to this sense of being powerless in the face of unfairness, some students in this waiting group felt that social inequalities had not affected their lives. Sunhao, a quiet boy from Class B, was an example.

> WW: Do you think there are certain inequalities in our society from your perspective?
>
> Sunhao: Inequality? I feel like there is none. Some jobs are more dangerous…but there are still those who do because they pay well…all of these require your effort to receive more rewards. So, I think unfairness is relatively rare in society.
>
> WW: What about the differences between rural and urban areas? Do inequalities exist?
>
> Sunhao: I haven't really thought about this. But if we have to find the unfairness, it's more about the unfairness and differences in people's thoughts.
>
> WW: What do you mean by differences in thoughts?
>
> Sunhao: For example, in the city, some people think it's good to learn more skills, the

more skills, the better. But in some rural places, like where we are, some people believe that learning certain things costs money, and they consider it a waste of money. They might think that even if you excel in those skills and go to the real world, it won't be useful, and you won't earn much. This is different and unfair.

During a follow-up interview in August 2022, the summer break after Sunhao's two years in the vocational high school, I revisited his view on social equality. His perspective remained consistent.

Sunhao: I think it's impossible for our society to achieve absolute fairness…It's just not possible because some things, in order to function, can only be this way, and there's no way to cater to everyone.

WW: Does that mean unfairness is acceptable?

Sunhao: Right. I don't know if it is an issue with this society, if it's just me with some wrong ideas, or if this society is just inherently like this, with any problems at all. Why do some people insist that society is problematic?

By referencing Lei and Sunhao, I am not suggesting that rural Chinese students with limited academic interests universally dismissed the presence of inequalities. Nor am I implying that the optimism among rural Chinese students stemmed from an absence of critical awareness of social disparities. The perceptions of social inequality among students who were not deeply invested in academic learning were diverse. For instance, Pingping held a contrasting perspective on this matter.

WW: What do you think of the fairness of our society?

[Pingping shook her head.]

WW: What does this mean?

Pingping: Some people win at the start line, like if their parents are rich, their kids are born into wealth, and they can pay to get into good schools even if they don't do well in their studies. But people like us can't do that. Their parents have money, they can experience things we can't, their parents also have higher education degrees, and they've been enrolled in various extracurricular classes since childhood, which broadens their horizons. My parents don't have high degrees, and their exposure is limited.

Kai, a classmate of Pingping in Class B, also felt that society was unjust. In our discussions of social equity, after some contemplation, he remarked,

> It's definitely unfair. Rich people are different from us; they can inherit their parents' assets without having to study. They don't need to excel in their studies; it doesn't matter whether they do well or not…So, this society is very unfair, not fair at all. That's why I plan to nurture my children well in the future, so they can get into County High, and I can rely on them for my retirement.

While recognizing the existence of social inequalities and their impact on the life opportunities of less advantaged individuals, these students typically did not link their personal circumstances to broader issues of inequality. They commonly concluded that their individual futures would be determined by their own actions and efforts. In a group conversation with four girls, varied perspectives on social justice emerged. However, their descriptions of their present lives and envisioned futures placed significant emphasis on personal responsibility and their own perceived shortcomings in making the necessary efforts to realize their aspirations.

Weiyao: Society is inherently unfair.

Yunjin: Right, it's unfair.

Xiaolu: Has it ever been fair?

Yaqin: I feel it's okay; there's no issue, and the key is I don't really care about whether it's fair or not.

[……]

WW: It sounds like you all believe that whether your lives end up successful or not, it ultimately comes down to your own reasons,

Weiyao/Xiaolu: Right.

Yunjin: Yes, I agree.

WW: Have you considered other factors, such as societal inequalities?

Yunjin: I don't think so.

Xiaolu: Maybe a little bit, but not too much. These aren't important; it mainly depends on oneself.

Yaqin: I would blame myself for not having good luck. Anyway, it's all my own fault.

Such perceptions of social inequality are not unique to this context but can be observed worldwide. These students, regardless of their contrasting positions on the socio-economic spectrum, held views reminiscent of the sentiments expressed by the elite students of an American high school, as documented by Khan (2011). He notes that these high school students, representing the new elite, conveyed an optimistic perception shared by Americans across various social strata, "[T]hough hierarchy may be a structure that *marks* the world, it is not the one that *makes* it" (p. 72, emphasis in original).

In the case of Chinese students from Red Mountain Township, many recognized the

existence of various inequalities, particularly those rooted in social class disparities and the divide between rural and urban settings. However, they believed that such structural inequalities could be surmounted with individual effort. They were confident that if they stopped "lying flat," they would progressively approach the middle of the social hierarchy they aspired to. Similar to Generation Z in the United States, who develop "a hybrid set of cultural tools that hold to tenets of hard work and self-reliance" (Zilberstein et al., 2023, p. 349) in their navigation of unsettled times, my participants in rural China relied on multiple cultural repertories, both traditional and modern, to instill confidence in fulfilling the compulsory need for upward mobility.

Even with the educational hurdles they encountered, these students remained hopeful for future prosperity. Their ambitious goals of moving from the lower rungs to the middle of the social ladder reflected the pervasive imperative of social mobility that has taken root in Chinese society, as elaborated in Chapter 2. This imperative of social mobility becomes a collective "social imaginary," through which Chinese youth "locate ourselves in the world, position ourselves in relation to others and seek to grasp that sphere of our existence which we have not yet experienced but which we nonetheless act towards in anticipation" (Vigh, 2008, p. 20). Aware of their current academic constraints, they chose to bide their time, awaiting their tipping point to join the competition again in the subsequent phase of life after their schooling. This placed them in a distinct state of aspiring while awaiting.

Why Not Strive? A Wait-and-See Approach

One might assume that students with positive visions of their future would be highly motivated to work diligently toward realizing these aspirations. However, many of the students at Watershed adopted a seemingly passive approach: they *waited*. Waiting, both as an action and an

attitude, had become a strategy that these students used to navigate the imperative of social mobility in stratified Chinese society. By carefully utilizing waiting as an analytical framework of rural Chinese students' educational experiences, this section provides a more detailed explanation of why these young students did not actively strive for academic success while at the same time maintaining a high aspiration of moving socially upward.

Teachers at Watershed had developed their own analysis of why many of their students did not devote themselves to their studies. They blamed the students, the majority in Class B and some in Class A, for not being responsible for themselves by wasting time. When seriously discussing their students' learning issues, the teachers intended to describe the status of their students as *zuo chi deng si* (坐吃等死, waiting to starve without doing anything), a serious criticism that is similar to the lifestyle of the Winter-Cry Bird in the Chinese textbook. The teachers, similar to the popular public views, often attributed rural students' failure at school to their laziness, low motivation, and low *suzhi* (素质, quality) of parents (Chung, 2012). A senior male teacher explained to me the learning issue of Watershed students in this way:

> Our students are too lazy. They have lost the spirit of striving because their material lives are much better. They are not like us; we grew up in extreme poverty and saw schooling as the only way out of it, but our students can't grasp this necessity. They don't want to eat bitterness. You know, there are many temptations that divert their attention from learning, like TV, video games, and especially smartphones. Also, the *suzhi* of their parents is too low to provide proper guidance to their children. Some have already given up on their children's education.

These stereotypical understandings of rural Chinese students reinforced the students'

marginalization in China's education system. My ethnography aims to go beyond this problematic narrative of rural Chinese students by carefully examining what made them (have to) wait. In previous chapters, I analyzed some institutional forces that put some students in the state of awaiting, such as the production of a stratified and waiting space (Chapter 4) and the emphasis on a learning ethos of *kudu* (Chapter 5). These forces illustrate Hage's (2018) point that waiting is often "structured and institutionalized" (p. 205).

This section provides a deeper understanding by examining how these students themselves made sense of their waiting at school. I adopt a narrative approach (Ravn, 2019) to capture Watershed students' self-understanding of their dispositions of waiting. According to Ravn, this approach is different from a variable approach, which narrowly focuses on variables/factors (such as poverty, social class, different forms of capital, and quality of rural education) that impact the making of risk in young people's lives. A narrative approach pays closer attention to "how 'variables' are given meaning, how these meanings change over time, and how the process of narrating and imagining futures in itself provides central analytical insights into a person's sense of self" (Ravn, 2019, p. 1040). Therefore, it highlights the significance of the imagination in young people's meaning-making process.

Through the narratives of the students, we can comprehend how and why waiting had become a strategy for the "Winter-Cry Birds" to deal with the desire for social mobility and the reality of stratification. They expressed the sentiment that their current circumstances offered limited opportunities for proactive action. A lack of a concrete plan added to their sense of uncertainty, causing them to believe that waiting was their only recourse at the moment. They understood that numerous uncertainties lay ahead before they could manifest their dreams, and as

a result, their imaginations of moving toward the middle sometimes wavered.

The phenomenon that aspiring young people (have to) wait is not uncommon globally, especially in the Global South (Osei et al., 2022; Zharkevich, 2021). This emerging scholarship has emphasized the politics of waiting in neoliberal times, understanding "waiting as an exercise of power" (Auyero, 2012, p. 19). As Zharkevich (2021) writes, "[M]aking people wait has become a key technique of governmentality" (p. 827). With no sufficient support to navigate the increasingly uncertain world, young people with less power face challenges in their transitions to a new life stage. Existing studies of the politics of waiting mainly focus on youth transitions to adulthood (Honwana, 2012), education-to-work transition (Jeffrey, 2010), and migration (Zharkevich, 2021). This dissertation brings a form of waiting in an earlier life stage into discussion: waiting at school. It examines how and why rural Chinese students developed a sense of waiting in their educational experiences, as one of my participants, Lei, said when he described his current schooling life, "I'm in a waiting phase right now."

Like other forms of waiting in the Global South, uncertainties also lay at the heart of Watershed students' waiting, despite the general optimistic imagination of their ability to achieve social mobility. Lei, for example, relatively firmly believed that his future would be better than the present, while he did not have a clear plan for the future. Like many other students, he did not know what career he wanted to pursue after graduation from high school or college. All he had was a vague imagination of a better life. As a middle school student, he felt that it was too early to plan how the future path should be taken. To answer my questions about their short-term plans, Lei, like many of his peers, including Hongbin, Yonghai, and Taihang, replied, "No planes." There were many uncertainties in front of him, such as what type of high school he

would finally enter (academic or vocational high school), whether he could be admitted to college, and what major he would continue to learn.

Lei felt that he was not empowered enough to *choose* the path he wanted to take at each significant crossroads. He expected to enter an academic high school, but it was more likely that he would only be admitted to the local vocational school. He expected to attend a four-year college, but even a three-year vocational college might not be affordable for his family. He hoped to work in a big city, but he lacked confidence in his ability to relocate and establish stability in an urban environment. What he was left to do at the moment was to *wait* for the result of *Zhongkao*. All the possibilities of his imagined future depended on his performance in the tracking examination. Therefore, Lei repeatedly used words such as "wait and see" (*deng deng zai kan*, 等等再看) and "maybe" when talking about his expectations of the future.

Lei's narrative indicated that his attitude toward the future was ambivalent. On the one hand, he felt that his future would definitely be better. He also felt a necessity to seize every opportunity and work extremely hard to achieve a brighter future. On the other hand, he sensed a sense of uncontrolled *at the moment*, understanding that the road ahead seemed to be determined by other forces that he was not able to control. Therefore, he had to only take one step at a time and was unable to plan in advance. This ambivalence resulted from what Appadurai (2013) calls the difference of "the capacity to aspire" in society. Lei's navigational capacity to envision a clear path toward his aspired "better life" was brittle due to his "situations permit fewer experiments and less easy archiving of alternative futures" (Appadurai, 2013, pp. 188–189). Without a realistic, detailed navigational map of his social mobility path, Lei could only "wait and see." Lei mentioned many times that his guiding attitude toward life is *shun qi zi ran* (顺其

自然, let happen what may), indicating that he believed he had little control over his future and would accept what comes naturally.

This life attitude is understandable when considering Zhan's (2023) perspective on the absence of concrete plans among migrant youth in Beijing. For the rural migrant youth with whom she worked, "giving up the attempt to control the uncontrollable is one means of coping with hyper-uncertainty" (p. 443). Not planning and deciding step by step, in this sense, helps disadvantaged groups avoid the traps resulting from structural inequalities. In *Coming Up Short*, Silva (2013) discovers a similar situation among working-class young people in the United States in the contemporary age of uncertainty. She writes, "*Having* goals… sometimes works against them, leaving young men and women even worse off than they would have been if they hadn't taken risks to get ahead" (p. 148, emphasis in original).

My participants' wait-and-see approach is reminiscent of the attitudes of rural Chinese youth who have migrated to cities. Zhan's (2023) study conducted in two urban villages (*chengzhongcun*, 城中村) in Beijing that housed rural migrants revealed that when questioned about their future plans, some young rural participants often responded with, "I don't have a plan. Everything happens for the best" (p. 442). Watershed students echoed this sentiment. Along with Lei's attitude of "*shun qi zi ran*," another commonly used phrase among my participants was "*zou yi bu kan yi bu*" (走一步看一步, take one step and decide on the next step). They found it challenging to set a feasible and realistic path for themselves. As a result, they had to move forward without a definite plan, adjusting their actions based on evolving circumstances.

But why did this group of students not seize the opportunity to invest in education at the moment? How did my participants make sense of their school life of not striving? Each time we

had a conversation about why not seek a change at school, my participants usually referred to the academic challenges they faced. They were unable to understand the majority of the courses. Their responses would then be more likely followed by emphasizing that education is not the only way out in today's society. This perception of education has been discussed in Chapter 5.

Facing great academic challenges, they found it not only impossible but also not worthwhile to make an effort to participate in the competition in the school setting. During their ninth grade, their teachers repeatedly reminded them that, according to their prediction, only around ten students were able to secure a spot in academic high schools. Teachers hoped that this tough reality of fierce competition would motivate them to work more diligently. However, this competitive situation made some students, especially those whose rankings were always behind twenty, feel less motivated to work hard as their opportunity to stay on the academic track was limited. They, therefore, turned their expectation to change their life away from school education to the next arena: participating in competitions in society.

My writing so far might reinforce the impression that these waiting students had fully given up their academic learning. However, these academically disengaged students also tried to improve academic results. Yonghai, who identified himself as someone who were not capable to learn, also tried to work hard at some points in his learning journey. But his effort to strive all failed when he found that the content taught by teachers was beyond his understanding.

WW: You said you've also tried to learn?

Yonghai: Yeah, I've tried. It's like not sleeping during classes, sitting there listening to teachers. Some things I couldn't understand, but some I could. But then, gradually, I couldn't grasp anything. It got more and more difficult.

WW: When did you make this kind of effort?

Yonghai: I've done it a couple of times, in elementary and middle school.

This reminds us that, similar to the young rural migrant workers who displaced low desire to strive in Richaud's (2022) study in Shanghai, the waiting that Watershed students experienced was "a reluctance to work without reward" instead of "a refusal to strive" (p. 343). In a stratified educational system, a certain percentage of students inevitably find themselves directed toward vocational education, characterized by lower educational standards and diminished prestige (Ling, 2015; G. Wang, 2022). Young people wait because they "have been incited by powerful institutions to believe in particular visions of the future yet lack the means to realize their aspirations" (Jeffrey, 2010, p. 3). The institutional design produced and reinforced rural Chinese students' waiting, turning them into "paused subjects" (Elliot, 2016) who were more likely to wait.

"Paused" is a figurative term describing the waiting students at Watershed. These students felt that their lives had become paused as they saw a slight chance of change in their academic outcomes. What they found hopeful was to wait to regain the initiative in controlling their lives rather than achieve significant progress in their study. Similar to the perceived "at-risk" youth in Ravn's (2019) study, at the heart of these students' narratives was their desire to enter the next stage of their lives. After facing numerous academic setbacks, they recognized that the existing school system did not align with their strengths. Anticipating the start of a new arena, often this arena being society (or the social world beyond the school gate), they believed they could assert more control in this novel "game."

My participants' struggles and aspirations represented what Xiang (2017; B. Xiang &

Wu, 2023) calls “giving up without accepting fate” (*renshu bu renming*, 认输不认命). In his study of young Chinese people who aspired to migrate abroad, Xiang (2017) found that there existed a common attitude that they intended to change their fate and deny the low social position in which they were born. However, these young “would-be” migrants also easily admitted defeat, facing various struggles in their life paths. Xiang uses the Chinese term “*renshu bu renming*” to describe his observation of contemporary Chinese people and explains why they felt constant pressures to live like “hummingbirds” who are unable to stop flapping their wings. Meanwhile, these individuals with a defiant mindset tend to label themselves as failures when encountering setbacks. This self-perception hampers their ability to muster strong determination and resilience to overcome challenges, resulting in a paradoxical state between aspirations and reality.

This local phrase accurately captured the lived experiences of this group of waiting students at Watershed. On the one hand, giving up became an integral part of these students’ schooling experiences, whether it was a self-imposed surrender or a consequence of the stratified school and education system abandoning them. They could not envision a space for academic progress within the school, so their expectations for achieving academic success were seldom high. They carved out distinct identities as “good students” and “bad students,” creating a division within the educational space. On the other hand, this relinquishment was confined to their current school education, showcasing a marked “non-acceptance” characteristic toward future social life. They were unwilling to accept their existing social positions and aspired for upward mobility toward a middle position in society.

I once saw a sentence, what you are experiencing now is what you knew before

> reincarnation. You have read the script of your life before you were born, you chose this script. That means you already know and accept the difficulties in your life. So you have to accept them, and then you must work hard to change these unsatisfactory parts. Anyway, I'm still young, so I'll try my best. If there's a good result, that's the best. If there's no (good) result, then I'll accept my fate in the end. But for now, I can't just accept my fate. There is a lyric saying that only those who love to fight will win. How can you know the result if you don't fight for it?

This quote was from Lei when we had a follow-up conversation when he entered vocational high school. Lei was not a striving student who worked as hard as his peers, such as Ying, Shulan, and Xinhan. While sitting in Class A, he spent most of his school time feeling bored and less motivated. However, the words he shared above echoed the long-existing "meritocratic aspirational narratives" (Kulz, 2017, p. 106) in Chinese society and globally. He was willing to "work hard" and "fight" to change his destiny in future fields where he was able to participate in games of competition.

An additional crucial facet of waiting for the next arena is deeply embedded in the narrative of "catching up later." The students firmly held the belief that, despite being in a state of waiting, they had not surrendered their willingness and capacity to strive. They harbored the conviction that, with patience, their envisioned futures would finally materialize. Adopting a pragmatic "wait-and-see" approach, they were not merely passive in their anticipation but actively engaged in exploration and seizing opportunities in other arenas. During my subsequent interview with Lei in his third year at vocational high school, his enduring optimism shone through. His talk about his future vision not only revealed a temporal dimension of optimism but

also underscored the indispensable role of patience in his journey of waiting and striving.

> [I'll] take my time (*manman lai ba*, 慢慢来吧). I heard that Jack Ma first made money from selling socks, and now he is the founder of Alibaba. Don't they all say that you have to fight for opportunities by yourself? Let me see if I have a chance in the future. If I'm lucky, I can reach the top. If not, I can take it step by step, and it's also good to get to the middle position slowly.

Patience emerged as a recurring topic in the contemplations of Watershed students as they envisioned their futures. As the quotes in this chapter show, both Lei and Wenjie consistently emphasized the term "*manman*" (慢慢, slowly), understanding the critical importance of maintaining patience throughout their journey of upward mobility. Some scholars have discussed the concept of patience as a tool of governmentality (Auyero, 2012; Ozolina, 2019), with a focus on reinforcing personal responsibility. This notion of moving slowly toward their envisioned futures was prevalent among Watershed students, reflecting their collective belief in the statement that "today's loser could be tomorrow's winners" (B. Xiang, 2014a, p. 196). During my interactions with these students, I found that the majority subscribed to this perspective, viewing waiting as "a source of solace" (Franceschelli & Keating, 2018, p. 12S). Being patient became an integral part of their narrative of catching up, a quality they deemed indispensable in the pursuit of their dreams. Moreover, as Ozolina (2019) notes, this imposed "politics of patience" shaped the students' approach, compelling them to wait patiently not only in the realm of education but also as they prepare to participate in future competitions across various fields.

It is important to note that my participants did not approach their optimistic visions of the future with naivety. They possessed a nuanced understanding that the realization of their

aspirations was highly contingent. Paiva (2021) used the grammatical metaphor of the "future conditional" to comprehend students' future imaginations in Chile. She writes, "[B]ecoming somebody with a future is not certain; they do not perceive themselves as persons with a future as a given, but rather as something they have to work for and that is partly contingent" (p. 175). Building upon Paiva's (2021) analysis, my participants' aspirations to ascend the social ladder could be termed "contingent imaginations" (p. 182), signifying that their positive visions of the future they had imagined were neither overly assured nor entirely unattainable. Sunhao's interpretation of the classic meritocratic discourse, "everything is possible," served as an illustration of understanding this inherent contingency.

> WW: I noticed that there was a sentence written on the wall in Class A: Everything is possible. What do you think of this sentence?
>
> Sunhao: I believe that "Everything is possible" is true. But its authenticity has not been verified in my experience. I came to believe this statement through other people's stories. For example, I once saw a story about a student named Pang Zhongwang on Douyin. His family conditions were extremely difficult, but he finally got into a top university with his own efforts. Because of stories like this, I believe that it is true to say that everything is possible. But this doesn't mean that this sentence also holds true for me.
>
> WW: Why do you think so?
>
> Sunhao: Maybe it's because I have a clear understanding of myself. I don't have great ability or a powerful heart to support me to believe that I can achieve something like Pang. Now, I am still a vulnerable and timid person. I don't believe that I can make "everything is possible" happen to me.

Like the rural schoolgirls in Malawi in Frye's (2012) study, the development of a dogged optimism of Chinese boys and girls from Red Mountain Township was not due to "imperfect information" (p. 11608) or a lack of awareness of the difficulties they faced. Instead, they were clearly aware of challenges and possible failures in their aspirational lives. Despite the potential perception of this optimism as "cruel" (Berlant, 2011) by external observers, this form of optimism served as a healing mechanism. It enabled them to tolerate various uncertainties while navigating the intricate balance between social mobility and stratification. Much like their strategy of waiting, maintaining optimism became a deliberate and adaptive approach.

The following section continues to explore the complexity of waiting and aspiring as observed among the young students from Red Mountain Township. Through the exploration of Hongbin's narratives, which encompass struggles, aspirations, and hopes, we gain a more nuanced understanding of the complexities behind their dogged optimism. Hongbin's lived experiences offer insight into the contradictory nature of their optimism, revealing both hopeful and hopeless elements intertwined within their journeys.

"My Life Is Decided by Heaven, Not Me!" Optimism Without Hope?

This was a regular social study class in the second semester of the ninth grade at Watershed. I was sitting next to Hongbin at the back of the classroom in Class B. The teacher, Ms. Gao, was correcting the exam paper for the students that they had taken the previous day. Her strategy was to read the standard answers several times and ask students to write them down on their answer sheets. Ms. Gao showed no interest in explaining why they should answer in these ways, as she understood that the students were not interested in them either. Therefore, she only asked students to write the correct standard answers down and recite them in case similar

questions appeared in other exams.

Obviously, Hongbin was not interested in the class. He did not even take his test paper and pens out of his desk. He kept chatting with Kunchi, who was sitting next to him, in a low voice. They talked about video games, online shopping, and girls they were dating. When they talked about their future plans after graduating from Watershed, Hongbin turned to me, saying, "I'm not like you; you are able to be the master of your own fate. But I can't. My life is decided by Heaven, not me." Hongbin said this sentence in a pretty calm tone and with a funny accent. I was wondering how serious he meant.

"My life is decided by Heaven, not me!" (我命由天不由我) was Hongbin's adaptation of a well-known sentence, "I decide on my life, not Heaven" (我命由我不由天), a circulating line in the animated film *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child*, which was released in 2019. This film was popular among Chinese younger generations. Almost all of my participants had watched it. I quickly wrote down Hongbin's words in my notebook. After expressing this seemingly deterministic understanding of his life, he fell asleep quite soon. Hongbin put his head on his left arm, which was stretched straight on the desk. His right arm rests on his head, covering his eyes and right ear. This was Hongbin's most commonly used sleeping posture in the classroom. Ms. Gao continued her class by reading the answers. She had noticed that more than ten students had fallen asleep, but she was not interested in waking any students up. The classroom was quiet when Ms. Gao finished reading and gave the students time to write down the standard answers.

With less than two months remaining until the coming of *Zhongkao*. Hongbin appeared unconcerned and showed no change in his approach compared to the previous semester. It seemed he had forgotten our discussion about his study plan from last semester. Back in

November 2019, he expressed his intention to begin earnest preparation for the Spring semester of 2020, aiming to score above 200 points (out of a total of 740 points) in *Zhongkao* to secure admission to the local vocational high school.

Just like that shifting attitude toward his study plans, he often exhibited what seemed to be contradictory states. For instance, after class, when he woke up from a nap, I asked him to explain again the phrase "我命由天不由我" (My fate is in the hands of Heaven, not in my control) that he had mentioned in class, he emphasized that he actually believed more in the opposite, namely "我命由我不由天" (My fate is in my hands, not in Heaven's control). Then, quickly, he negated this attitude again, saying he did not know whose hands his fate was in. Finally, he arrived at a conclusion that seemed a bit playful, "My fate is in the hands of my grandma."

The second time that Hongbin mentioned the sentence "My life is decided by Heaven, not me" was in an interview a week later. This was an Art class, and as usual, the teacher did not intend to teach any relevant content; instead, he turned on the computer and let the students choose a movie to watch. Therefore, I invited Hongbin to chat in the hallway outside of the classroom. In this interview, Hongbin talked more about the three forces that had "decided" his fate: Heaven, his grandma, and himself. Our conversation centered on his past experiences, through which I learned more about his experiences of growing up without the accompany of his parents. His mother "ran away" (*pao le*, 跑了, Hongbin's words) when he was five years old, and his father worked in the capital city and only returned home during the Spring Festival. When I asked him about the most difficult challenge he had faced in life, Hongbin did not bring up the difficulty of growing up without parental companionship. According to him, the greatest

challenge arose from a lack of understanding by his family, especially his grandparents, with whom he spent the most time. This was also the reason he believed he started smoking: to ease the pressure imposed on him by his family.

Hongbin: I haven't been smoking for long. Sometimes, I felt so sad, so I started to smoke when I was sick of endless criticism.

WW: Why did you feel that way?

Hongbin: I was scolded by my family all the time. They were so sure that I couldn't pass *Zhongkao*. That made me upset. They kept saying nagging and nagging. I was thinking of trying my best to pass the exam and continue to study in high school, but they all said that I was not capable of doing that. They even thought that it was unnecessary for me to stay in school as a ninth grader. Then I feel like that I don't need to work hard. I don't know, I feel like it's their fault if I am not able to get into a high school.

While Hongbin acknowledged that his grandparents took good care of him, he was hurt when they made him feel useless, or in Bauman's (2004) terms, "wasted." During my four years of friendship with him, Hongbin frequently identified himself as useless, lacking a sense of control in life. In his understanding, this self-perception partially came from his grandma.

WW: Have you ever thought about what kind of person you are?

Hongbin: I don't know. I've never thought about it. A study slacker (*xuezha*, 学渣)? A person who doesn't know how to learn, a maggot (*quchong*, 蛆虫).

WW: A maggot? Why did you say that?

Hongbin: This is how my grandma always thinks about me. She always describes me in this way. She said that I was not able to learn, so finally I'll be a beggar. My grandma

often talks trash about me, even in front of other people. I was so annoyed and sad.

Seeking for respect was an important theme in Hongbin's upbringing. This need was vividly represented in the following picture he drew. Hongbin drew a picture when I asked if he could express his life experiences or thoughts through drawing. He was interested in this practice because he was good at drawing in elementary school. However, he gave it up because he lacked the resources to pursue this hobby further. The guiding theme of the drawing activity I offered was open-ended: to draw a picture that you think can represent your ideas and/or experiences of your life.

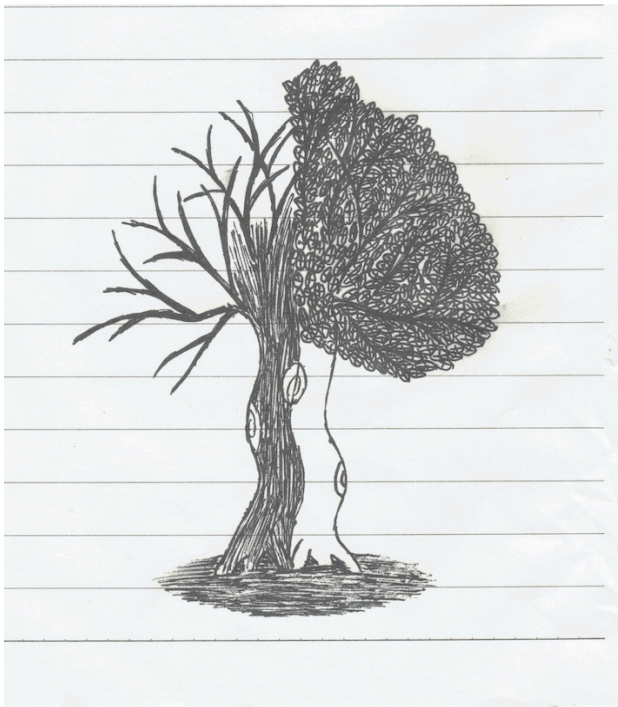

Figure 5: Hongbin's drawing

While he had a keen interest in this self-exploration activity, he also found it quite challenging. It took him approximately six months before he reached out again to inform me that he had finished the painting. By that point, he had already started the first semester at the local vocational high school. We met at the Starbucks in the county seat on a Friday afternoon. What

Hongbin drew was a tree, which was divided into two different parts. At first, he could not explain the connection between this drawing and himself.

> I don't know why I drew this picture. When I put my pen on the paper, thinking about myself and my life, this picture just naturally came to me. If you ask me the meaning of this picture, I don't think I can tell you what exactly it is. But I do feel like there is something that I wanted to say here. I just don't know how to say it.

When our conversation continued, he became clearer about his thoughts on the drawing. He told me that this tree could symbolize his life, feeling that it was split into two parts, a "healthy" one and an "unhealthy" one.

> Don't you think the left [part] is like me? It's unhealthy and useless. There is no energy. I kind of feel totally drained at the moment, no energy, no hope, and don't know how to study. Those good folks are like the right side, you know, full of branches and leaves, just super healthy. But maybe one day I would also become someone like this leafy side, the dried side will be replaced by the green side. Who knows? Speaking of this, I feel like I have both sides in my body. I'm not that bad, right?

Hongbin first described his current life as similar to the left side of the tree: dry, dead, and lifeless. He was not able to grow up healthily in the school system. This was especially true considering how his teachers and grandparents saw him, as teachers sometimes described the waiting group of students as "waiting for death" and doing nothing meaningful. However, this hopeless portrait did not fully represent himself. He sensed a dynamic energy within himself that remained unseen. As our conversation continued, Hongbin emphasized again that he was not "that bad." He complained, "I'm not that bad. I don't know why my grandparents and teachers

always think that I will do something really bad. I just don't like to study. But I'm not a *hunhun* (混混, street hooligan). I had never done anything terrible." He felt that the rules he violated were often minor, such as smoking, bringing a phone to school, or sleeping in class.

Hongbin was tall, strong, and masculine. His appearance made him easily grouped together with the "street guy." However, he thought he had strong principles and was clear about what was absolutely not permissible, such as engaging in physical fights. He did not understand why he was always easily misunderstood by adults as a troublemaker, seen by them as a potentially at-risk youth on the brink of delinquency. Therefore, recognition remained a key need in Hongbin's life. He had searched for it for a long time, and he did not receive recognition from his family or school. His grandmother, with whom he spent the most time, often devalued him, frequently saying that he was useless. Teachers at Watershed labeled him as a bad student and showed low expectations for him. "Sometimes I feel like just going all-in and being exactly the person they think I am, you know? Otherwise, I'm stuck always being misunderstood, and that's just not fair." Hongbin said.

His eyes looked down at the table as he took a big sip of the Matcha Frappuccino in front of him. After a brief silence, he looked up, smiling, and said,

> Hongbin: I'll be a big boss in the future, employing those who learn well to work for me. This is my dream. I will let other people know that even though study is useful, while the more important things are good social connections and a person's abilities.
>
> WW: What kind of abilities are needed?
>
> Hongbin: I don't know [he laughed]. Anyway, my dream is to be a big boss.
>
> WW: A big boss in which field?

Hongbin: A big boss of a restaurant. I don't know how to run a company, not to mention I only have a middle school diploma. If I start a company that needs to cooperate with Americans, I can't even understand their language. So it's not possible to start a company. To run a restaurant is more realistic.

This was not Hongbin's first time when he pictured a bright future. He used to jokingly imagine he would become a billionaire, a successful man who drives a Lamborghini and can afford to travel around the world. But this time, he envisioned a "more realistic" plan: to run a restaurant and hire his classmates with good academic records. From the way he talked about this dream, I could tell that he was not confident that it would come true, although this dream seemed smaller. But this boasting had its meaning. Hongbin quickly left the unpleasant past experiences behind and regained excitement. He admitted that he was generally optimistic, even though he was not able to fully understand where his optimism came from. Similar to Ying's *mangmu leguan* (blindly optimistic), Hongbin used the words "foolishly joyous" (*shale*, 傻乐) to explain his optimism without hope.

Why not think about things that could bring some hope? Why do I want to spend every day dwelling on how tough the future might be? If I think life is going to be worse later on, then what's the point of going through it?

Hongbin naturalized his optimistic disposition by problematizing living pessimistically. He used three rhetorical questions to respond to my seemingly self-evident question, "Why do you look so optimistic?" Passively submerged in an educational environment where meaningful actions seemed impossible, boasting and fantasizing about a dream he did not even believe in became his strategy to resist the current senselessness. Hongbin could only remain optimistic, no

matter how seemingly unrealistic and hopeless that optimism appeared. This is an "optimism imperative" (Bennett, 2015, p. 4) that he had to navigate. Growing up in rural China, Hongbin was not unaware of his disadvantages in the social mobility competition. He understood that his situation was due to being less supported.

> WW: I notice that you only drew the top part, no roots. Did you do that on purpose?
>
> Hongbin: Oh, really? I didn't even realize until you brought it up. But now that you mention it, I think leaving out the roots kind of suits me. Other folks might have strong roots, but mine, not so much. My support is a bit shaky, so I have to depend on myself.

Without "strong roots" in his navigation toward upward mobility, Hongbin expected that he would start from *dagong*, even though he was not able to figure out which form of work he would engage in at this point. His short-term plans after fishing education were constantly changing. He sometimes told me he would work as a waiter at a restaurant, but the next time, he would change to deliver food or packages. Despite the large gap between his dreams and plans, Hongbin did not feel disappointed or unmotivated. He was still excited about his life moving ahead. "I think no matter what happens in the future, I can at least feed myself." He said this in a calm tone, sounding somewhat like self-comfort. He continued, "The meaning of learning is to make money. There are many ways to make money in today's society. You don't have to learn well to earn a living. You only need to be willing to eat bitterness (*chi ku*) in society."

The last time I met Hongbin was in July 2023, a month after he graduated from the vocational high school. I assumed that he might have started a full-time job. However, his life was still in a state of waiting: waiting for a real start. He rented a small room in the county seat with his friends and was waiting to get his driver's license. He was not clear about what work to

do. Unfortunately, he encountered an exceptionally challenging job market in 2023. After three years of the COVID-19 pandemic, finding a job in China has become even more difficult for young people. Hongbin could only wait and plan to see if he could secure a job as a delivery driver after obtaining his driver's license. If not, he may end up working at a rubber and plastic factory that produces automotive sealing components, where he interned during his senior year of vocational high school. Although it was not what he truly aspired to do, on the one hand, due to the economic downturn, the factory's wages were even lower than when he interned, and on the other hand, he did not want to engage in repetitive work without change for at least the next fifteen years[11]. He said, "A man should aim for broader horizons (*zhi zai si fang*, 志在四方); you can't keep doing assembly line work forever." He shortly worked as a package delivery during the summer break, and he found he was often devalued by customers. His grandma hoped he could stay at the factory where he finished his internship, which was more stable. However, he tended to avoid working in factories because this type of work is usually repetitive, with no fresh changes every day.

Waiting but Not Resisting

In Beijing's Haidian District, Huangzhuang represents a typical example of extracurricular tutoring for Chinese students. Time there is severely compressed, with every minute within an hour meticulously calculated. Simultaneously, time is also significantly magnified, as any minute wasted is magnified to impact one's future life. In the economically underdeveloped counties we surveyed, children there lead markedly

[11] Hongbin shared that one advantage of entering factory work is that the factor contributes to employees' social insurance. However, in China, employees generally need to contribute for at least 15 years to be eligible for post-retirement benefits, such as a pension, and other related social welfare benefits.

> different lives. Time stretches out leisurely, and each time period is filled with singular or even monotonous activities. They do not know the length of the future runway, only how to navigate and pass the time along the stretch right in front of them. (Lin, 2023, p. 66, my translation)

This quote is a translation from a recent book published in Chinese that portrays educational issues in Chinese counties, which host over half of all students in China. These students, located far away from cities, are not able to access quality education as their urban peers. Lin (2023) finds that the temporality of schooling is different across urban and rural China. In an underdeveloped mountainous township within the economically advanced Zhejiang province, the scene depicted by Lin (2023) aptly applies to the majority of students from Red Mountain Township. For students in Class A, a school day was filled with monotonous, intense learning. While for students in Class B, a school day was filled with boredom and incomprehensible lectures. Waiting, therefore, was their specific way of experiencing time and navigating social stratification and mobility.

Turning to the temporality of rural schooling foregrounds waiting as an important framework for understanding rural Chinese students' educational experiences. This framework is different from a lens of resistance that has become a popular analytical tool in examining rural students' disengagement from academic learning in China. In the past decade, influenced by the publication of *Learning to Labour* (Willis, 1977) in Chinese and Paul Willis's three-year teaching at Beijing Normal University in China, resistant theory or the theory of counter-school culture has been widely used to explain why many rural Chinese students fail at school (Moskowitz et al., 2018). Studies that follow this approach have focused on the development of a

counter-school culture among rural Chinese students, both in rural schools (M. Li et al., 2020; T. Li, 2016) and in urban schools, when the students float to cities with their migrant parents (M. Li, 2015; Xiong et al., 2013; X. Zhou, 2011). Some have examined different cultural practices of the conformists and the non-conformists (Cheng, 2018; Willis, 2020). The approach of youth resistance provides a valuable lens for understanding rural students and educational inequality in China.

Although theories of resistance at school have become popular in recent years in China's educational research (Du et al., 2020; Moskowitz et al., 2018), scholars have questioned the application of this Western theory in Chinese contexts. For the researchers who are influenced by Willis's approach, they find that the "counter-school culture" that rural Chinese students have developed is different from that of the Western working-class youth in terms of perceptions of education and certificates (X. Zhou, 2011), authorities (Kipnis, 2001a), and social class consciousness (Q. Shi & Wang, 2015). For example, a shared conclusion from many studies is that rural Chinese students, even though they show little or no interest in academic learning, do not fully deny the value of education. This is also evident in this dissertation (Chapter 6).

Given these differences, researchers call for theories that go beyond a class-centered resistant framework in comprehending rural Chinese students' seemingly similar disengagement of learning (M. Li & Xiong, 2017; W. Wang, 2023; X. Xiang & Sun, 2022). In my earlier study, I made an initial attempt to understand rural Chinese students' disinterest in learning from a different theoretical perspective from resistance. I turn to theories of space and body to the spatial and embodied experiences of why they do not "learn" (from the perspective of institutional academic learning) (W. Wang, 2023). This dissertation builds on this effort and

develops a more context-sensitive understanding of rural students' seemingly resistant behaviors and attitudes. I argue that waiting, which is different from resisting, had become a defining feature of the schooling experiences of many students from Red Mountain Township.

Bringing the lens of "waiting" into rural education in China provides two unique theoretical contributions. First, it emphasizes that rural students' seemingly passive school engagement is a model of participation rather than rejection. Inspired by Xiang's (2021a) analysis of suspension as a form of participation, I argue that waiting in China's rural schools should also be interpreted as the ways in which these students strategically participated in China's modern processes of social mobility and stratification. Second, waiting has an essential agentive aspect. This seemingly passive strategy is a temporal practice through which rural students mobilize their agency to navigate and negotiate social mobility. Waiting is a form of agency.

Waiting as a Model of Participation

It is not difficult to find evidence to support that my participants from Watershed did not resist schooling. The production of an oppositional culture, described in Willis's (1977) ethnography in England schools, was not remarkable among Watershed students. On the surface, these students acted similarly to the "lads" in Willis's study, such as dozing off in class, refusing to finish schoolwork, and making fun at school. However, my participants seldom rejected the value of educational certificates (Chapter 5), opposed to teachers' authority, or viewed moving socially upward as a betrayal of their rural community. Contrary to the "lads" who harbored a rejection of competition (Willis, 1977), my participants waited for the tipping point that they would later be able to get back on track with the competition. In other words, they waited to

participate more actively in China's unique form of stratification, or what Xiang insightfully terms "mass participatory differentiation" (B. Xiang & Wu, 2023 p. 224). They waited for the end of school education and the start of the next brand-new life stage where they could regain a sense of control in the competition toward a better life. In this sense, the schooling experiences of my rural participants should be comprehended more accurately as a form of participation rather than a rejection.

Viewing waiting as a way through which rural Chinese students participate in their collective impetus of moving upward explains the widespread optimism among these perceived "at risk" students. At the stage of middle school and later in high school, my participants had not developed a strong feeling of getting stuck. This is different from many writings about waiting in the Global South. For example, the lower middle-class youth in India in Jeffery's (2010) study developed a sense of being "stuck in-between" or felt that they were "left behind" (p. 91). Such feeling was not evident at Watershed. For my participants, waiting was still hopeful. This aligned more closely with Hage's (2009) argument, as he writes, "Waiting indicates that we are engaged in, and have expectations from, life" (p. 1). The rural students from Red Mountain Township usually conceived that they had a bright future awaiting them.

As a model of participation, rural Chinese students' waiting is a temporal pause in their journey toward constructing a "striving individual" (Y. Yan, 2012, 2013). It is a strategic form of suspension that my rural participants adopted in their "sustained attempts to comply with (rather than defy) social expectations of mobility" (Masquelier, 2019, p. 213). They believed that they would be able to *restart* striving when they entered their next life stage. In *Being Modern in China*, Willis (2020) discusses how non-conformists found their own routes to modernity, routes

that are different from school education promises. With the lack of resources that education seems to guarantee, they still saw opportunities for upward mobility, which produces (and is produced from) Chinese youth's unique understanding of class and class consciousness.

> They see, mistakenly or not, different routes to adulthood through horizontal geographic mobility (rural students) or cultural distinction (second-generation city students) from parents' lives as their own kinds of upward mobility. They apprehend, somehow, that the school is not geared to their real futures as they see them. They burrow below the surfaces of authority and find a dignity and expression of their powers on other grounds. The lack of a sense of class, class position or class antagonism as in the West removes a whole repertoire of possible responses. (Willis, 2020, p. 171)

Echoing Richaud's (2022) ethnographic study with young migrant workers in Shanghai, my fieldwork in Red Mountain Township also found that "complete disillusionment hardly occurs" in rural China (p. 348). On the one hand, my participants acknowledged the structural constraints. They knew that a lack of economic resources and educational certificates would force them to start from *dagong* after leaving school. The life of *dagong* is often understood as difficult. It was sometimes characterized as "interstitial livelihoods" (Jones, 2014, p. 223). On the other hand, they believed that this difficulty would only be a "provisional praxis and navigation" (Vigh, 2008, p. 18). If only they were willing to make efforts in self-development and self-adjustment, they would eventually cross social boundaries. This ambivalent attitude toward their living conditions was tightly associated with their waiting at school.

Agency in Waiting

In addition to a model of participation, waiting is a way for rural Chinese students to

express their agency. Waiting, on the appearance, seems far from youth agency since the notion of agency is often perceived as opposition, rebellion, and resistance in the West (Durham, 2008). Although the waiting experience of these less academically promising students was largely a consequence of the production of a stratified learning space at Watershed, the agentic aspect of waiting should not be neglected. I agree with Masquelier (2019) when she writes, "Waiting, I argue, cannot be reduced to a passive experience of suffering but should be understood instead as a 'tactical mode of life'" (p. 34). Even waiting in the form of aimlessness has material, cultural, and political meanings (Jeffrey, 2010).

In fact, waiting was not completely passive and fruitless among Watershed students. At least the students were able to obtain a middle school and/or a high school diploma. I heard from the teachers and students that two students in the ninth-grade cohort dropped out during their middle school education; both of them were girls. When the students in Class B talked about the two girls' stories, they usually expressed their pity for them. Even though they thought of themselves as "just doing nothing" and "wasting time" at school, staying at school was a necessary investment. This was their strategy to keep themselves "on track." Despite gaining little meaningful knowledge, maintaining a student role and obtaining a higher level of educational certificate, as the students believed, would bring value to their navigation of the education-to-work transition. In other words, their seemingly passive wasting of time at school was not entirely meaningless.

This approach to navigating the imperative of social mobility blurred the boundary between a purposeless, compelled waiting and a more strategic form of waiting, as discussed by Jeffrey (2010) in *Timepass*. The former, usually understood as the politics of waiting (Auyero,

2012; Janeja & Bandak, 2018), is a result of powerful structures and institutions by which the waiting population, usually less advantaged in society, waits chronically for a particular promised future while lacking the realistic means to make it come true. The latter seems to be characterized by greater autonomy of choices: people choose to wait. The striving students in the previous chapter chose to postpone the enjoyment of current life at school and wait for more returns in the future by engaging in the practice of *kudu*. The waiting students, as described in this chapter, sometimes viewed their waiting as a choice. Boys and girls in Class B at Watershed usually believed that they were happier than their peers in Class A. Yaqin chose to learn in Class B even though her academic records allowed her to stay in Class A. She preferred a less stressed learning environment. Hongbin once shared a similar view,

> I think they [students in Class A] are carrying too many burdens in their lives. I don't want to live in this way. Yes, they'll definitely live better than me in the future, but look at them right now, the burden on them is too heavy; they're kind of crawling through school life.

The reality at Watershed was that the majority of students in Class A, no matter how pushed, would end up enrolling in the same vocational high school as the students in Class B. Each year, there were usually less than 30 percent of the graduates in the school would be admitted to the academic high schools. In the *Zhongkao* of 2020, only the top 15 students had successfully escaped from the vocational track. "Anyway, they (many students in Class A) can only get into the lousy school in the end. I can also get in even if I stay in the bad class, why bother studying so hard in their class?" Yonghai explained why he did not want to strive to be "upgraded" to the "good" class.

While with relatively low academic aspirations, these students still hope to stay on track with education. Some disengaged students, such as Hongbin and Yonghai, aspired to a high school education and worried about not being admitted to vocational high school in their ninth grade. Instead of achieving higher scores in exams, they gave an alternative meaning to schooling experiences: gaining social capacity and expanding their social circle, which were assumed to be useful when they later stepped into society. They shifted their attention to the importance of socially oriented knowledge (W. Wang, 2023). Compared to Class A, where the daily emphasis was on academic learning, Class B offered a more appropriate space for them to engage with and practice social knowledge in advance. In this dynamic environment with less academic oversight, students could more freely engage in playful banter, mischief, teasing, and boasting, learning to find joy amidst challenges. These experiences are essential preparations for their inevitable entry into the workforce as a *dagongren* in the future.

When my participants waited, they also imagined. Hongbin dreamed of becoming a billionaire, Yuchao hoped to succeed as "a high-end individual," and Mingfei persistently sought a stable life after being pushed out of the educational track. Imagination brought hope to their seemingly aimless schooling life in a remote rural mountain township. Despite their seemingly unrealistic imagination, they bravely navigated their potentiality through narrating these fantasies. Recent literature highlights the role of imagination in young people's future-making (Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2016). In this sense, waiting became a form of labor, as Masquelier (2019) reminds us that we should "take seriously the kind of work that waiting does, if only as a work of imagination, for without imagination, there can be no viable future" (p. 212). It was through imagination that my rural participants tested and improved their navigational capacity,

envisioning the potential to rewrite their script for a desired future.

Imagination, or belief in the realization of a bright future—even in a joking manner—added meaning to their current state of waiting. The future was right there; it just had yet to arrive. Through this, they found a way to "generate meaningful temporalities" (Masquelier, 2019, p. 34) of the present. In general, the waiting practice that Watershed students experienced was a "hopeful waiting for something," rather than "a frustrated waiting for 'nothing'" (Dungey & Meinert, 2017, p. 93).

Highlighting the agency in rural Chinese students' waiting does not mean that waiting was something that they actually valued. Some students chose to end their waiting period as soon as possible by seeking alternatives, such as starting to work earlier and learning skills that would contribute to their future careers. In the first semester of his ninth grade, Mingfei took a month off to work in another city. In his perspective, squandering each day at school by sleeping or idling was a total waste of time. He aimed to end it swiftly and immerse himself in the social life he was on the brink of entering as soon as possible. Another male student from a lower grade dropped out for a semester to study martial arts. They were seeking alternatives to the boredom. In understanding the "patience" of the urban poor in Argentina, Auyero (2012) writes,

> Waiting is neither a trait of their character nor something they 'value' because they have a different appreciation of time, as a 'culture of poverty' type of argument would have it; rather, it is a product of a successful strategy of domination. (p. 15)

Rural students' waiting in their pursuit of social mobility should be contextualized within the framework of China's structural inequalities. This perspective helps clarify what the waiting strategy adopted by these academically disengaged students was not. While, in some instances,

waiting was a self-adopted strategy, it is crucial to acknowledge that the practice of waiting was not entirely voluntary. Rather than choosing to wait, most students were essentially "pushed into" waiting (Jeffrey, 2010, p. 98), a consequence of the stratification within China's educational system, the rote learning approach, and the rural-urban divide. In this context, waiting became an embodied experience of China's unequal education and rural-urban disparities. It evolved into a coping strategy to navigate the feelings of boredom and meaningless experienced by these students. In essence, waiting "is socially produced" (Masquelier & Durham, 2023b, p. 8), shaped by the broader socio-economic landscape.

When students reevaluate their waiting from a longer timeline, they might make a different assessment of their previous, somewhat appreciated approach. Upon ending his formal education with high school graduation, I had another discussion with Hongbin about his academic journey. It was July 2023, and as we casually wandered through the largest mall in the county seat, our conversation unfolded, touching on his past experiences and future aspirations. This time, Hongbin used the word "endure" (*ao*, 熬) to describe his educational experiences. His high school life mirrored that of middle school, both marked by boredom and monotony. "The me you saw in middle school is the same in high school, it hasn't changed a bit." He shared. When the school tightened control over mobile phones more than in middle school, besides sleeping and chatting, he started reading novels in class, which might be the most noticeable change. When I asked him about the meaning of his studies in high school, he said with certainty, "Nothing."

> Now, looking back, I feel like even middle school was just a waste of time. Back then, I was like, "If I can get into high school, I'll just endure the school's boredom." But now,

after graduating high school, I realize high school was a joke, I didn't learn anything. I'm kicking myself now; I should've just started working after middle school. At least, I'd have pocketed some money in those three years.

In contrast to resistance, rural Chinese students in my study were more likely to *endure* an educational experience that, for them, offered limited benefits. Similar to the "lads" portrayed by Willis (1977), my participants keenly sensed that the current school education was not designed for their benefit. While my participants did not develop insights akin to the working-class "lads" in England who (partially) saw through the middle-class orientation of school education, in their day-to-day school lives, they vividly perceived that they were not the protagonists of the school. They knew that the stratified school education was not designed to serve them and knew that they had been abandoned by this form of education, which primarily serves the purpose of advancing to higher education. What they did not fully understand was that they were a group filtered out of this competitive game as they usually attributed their academic failures to personal reasons, such as insufficient intelligence, indulgence in play, or not listening to teachers in elementary school. Consequently, they could only endure the consequences of their lack of effort, waiting aimlessly for the commencement of the next competitive stage.

Contemporary Chinese society has witnessed increasing challenges to the traditional ethos of striving over the last decade. Coming of age in these precarious times, today's Chinese youth face significant economic and cultural changes. The emergence of a "slack-off" culture is a recent response to the realization that striving appears to yield diminishing returns. The gap between meritocratic aspirations and precarious realities is widening. How will these changes in economic, societal, cultural, and moral spheres shape the lives of rural Chinese students? Will

the experience of waiting at school extend to their next competitive field? My current ethnography cannot answer these questions definitively. However, during the middle and high school education stages, my participants still harbored a strong belief in the improvement of their living conditions, even when facing a lack of control over life trajectories.

Chapter 7: Dogged Optimism and Beyond

Hope is an ontological need.

Freire, 2021, p. 16

Educated hope matters because it points to the possibility of rethinking not only politics but also matters of agency, struggle, and the future itself.

Giroux, 2015, p. 80

More than 20 years ago, Kipnis (2001b), a Western anthropologist who specialized in China studies, raised an interesting question after he researched rural education in Zouping, a county in a coastal province in eastern China:

> An interesting if depressing question is whether school countercultures will eventually emerge in places like Zouping. If the present pattern of successful rural students moving into careers in towns and cities outside their villages of origin continues, Zouping's villages will some day be filled with parents whose own experience of the education system was that of failure. What such a situation will mean for the culture of discipline within local schools remains to be seen. (p. 20)

Based on his research from 1988 to 2000 in Zouping, Kipnis (2001b) finds that educational discipline, which means the commitment to education and the pressure of achieving academic success, was strong in rural China. In a book published a decade later that examined the educational issue in the same county, Kipnis (2011) calls this phenomenon "educational desire" and examines how this desire has been governed in the Chinese context. This phenomenon of educational discipline/desire, according to him, is different from that in some other parts of the world, such as the United States and Europe, where a tight attachment to education is more evident in urban middle-class families than rural or working-class families. He

suggests that no widespread youth cultural identities express anti-intellectual attitudes in Zouping. Meanwhile, he doubts whether this counterculture will finally emerge in China's education system, considering that only those failed young people in the educational system stay in rural areas. How will their failed schooling experiences impact their parenting?

The rural students in my ethnography can be roughly seen as the next generation of the generation described in Kipnis's (2001b) study. Parents of the middle school students at Watershed were usually born in the 1970s and early 1980s, and many had attained middle school education. Only a few had finished high school. None of them had received higher education. Their parents were those who had been "sorted out" in the educational channel in their student times. Therefore, the stories in my ethnography can partially answer the question Kipnis (2001b) raised about the education of the next generation of academically "failed" rural parents.

My critical ethnography tells a more complicated story than whether rural students in contemporary China have developed a counterculture of schooling. Watershed students formed intricate relationships with school education during their negotiation and navigation of their social mobility projects. On the one hand, these students generally believed in education, internalizing the meritocratic narratives that emphasize personal effort in schooling and individual responsibility for their academic results and later life opportunities. Both the academically ambitious (the Magpie) and academically disengaged (the Winter-Cry Bird) students hypothesized the possibilities of the exchange of educational certificates with a stable and prosperous life.

This differs from some academically "high-achievers" from working-class and immigrant/refugee families in Australia in Zipin and colleagues' (2021) study. Generation Z in

Australia developed a pessimistic view of their own life trajectories as they have witnessed their college-educated parents' struggles in exchanging their degrees for financial and employment security. Building on their observation of their (educated) parents' life journeys, the Australian students recognized the likelihood of precarious futures instead of confidently envisioning upward mobility.

Regarding the rural students from Watershed, none of their parents went to college or received any form of beyond-high school education. The rural students at Watershed hardly recognized the "opportunity trap"—more education may not lead to more opportunities—"a simplistic and false hypothesis" (p. 157) recognized by the students in Zipin et al.'s (2021) study. Rural Chinese students at Watershed had little chance to see the failure of a meritocratic narrative from their parents' life trajectories, as they would more possibly see the hardships in their parents' lives resulting from their failure in school education (J. Chen & Wang, 2021).

On the other hand, many rural students from Watershed School understood the necessity of seeking alternatives other than educational success in moving up trajectories as they saw education was not the right path for them. After realizing their chances of achieving educational mobility were dim, they shifted their attention. They anchored their hopes in "battlefields" beyond the school gate, such as society and the market. Embracing the faith that striving ethos and proper social capabilities, these students were still included in the game of China's social differentiations and becoming the "person above persons." Therefore, my rural participants maintained an aspiration of moving up to the middle, envisioning different paths to fulfill their Chinese Dream of achieving a better life.

Considering these complexities, when the power-marginalized students in Zipin et al.'s

(2021) study identified themselves as “a really, really pessimistic generation” (p. 158), my participants in rural China were generally optimistic about their future. They anticipated entering the middle positions in the social hierarchy, whether the means of achieving this mobility was education or not. Both the groups of academically ambitious and disengaged students imagined social mobility and a better life than their parents. I call this positive imagination of the future among rural Chinese students “dogged optimism.” What they had developed was not a counter-oriented culture toward the school and society. Instead, they constantly rationalize their processes of future-making, developing optimistic anticipations and imaginations.

This final chapter summarizes the culture of dogged optimism developed among rural Chinese students from a rural mountain township. Drawing on a careful consideration of the Chinese local contexts and my ethnographic materials, I discuss the meanings of dogged optimism that characterizes rural Chinese students’ lived experiences. I explore both the hurt and healing aspects of such optimism in rural young people’s strenuousness of their navigations and negotiations of the imperative for social mobility. These discussions help us understand why a counter-school culture did not appear among Watershed students in a rural township in China.

What followed is a discussion of how education can respond to the needs of power-marginalized students, especially in relation to the imperative of social mobility rooted in many societies around the globe. I call for critically reflecting on the rooted discourses of social mobility in education for disadvantaged students. This is not only evident in China but also in the world. In an era characterized by unsettled times, motivating students to anchor their hopes in education has been widely used as a governmentality technique for children and youth in the margin. The discourses that link education and a better future are prevalent. However, as Hage

shares in a conversation with Zournazi (2002), "[W]e need to look at what kind of hope a society encourages rather than simply whether it gives people hope or not" (p. 152). Using the Chinese concept of "*fujin*" (the nearby), I discuss the possibility of turning to a pedagogy of the nearby rather than merely providing a (false) promise of a future to rural students or youth in other forms of marginalization. By shifting our attention from suspension to groundedness and bringing the meanings back into focus, a pedagogy of the nearby may open up the possibility of reimaging a different education for rural youth and other marginalized young people. The implications of this study are also relevant to educational justice in other cultural contexts.

Dogged Optimism Between Hurt and Healing

This dissertation explores how education, social mobility, and differentiations in educational and social contexts intersect in the lives of rural Chinese students. The overarching question is: How do rural Chinese students negotiate and navigate social stratification and mobility? Drawing on two years of critical ethnographic research, I argue that a group of rural Chinese students in Zhejiang Province, southeastern China, developed a dogged optimism to deal with the imperative of social mobility within a stratified society. Despite the enormous challenges posed by an increasing rural-urban divergence, these rural students are still convinced that they will finally embark on upward social mobility. No matter they are viewed as "diligent Magpies" or "lazy Winter-Cry Birds," they firmly believe that through their efforts, either by continuing to compete on the educational track or turning to alternative avenues, they can move toward a middle or even higher position in the social hierarchy. In general, they were optimistic. I call this positive anticipation in the face of challenges *dogged optimism*.

Kleist and Jansen (2016) remind us that only pointing out that people have hopes is

insufficient. More importantly, we need to understand what people hope for and in which ways they hope. They argue that in today's anthropological studies, researchers pay more attention to the claim that disadvantaged people harbor hope to resist structural constraints and demonstrate their agency. However, a more detailed exploration of the objects and strategies in their hoping-making practices is under-researched. A more nuanced investigation of how young people hope and maintain positivity is significant; as scholars have pointed out, optimism means different things for people with different power resources (Franceschelli & Keating, 2018). The following section takes the call from Kleist and Jansen (2016) to unveil the mechanisms of hope in rural Chinese students' navigating the balance between structure and agency, as well as why optimism has been the core of their cultural identities and subjectivities.

Dogged Optimism as a Form of Social Navigation

My use of the term "dogged optimism" borrows from Paul Willis (2020) in his recent book entitled *Being Modern in China*, where he mentions that Chinese students, especially those unable to take the *Gaokao* route, "produce a dogged optimism and hardiness towards setback" (p. 171) in their path to China's modernization. Their doggedness and tenacity become valuable assets for those who fail in education and face challenges in surviving in cities. My critical ethnography also finds that this dogged optimism pervaded the pursuit of upward social mobility among rural Chinese students. The academically promising students fervently hoped to change their fate by continuously advancing through the ranks of education. Even after failing *Zhongkao* or *Gaokao*, they quickly regained hope, aspiring to successfully land ashore (*shang'an*) on the next stage of the competition. They knew the importance of hard work in their academic journey and putting off enjoying their current life.

The group of students who waited until the end of schooling redirected their focus away from academic learning and anticipated reclaiming their ability to compete in society and the market. Like the striving students, the waiting students maintained optimistic outlooks toward their futures, believing that as long as they worked diligently in their jobs, they could still attain their desired lifestyles. They believed that they would regain the ethos of hard work once they moved beyond the school gates. Through their physical labor and social knowledge, or what Zipin et al. call "life-world" knowledge, they envisaged achieving material prosperity in adulthood.

Society usually characterizes rural Chinese students as "broken children," a label echoed by the urban visitors who visited Watershed in 2020 (see Chapter 1). This dissertation challenges such a stereotypical portrayal. The young people in this study generally exhibited hopefulness, optimism, and aspiration. They have learned their ways to live with the "abnormally-normal" situations of growing up in rural China (Cooper et al., 2019, p. 35). At the beginning of the dissertation, I describe a seemingly paradoxical phenomenon in contemporary China: rural schools are perceived as overcrowded with unmotivated students in an era when the ethos of striving has become the norm. This dissertation examines the tensions surrounding the maintenance of striving amidst social inequalities and stratification. Within this context, doggedness emerges as a prominent theme in their negotiations of life opportunities.

In Chinese, "dogged" can be translated as *wan qiang de* (顽强的). Chinese students are instilled with the importance of resilience from a young age. Particularly for students facing adversity, doggedness is considered an essential attribute for altering one's destiny. I use the term "dogged" as a prefix to "optimism" to underscore the difficult task of maintaining this optimism,

which demands ongoing negotiation and renegotiation of their life aspirations.

Remaining optimistic was not an individual choice among the rural students from Red Mountain Township; rather, it was socially embedded and should be understood collectively. In a stratified educational and social system, rural Chinese students found it necessary to maintain optimism to rationalize their efforts or idleness in the present. Otherwise, there would be no meaning in their current sacrifices for the striving students, nor an escape for the waiting students who might perceive that there were all walls around them. As discussed in Chapter 2, the imperative for upward social mobility has been deeply ingrained, especially for rural Chinese students facing disadvantaged circumstances. Thus, maintaining a tenacious spirit of optimism is equally imperative in this arduous pursuit of mobility. In other words, being optimistic is something they *should* and *have to* do.

Rural Chinese students' narrative of an optimistic future, according to Zhan (2023), should be understood as "a form of epistemic labor," which "make[s] their life sensible, their reality tolerable, and their future imaginable to themselves" (p. 446). In this sense, the dogged optimism is healing, serving to mitigate the injuries resulting from families, schools, and society. This optimistic thinking serves as "a source of solace" (Franceschelli & Keating, 2018, p. 12S), alleviating their current struggles and pains in making sense of their past-present-future. A culture of dogged optimism also helps rural students maintain a relationship with the future (Gökşen et al., 2023). This explains why my participants' optimism was not as blind as they sometimes perceived it.

The necessity of maintaining hope as labor is not unique to China. Scholars outside China have also discussed this need among young people in different societies (Franceschelli &

Keating, 2018; Jakimow, 2016). For example, Jakimow's (2016) research in India finds that hope functions as a survival mechanism for both rural parents and children. Despite recognizing the failure of educational promises regarding upward mobility, rural Indian parents continue to invest in their children's education, pinning their hopes on escaping hardship through educational attainment. They uphold conventional hopes and desires as a means of navigating the uncertainties of the present day. In this context, hope serves to "suggest a course of action, in the process providing a (false) sense of agency" (Jakimow, 2016, p. 20). As Jakimow (2016) points out, remaining optimistic and hopeful signifies that rural parents and children maintain a strong attachment to the perceived "progress" toward *the* good life. This is similar to my discussion of "a sense of participation" in Chapter 6. The young people in both Jakimow's (2016) and my study "remain a positioning as *included* in the promises of development" and within the realm of social differentiations (p. 21, emphasis added). In this context, dogged optimism serves as a survival strategy and a method of social navigation (Marzi, 2022). Therefore, the findings from my critical ethnography also resonate with Marzi's (2022) theorization of aspiration. Drawing on Vigh's (2009) concept of social navigation, Marzi theorizes aspiration as a tool for social navigation, which "may be less of a desired end goal and more of a navigational tool to enhance life conditions" (p. 843).

A similar role of optimism is explored in a study of young people in England who shared their experiences under the shadow of the 2008 financial crisis. Faced with shrinking educational and career opportunities, these English youth generally hold an optimistic view of life and place their hopes in the transformative power of hard work (Franceschelli & Keating, 2018). This echoes the sentiments of the rural Chinese students in this study, who harbored a deep-seated

faith in the value of hard work. Franceschelli and Keating (2018) find that while young people articulated similar optimism, its implications varied for individuals in diverse positions within power structures. Optimism among those from privileged backgrounds originated from acknowledging their personal capabilities and the resources available within their families. Conversely, for youth positioned in relatively disadvantaged circumstances within these power relations, optimism primarily functioned as a coping mechanism. Envisioning a positive future was "an anchor of hope" for these less privileged youth (Franceschelli & Keating, 2018, p. 12S).

These discussions about youth optimism during unsettled times, both in and outside of China, are particularly relevant for understanding the doggedness among aspirational rural Chinese students. By contextualizing this form of optimism within broader social dynamics, we can avoid the risk of considering their aspirations as merely false or naïve hopes. In English literature, several relevant terms describe the optimism and hope of young people in today's precarious era, such as cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011), false hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009), and naïve hope. These concepts contribute to a critical understanding of how "governing through hope" operates in society (Kleist & Jansen, 2016, p. 382). For example, scholars have applied Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism to analyze rural education in the Global South, including Laos (Huijsmans & Piti, 2020), India (Dost & Froerer, 2021; Jakimow, 2016), and other regions (Ansell et al., 2020).

Given the existence of these relevant terms, one might wonder why I sought another term to characterize the future-making of rural Chinese students. To answer this question, I should clarify what dogged optimism, as manifested in the lives of my participants, is not. Firstly, dogged optimism extends beyond cruelty. I do not call their positive view "cruel optimism" as I

share with Ngutuku's (2022) discomfort that she felt "with the closure that comes with reading children's aspirations in the Global South too quickly and as an impossibility or a form of 'cruel optimism'" (p. 226). In her research with vulnerable children in Kenya, she calls for a more contextualized understanding of children's aspirations that transcends "explanatory linear models" (p. 226) and meticulously acknowledges the complexity and non-linearity inherent in poor children's experiences. In the case of rural China, viewing students' visions as mere cruel optimism poses a similar risk of prematurely deeming their hopes as unattainable, thereby reducing the efforts of these rural students to a deterministic model of social reproduction.

A less contextualized comprehension of the positive outlook developed by my participants may lead to the second possible misreading of dogged optimism, which tends to perceive it as merely false or naïve. Researchers have criticized how various meritocratic narratives contribute to fostering unhelpful, if not detrimental, hopes within and beyond the realm of education. Duncan-Andrade (2009) identifies three types of false hope circulating in urban education in the United States: hokey hope, mythical hope, and hope deferred. These forms of hope either have a naïve expectation of achieving success through individual hard work or deny the possibility of educational changes through transformative pedagogy. Chinese scholars have also used Marxist and Freire's concept of false consciousness to describe the faith in education held by disadvantaged (migrant, poor, and vocational) Chinese students and their agentic role of controlling fate (J. Chen & Wang, 2021; Y. Dong & Wang, 2022; G. Wang & Doyle, 2022). While I agree that structural barriers often turn the expectations of Chinese youth into illusions, emotionally, I find it difficult to view the optimism of rural students solely as a misconception. Moreover, too quickly viewing my participants' imaginations of moving up to the

middle as false consciousness overlooks the healing aspect of dogged optimism. Optimism serves as a navigational tool for confronting social suffering, even if it is only temporary (Bryant & Knight, 2019; Franceschelli & Keating, 2018). By uncritically labeling the optimism of rural Chinese students as naïve, false, or cruel, researchers run the risk of perpetuating the dominant norm of "what counts as (a good) aspiration" (Gale & Parker, 2015, p. 84).

By refraining from categorizing rural Chinese students' dogged optimism as cruel and false, I am not suggesting that educators should encourage the reinforcement of this optimistic outlook for those who come from marginalized backgrounds. As I will discuss in the next section, dogged optimism has limitations. Therefore, it is essential to transcend dogged optimism in education to address the educational needs of rural youth effectively.

The Tenuity of Optimism

This section moves to the limitations of dogged optimism in dealing with various social sufferings that rural Chinese students have faced and will confront in their life paths. Although I do not use Berlant's (2011) term to define their attachment to a bright future, dogged optimism often carries a sense of cruelty, particularly when they realize the "*almost* impossibility" of their meritocratic reasonings and their aspirations for social mobility (Jakimow, 2016, p. 11). As illustrated by Pattenden's (2017) ethnographic study in South Africa, the hopes for a better life that marginalized youth developed through schooling, as a result of the socialization of various meritocratic discourses vigorously advocated at school, often proved to be illusory upon their integration into society. While some students in South Africa finally realized the goals set forth in school, such as obtaining certificates, they later found that these fulfilled hopes did not yield the anticipated material benefits.

My critical ethnography finds a similar shift in the perceptions of rural Chinese students regarding their future lives, transitioning from hopefulness to disappointment. Dogged optimism could turn into pessimism as rural students eventually enter universities or job markets. In Chapter 5, we discussed how striving students like Ying and Shulan immersed themselves in the learning practice of *kudu*, a response to the inequalities stemming from China's rural-urban and social class disparities. Their embodied experiences, such as the constant need to motivate themselves even in states of extreme fatigue and disappointment, exemplified the cruelty of anchoring their hopes in education. This group of academically oriented students likely realized earlier that their optimism was somewhat unrealistic when they faced failure in entrance exams compared to their "laid-back" schoolmates. Yunjin, for instance, did not gain admission to County High. Following graduation from a lower-quality high school, she attended a three-year vocational college rather than a four-year university. Hence, her long-held aspiration to become a Chinese language teacher seems almost unattainable. Ying, another top student at Watershed, also faced failure in *Gaokao*, preventing her from entering a regular undergraduate program. Consequently, she had to continue her journey toward *shang'an* by preparing for the exam to upgrade from a three-year vocational college to a four-year university.

Disappointment also marked the waiting students' attitudes when they finally moved beyond the school gates. The last time I saw Taihang was in August 2023, upon his graduation from vocational high school. He was employed in the dried goods section of the county seat's largest supermarket, his fourth job in the past year since beginning internships during his senior high school year. Previously, he had worked at a car wash, a tailor shop, and an automotive battery factory. During our talk, he sighed and said, "Why does it feel like the path I imagined is

drifting further away? I didn't make it to college in the end, and work is truly exhausting."

A similar comment arose from Yonghai in the summer of 2023. When I inquired whether life was progressing as he had envisioned after a year of work, he shook his head and replied,

> How could it be the same? I used to think I'd have a nine-to-five (*zhao jiu wan wu,* 朝九晚五) job, but look at me now. That's why I've stopped thinking about what kind of life I'll have in the future. I don't dare to think about it; even if I do, it's meaningless.

A nine-to-five job is a job where workers start at 9 a.m. and finish at 5 p.m. Yonghai never had the luxury of aspiring to a salaried office position; his desire was simply for a job with stable working hours and an 8-hour workday. However, when he started interning in his senior year at vocational high school, he soon discovered that finding a nine-to-five job was out of reach. Since the start of his internship, he had been working at the sewage treatment station of a pharmaceutical factory in Shen County. He adhered to a three-shift work schedule: one day on the day shift (from 8 am to 8 pm), the next on the night shift (from 8 pm to 8 am the following day), followed by a day off after the night shift. Yonghai did not enjoy these working hours, but it was presently the most suitable job he could secure.

Facing new challenges, my participants found the necessity of continually adjusting their life plans. Mingfei, one of the four students who did not continue any form of education beyond middle school, surprised me during our last conversation in 2023 by revealing that he no longer wanted to get married. In our previous interviews, he often portrayed a good life with references to family. Establishing a family was previously an integral part of his aspirations for stability.

WW: What do you think your ideal life is like?

Mingfei: I've actually thought about this question. You know, I don't think I'd get

> married. [He laughed after saying this] I am not thinking about getting a wife. I mean, you need money to buy a car and a house before you can get married. A car costs money, and isn't it over a million to buy a house anywhere? For me, after buying a car, I wouldn't have the funds to spend another million on a house. I can't even earn the money to afford a wife.
>
> ……
>
> WW: Is the main reason you're not considering marriage due to economic pressure?
>
> Mingfei: Because I don't think I can earn that much money. In the future, as long as there're women to sleep with, that's enough. I don't want to think much about anything else.

Hope becomes precarious. It seems contradictory to describe rural Chinese students' optimism as dogged on the one hand, and to argue that such doggedness is tenuous on the other. How can something be determined and persistent while simultaneously vulnerable? However, when considering the lived experiences of growing up in rural China, this paradox is not difficult to understand. It is essential to contextualize our understanding of this optimism within specific temporal and spatial dimensions.

This complex also prompts us to rethink the role of the optimistic views inherent in rural Chinese students. After her research with rural migrants in Beijing, Zhan (2023) found that her participants' positive narratives did not necessarily uplift or inspire them in their daily lives. Instead, these narratives contribute to helping the marginalized migrants "fill in the gap between reality and hope, transforming the absurd and unfair situation into a sensible reality and therefore allowing people to make sense of a social order amid unpredictable, chaotic economic

conditions" (p. 446). This parallels my ethnography; remaining optimistic did not actually motivate some students to pursue academic improvement or take action to resist the inequalities they faced, particularly among the waiting students. This urges educators to rethink which form of optimism and hope would be more relevant in supporting rural Chinese students and other students facing similar power-marginalized conditions globally.

Therefore, dogged optimism is not the appropriate solution for addressing injustice. I do not argue for cultivating a culture of dogged optimism to make rural students' upward mobility more achievable. Instead, I argue that to better serve rural Chinese students and meet their educational needs, school education should facilitate students to go beyond the utopia and suspended aspects associated with dogged optimism. The following section discusses the possibilities of transcending dogged optimism within China's educational system for rural students by moving beyond suspended schooling experiences and bringing meaning back in.

From Suspension to Groundedness: Bringing Meaning Back In

What education in rural China can learn from the experiences of youth on the margins about dealing with the complex nexus between schooling, stratification, and mobility? The preceding chapters depict the intricate correlations between education, social differentiation, and student aspirations for social mobility in rural China. Despite the prevalent disparity in educational quality, with rural schools lagging significantly behind their urban counterparts within China's urban-rural divide, these rural institutions strive to facilitate social mobility for (some of) their students. This good intention has persisted, yet it often ends up achieving the reproduction of the lower social strata. Chinese society's longstanding "educational desire" has consistently been intertwined with a fervent drive for upward social mobility. The stark tension

between the reality of social stratification and the yearning for socioeconomic advancement is notably pronounced within the rural educational space. Under this intense contradiction, certain extreme and seemingly illogical educational practices have arisen, as I have discussed in the previous three chapters.

Watershed School, located in a rural mountain township on the southeast coast of China, is where we witness these practices and their impacts on students' lives. Chapter 4 introduces these educational approaches and explains why they exist. The following Chapters 5 and 6 describe the experiences and perspectives of the students involved. These chapters examine how and why some rural Chinese students choose to (or are able to) become Magpies while some are like Winter-Cry Birds at schools, even though both groups of students are aspirational. Through pedagogical strategies such as "stratified teaching in mobile classes" and "labor education," Watershed sorted students into differentiated groups with different learning opportunities. This tracking system divided Watershed into two educational spaces, one for the Magpie-type students and the other for students who perceived to be irresponsible "Winter-Cry Birds," or the so-called "written-off" (Zipin et al., 2021). This stratified educational design motivated academically promising students to work hard to seek upward social mobility through education, while almost giving up on the group of students who could not perform well in *Zhongkao*.

A few students who were more promising to achieve educational success motivated themselves to engage in the learning practice of *kudu*, which required them to postpone the meanings of the present to exchange for a better future. In line with the production of a learning space that narrowly focused on subject knowledge, these students perceived academic attainment as *the* means of facilitating their upward social mobility. They took responsibility for themselves

with the hope of changing their fate and becoming the "person above persons." They learned that it was their rural disadvantaged background that made hard work extremely necessary for them. With limited resources from their families, they had no choice but to ceaselessly motivate themselves by putting more effort into routing learning. These striving students temporarily protected their esteem and dignity with an identity of qualified learners and "good students" while at the same time paying a great price in activities of self-sacrifice.

For the other group of students, those seen as irresponsible to themselves, the school's primary task was merely to keep them in school and not cause trouble. Learning academic subjects was no longer the focus of the students' school education. Instead, the school made efforts to cultivate individuals who are as useful as possible to society through forms of pedagogy that make them feel cared for and willing to work hard as future members of the workforce. These disengaged students lost their learning opportunities even though the majority of them still had a strong faith in education. What they disbelieved was that education works in their own navigation toward a good life. The years of schooling turned out to be a waiting period when these students saw few meanings.

Although these two groups of rural Chinese students had vastly different educational experiences, they shared a commonality: they both lived a life that Xiang (2021a) describes as "suspended." Both the striving and waiting students tended to view the present as meaningless. In their pursuit or imagination of social mobility, the meaning of the present was largely absent. In other words, their focus was on the future, the not-yet. Even though they developed a culture of dogged optimism in the life stage when they were put in suspension, this positive imagination turned out to be tenuous. Anchoring their hopes in the far-away future mobility could only

temporarily release their struggles. Therefore, I argue that it is important to bring meaning back to their schooling, which will help rural students move beyond a suspended life to a more grounded navigation of a possible future. The following discussion is my initial effort to reimagine education that will genuinely help rural students "to unveil opportunities for hope" (Freire, 2021, p. 17).

Rethinking Social Mobility in Rural Education

This critical ethnography reveals that attaching hopes to social mobility does not bring equality to rural young people in China. Even worse, anchoring one's hopes to imagined mobility puts rural students in the status of suspension (B. Xiang, 2021a), which makes the present a sacrifice. Rural Chinese students, whether they acted like assiduous Magpies or idle Winter-Cry Birds, had to similarly sacrifice the meanings of the present to wait for the arrival of a better future, even though in different ways. Stories from Red Mountain Township manifest that the life trajectories of rural Chinese students are not only marginalized by social stratification and inequality but also profoundly shaped by narratives of social mobility. Through an ethnographic examination of how students navigate and negotiate the imperative of social mobility differently within the educational and social systems, we are able to grasp the cruelty of such narratives that motivate students to aspire for upward mobility and take responsibility for themselves.

Education is often perceived as the solution to social inequality and the means to promote social mobility for disadvantaged students. Under this logic, reforming rural education means increasing the capability of schools to provide more opportunities for students to achieve upward mobility. Education reformers seldom challenge this embedded assumption. In her foreword to *Factories of Learning*, Mirza (2017) writes,

> How we achieve this meritocratic dream of social mobility in a fundamentally inequitable society, deeply riven with the historic fissures of racist, classist and sexist divisions, is the question that lies at the heart of our heated debates on the relationship between educational inequality and social mobility. (p. vii)

In many societies, social mobility is perceived not only as *the* solution to addressing educational inequality but also as a factor that perpetuates various social divisions. This role of social mobility is evident in my ethnography in Red Mountain Township. The production of a particular learning space and the design of the curriculum at Watershed exemplified the logic of social mobility. At the school, what I found was a "social mobility vision" of public education that prioritizes credentials over skills that empower students in their life paths (Labaree, 2012, p. 196). Therefore, rural schools such as Watershed contribute to "making social mobility the driving force in education," a model "that is focused on credentialing more than learning" (Labaree, 2012, p. 197). Moving out and moving up become the primary goals of rural schooling, which significantly shape the life experiences of rural young people.

My critical ethnography uncovers at least three negative consequences of a tight attachment to social mobility in rural education. Firstly, the imperative of social mobility contributes to limiting learning opportunities for many rural students. In the dual-track education system of academic and vocational high schools, social mobility is often associated with the academic track. Therefore, the evaluation of a middle school is usually linked to how many students it can send to academic high schools, especially "key point high school." The desire to promote educational success for students within a stratified system often leads the school to prioritize the learning opportunities of a select few promising students. Consequently, rural

schools are compelled to produce unequal and stratified learning spaces for students with varying degrees of engagement with education. As I discussed in the previous three chapters, rural Chinese students developed different relationships with school education. The striving students perceived schools as "engines of social mobility" (Owens & de St Croix, 2020, p. 407), whereas the waiting students imagined their mobility path would eventually start after leaving school. A narrow focus on education solely as a vehicle for facilitating educational/social mobility diminishes the learning opportunities for some rural students.

Secondly, the imperative of moving upward individually reinforces and legitimizes a meritocratic model of schooling. Narratives of social mobility in education often persuade students to embrace the adage: "No pains, no gains." In the context of meritocratic social mobility, aspirations and hopes are framed as moral projects for students living with disadvantages. Rural students are instilled with the belief that they must take full responsibility for their own lives. They are taught that only through relentless hard work can they achieve rewards, and if they fail, they have no one to blame but themselves. By producing striving individuals and immersing young people in a "hard work zeitgeist" (Mendick et al., 2015, p. 174), schools and society subtly divert attention away from structural injustices. This legitimizes a process that makes some students disposable (Giroux, 2015), wasted (Bauman, 2004), and surplus (Ansell et al., 2020).

The third consequence of the false promise of social mobility is that it suspends the present lives of rural students. In a society where everyone is indoctrinated to believe in the opportunity to ascend socioeconomically, social mobility becomes a *fact* rather than a *project* (Berlant, 2011). The future destination for every young person is imagined as somewhere better

than their parents. As a result, rural Chinese students develop a negation of the lives of their parents' generations and their own present circumstances. Their optimistic perception of a utopia life leads them to "live for an elusive future rather than strive to transform the present" (Zhan, 2021, p. 348). What's worse, by narrowly focusing on educational/social mobility, rural education serves as a "disimagination machine" that works to "weaken the ability of individuals to think critically, imagine the unimaginable, and engage in thoughtful and critical dialogue" (Giroux, 2015, p. 74).

Therefore, stories from Watershed students in this critical ethnography teach us that problems in China's rural education are not only linked to its incapability to promote social mobility for students but also to the promise of mobility itself, which needs to be reconsidered. As Atherton (2016) contends, "The present focus in schools on social mobility, which is to drive up attainment of those from lower socioeconomic groups, is at best not fully thought through and at worst a deceit" (p. 80). Many critiques of narratives surrounding social mobility suggest that we have to go beyond "celebratory social mobility discourses" (S. Friedman, 2014, p. 355). Scholars in China have insightfully critiqued the failure of education to assist rural students' success from various perspectives. I aim to contribute to their arguments by highlighting that the taken-for-granted promise of social mobility rooted in education itself is problematic. This assumption has seldom been challenged in today's Chinese society.

Drawing on the complex entanglement of education, social mobility, and stratification examined in this study, I call for "more critical or dissociative stances" to normative aspirations of social mobility (Anderson et al., 2023, p. 154). In previous discussions of rural education in China, there has been excessive focus on reforming failed rural schools by increasing funding

and ensuring the availability of qualified teachers. The underlying logic of these reform strategies suggests that rural schools should and can enhance students' academic attainment, thereby enabling rural students to achieve aspirations of social mobility. However, these reforms often struggle to achieve the desired outcomes, with education levels in rural areas consistently lagging far behind cities. The aspiration for social mobility as a collective "societal hope" (Hage, 2003, p. 15) faces repeated setbacks yet continues to be reinvigorated time and again. It is hard not to draw parallels with reforms aiming to provide fairer opportunities for social mobility but inadvertently perpetuating existing structural injustices, which ultimately offer little real benefit to rural students.

Following recent critiques of social mobility narratives (Atherton, 2016; Ingram & Gamsu, 2022; Reay, 2013), my critical ethnography calls for rethinking the role of social mobility in education. It is not only the broken link between rural education and upward social mobility that is the problem but also the tight link between education and individual mobility that should be critically reexamined. An alternative dissociative stance means educators and researchers should guide students to engage in the process of what Berlant (2011) calls "unlearning attachments to regimes of injustice" (p. 184). What disadvantaged students need is not only "a new narrative of upward mobility" but also "a new model of upward mobility" that "lifts communities and not just individuals" (Morton, 2019, p. 16). By arguing for keeping distance from the promise of social mobility in education, I do not mean students with fewer resources need a "stay in your lane" approach (Ingram & Gamsu, 2022, p. 192). This does not mean that rural Chinese students do not have the need or the right to change their living conditions and move up the social ladder. What I emphasize is an attachment to an illusionary

social mobility within a stratified society is unable to lead to meaningful changes in the present and the future.

Current Chinese society has witnessed the consequences of tightly connecting education and social mobility in a time when many university graduates could not find "good" jobs. After the global pandemic, when economic growth slows down, more educated young people who achieve educational mobility are not guaranteed middle-class jobs. Political talks on post-university employment tend to blame college graduates for being unwilling to take working-class jobs. In this context, more young people will realize that education is not the guaranteed path to social mobility. As Atherton (2016) writes, "If the present education strategy was successful, the result would be a lot of disappointed (young) people—there are simply not enough 'good' jobs (as such jobs are defined at present) to absorb such a qualified workforce" (p. 167).

Therefore, educators should rethink the role of education in reintroducing meaning into the present and shift away from a suspended existence toward a more grounded life for students, significantly those facing multiple and intersectional disadvantages. Regarding rural education, schools in rural areas should "no longer be sites of extraction, sacrifice zones, and sites that exist only to produce raw materials for growth" (Cervone, 2023, p. 116).

Is detachment possible? Can we envision an education not solely aimed at facilitating educational or social mobility? Developing a dissociative approach to the relationship between education and social mobility is not an easy task. Studies in various cultural contexts have illustrated that students and teachers often struggle to escape the constraints of meritocratic narrative, even when they recognize the structural factors influencing educational outcomes (Owens & de St Croix, 2020). This dissertation cannot offer a comprehensive answer to what

alternative narratives and models of social mobility should entail. Drawing on critical ethnography conducted in a rural mountain township in China and insights from scholars with perspectives from the Global South and Asia, I propose that the concept of "nearby" (*fujin*) may open up a new possibility for interrogating the false promise of social mobility in education and other development projects. The following section presents my initial attempt to discuss the possibility of a pedagogy of the nearby.

Toward a Pedagogy of the Nearby

In their ethnographic studies of rural education in Lesotho, India, and Laos, Ansell and colleagues (2020) raise an important question: Why are countries across the globe passionate about expanding rural education, which is often proved to be little relevant to most rural students' futures? Rural schooling across the world encourages students to be more aspirational but fails to facilitate children to achieve the promises that education promotes. Based on their ethnographies in the three countries, they find that the majority of rural children only learn little at school and are not able to be well-prepared to participate in the global economy. Rural education, despite significant expansion, falls short of its anticipated role in enhancing both individual social mobility and collective human capital in rural areas. Consequently, educated rural children and youth often remain "superfluous or residual" (Ansell et al., 2020, p. 34) in the current global economic structure. They write,

> Education's promise of social mobility is part of a myth that possibilities are open to all, that something worthwhile is on offer, even if it lies in the future. Legitimacy is conferred on the provider—alleviating them of the need to deliver a radical redistribution of resources. In effect, a focus on expanding education covers up the urgent need for

structural change. (p. 33)

If the widely accepted goal of rural education in promoting human capital enhancement is often proven unattainable, as Ansell and colleagues (2020) suggest, what role should education play in better supporting students who grow up on the margins? If the expansion of rural education does not bring more justice in rural places, what kinds of educational changes can better serve rural youth? Ansell et al. (2020) are pessimistic about the transformative role of education in rural regions as they see contemporary rural education across national borders not only fails to include rural young people in the global economy but also fails to prepare them for surviving in rural places. Therefore, they argue for the need for "rights *in* education" rather than merely calling for "rights *to* education." The latter refers to expanding access to and improving the quantity of education for disadvantaged groups of students, a dominant discourse in global development projects (X. Wu & Geo-Jaja, 2016). Previous efforts in rural education reforms worldwide have predominantly focused on improving access to schooling in this dimension. Rights *in* education, on the contrary, pay more attention to dimensions of quality, empowerment, and identity, through which "people not only commit to the workforce but also strive to expand capacities to acquire communal responsibilities to actively participate in societies" (X. Wu & Geo-Jaja, 2016, p. 13). Ansell and colleagues (2020) believe that a shift from "rights *to* education" to "rights *in* education" is possible to better meet the educational needs of rural students.

Evidence from this dissertation supports the idea that rural Chinese students need not only rights *to* education but also rights *in* education. On the one hand, stratified education in China excludes the majority of rural students from qualified educational opportunities, either

tracking them into low-quality tracks or pushing them out of education. On the other hand, the schooling experiences of rural students lack sufficient relevance to their lives, as we have learned from both the striving and waiting students at Watershed. Through the production of optimistic and aspirational subjects, rural schooling contributed to "instilling hope," which created an imperative for "endlessly postponing the materialization of promises" among rural students (Lindroth & Sinevaara-Niskanen, 2019, p. 646). Scholars and educational reformers have paid less attention to the rights *in* education, as existing critiques of China's rural education often center on the incapability of schools to send more rural students to high schools or universities. A discussion of rights *in* rural education aids in reimagining the role of education, which is not only pertinent to an envisioned future—likely unattainable—but also capable of fostering meaningful and critical engagement with the present.

My participants from Red Mountain Township and their stories repeatedly remind me of the concept of "nearby," which has been recently developed by Biao Xiang (2021b). As the distant future of social mobility demands endless sacrifices of the present and the self, as exemplified by the experiences of the striving students, what if their efforts fail to yield the desired outcomes? And for the rural students who are in a state of waiting, realizing that education may not be the right path for them, what steps can schools take to equip them better for the challenges ahead, rather than simply leaving them to wait? Are there alternatives that education can offer them beyond merely producing subjects heavily dependent on dogged optimism? How can these students actively embrace, rather than evacuate, the significance of the nearby and the near future? As Stasik and colleagues (2020) argue, "As one waits for a distant event, the near future appears to be evacuated" (pp. 2-3). In this section, I discuss pedagogical

possibilities aimed at guiding rural Chinese students beyond dogged optimism, drawing upon Xiang's (2021b) theorization of the nearby. My attempt here is to imagine what a critical pedagogy might look like in rural China, challenging normative social mobility and meritocratic discourses that foster unachievable aspirations.

What is nearby? Why turn to the nearby?

According to Xiang (2021b), the nearby is a lived space where people with different social statuses and various backgrounds lead their everyday lives together. Daily interactions emerge among diverse residences in this "socially rich" space (B. Xiang, 2021b, p. 159). Two prominent features of the nearby are its fluidity and generativity. These traits distinguish it from a community, typically forged through shared similarities and homogeneity, where individuals tend to maintain relatively consistent membership and comparable social standings. The nearby, however, consists of differences and diversity. Xiang (2021b) suggests we turn our eyes to look at places and people around us, regaining interest in the histories of the land where we live, stories of the residents we meet daily yet often neglected, such as street vendors we buy breakfast and fruit, hair salon workers we visit every month, and cleaners and maintenance staff work in the condo we live.

Xiang (2021b) contends that contemporary Chinese society has experienced the vanishing of the nearby in everyday lives. This phenomenon is not exclusive to China but is also widespread among young people, particularly in regions of the Global South. The disappearance of the nearby in public consciousness leads to deep divides in today's world, which is evident in often polarized extreme discourses around the COVID-19 pandemic. People tend to develop their opinions either from their own experiences (the very near or the self) or from a grand

narrative (the very far or the imagined "world"). Often lacking is a perspective based on the nearby, the in-between space that connects the very near and the very far. Youth appear to be losing their sensitivity toward the lives of those they encounter daily and the recent transformations in their local places. The loss of sensitivity to the nearby leads to narrowing dialogical possibilities for reflexively and critically negotiating diverse ideas and discourses. Consequently, Xiang (2021b) argues that "[p]eople lost their nearby consciousness and are becoming ever more one-dimensional" (p. 157).

Therefore, besides its material basis as a lived, in-between physical space, the nearby is a scope of seeing. Considering its diversity and generativity, "[t]he nearby brings different positions into one view, thus constituting a 'scope' of seeing. Such a scope enables nuanced understandings of reality and facilitates new social relations and actions" (B. Xiang, 2021b, p. 147). A reconstruction of the nearby for young people helps young people regain the capacity to appreciate differences and tensions. As a perspective of seeing, the nearby contributes to a critical and reflexive way of understanding both the self and the social world, especially taken-for-granted doxic aspirations (Zipin et al., 2015) and "general discourses—be they global discourses, national slogans or social norms" (B. Xiang, 2021b, p. 159).

Xiang's conceptualization of the nearby is intertwined with another aspect of his discussion: *renming* (knowing fate). Xiang (2014b, 2017), based on his anthropological observations of Chinese society, argues that Chinese people tend to admit defeat without accepting fate (*renshu bu renming*). Chinese people commonly desire to alter their destiny, perceiving the need to transcend their current lower social strata and rural identity. They, therefore, persistently climb the social ladder, even at the cost of sacrificing present lives for a

suspended existence. However, this journey of escape is often fraught with challenges. Following repeated setbacks and frustrations, people tend to give up, acknowledging the necessity to transition from their initial idealistic pursuit of change to a more mature acceptance of their fate. This mindset of not accepting fate often arises from a deficiency in the nearby consciousness, shaped by normative narratives pervasive in society. As a central scope of knowing and seeing, it is possible to develop a new understanding of the social world that facilitates citizens' understanding of their fate through a deeper engagement with their immediate surroundings, neighborhood, and people with diverse backgrounds and life paths who live around them.

Turning to the nearby as an alternative way of knowing is particularly relevant for the rural Chinese youth in this study. Both society and the rural school collaborated to instill a sense of imperative social mobility among rural students from Red Mountain Township. Changing their fate became a norm. Therefore, the lives of their parents and other rural residents are othered and not recognized. Rural education provides limited space for students to learn from the nearby: their rural parents who migrate to cities to find jobs, neighbors who sell vegetables on the streets on market days, and friends who drop out at an early age. Instead, schools create increased aspirations that lead rural students to imagine a future life away from their rural origins, aspiring to move up in society. My critical ethnography supports Xiang's (2014b, 2017) observation of admitting defeat without accepting fate among rural Chinese students. The rural school functions as an institution that produces a normative desire for progress, whether in educational success or future life success, while often failing to facilitate the possibilities of progress. It encourages rural students to turn to general narratives and very far futures. A reconstruction of the nearby for rural students is possible to remedy hurts produced by what

Poole and Riggan (2023) call "teleological violence," which arises "when schools inculcate aspirations that cannot be met and a sense of responsibility for the future that cannot be achieved because of the structural barriers" (p. 7).

It is worth noting that Xiang's (2021b) theorization of the nearby is urban-focused. He primarily focuses his discussions on urban youth. Other scholars who apply the concept of "nearby" are also centered in urban settings. For example, artists have tried to explore a form called "nearby art" in urban China (Zhong et al., 2024). However, the concept of "nearby" is also important for young rural people. The development of a scope that pays attention to the nearby offers an alternative for rural students to understand themselves and their life trajectories. Turning to the nearby is a possible solution to the problem of suspended living conditions (B. Xiang & Kang, 2023a). It helps rural students, like those in my study, to reengage with the present and find meaning in their schooling days, rather than feeling like sacrifices and waiting.

Previous studies show that disadvantaged young people often turn to spatial changes to fix their temporal problems, such as waiting for migration to resolve the meaninglessness and boredom of their current lives (Mains, 2012). Does the nearby, as a spatial concept, have a temporal meaning? Xiang's discussions provide an ambitious answer. On the one hand, he contends that the initial introduction of the concept of "nearby" addresses the prevailing "tyranny of time" prevalent in contemporary Chinese society. In the current digital age, where various services rely on big data algorithms, people are becoming increasingly fixated on time while inadvertently overlooking their nearby. For instance, individuals cannot tolerate even a two-minute delay beyond the estimated delivery time for takeout. Yet, they show little concern for the routes taken by delivery personnel or the potential traffic hazards they may encounter while

ensuring timely delivery (B. Xiang & Kang, 2023a). On the other hand, the displacement of the nearby, according to Xiang (2021b), shares some similarities with what Jane Guyer (2007) discusses: the absence of the near future in the United States. The view of time in American public culture has changed significantly from focusing on short-term planning to responding to immediate situations and considering long-term perspectives.

The temporal meaning of the nearby is important in understanding rural Chinese students' negotiation of social mobility. This critical ethnography has demonstrated that rural education shapes students' aspirations for the very far, in terms of a life destination other than rural and working-class lives, while decreasing the possibility of action for the waiting students by producing a stratified learning space. Schooling continually upgrades rural students' aspirations yet fails to provide attainable means to achieve them. Every participant in this study embraced hopeful imaginations of the middle-class future but lacked "an ascending ladder of attainable goals *in the near future*," which leads them "to experience something like boredom in the present as they wait for the sudden change that will reconnect them to their hopes" (Mains, 2012, p. 83, emphasis added). This is particularly relevant to the rural students in wait.

Additionally, the nearby itself is educative. Xiang (2021b) refers to the nearby as "a classroom of life" (p. 150), which brought a concrete understanding of history and politics in Chinese society to his childhood. Therefore, the nearby as a scope of seeing can foreground the "lived-cultural resources" in the life journey of rural Chinese students toward the future (Zipin et al., 2015, p. 236). In a lecture presented by Xiang at Beijing Normal University in 2022, Xiang invited educators to think about the possibility of a pedagogy of the nearby as a progressive education. I take this invitation to initially understand how the nearby might benefit my

participants in this ethnography. Although this attempt is still preliminary, I believe that it contributes to current trends of paying attention to rights *in* education (Ansell et al., 2020) and expands the meanings of social justice by moving beyond a distributive understanding of justice (Cuervo, 2016) in rural education.

What a pedagogy of the nearby might look like in rural education?

A pedagogy of the nearby can be a form of education that facilitates students to cultivate a nearby consciousness and reconstruct the meaning of life based on the lived space of their daily interactions. It enables rural students to regain the capabilities for critical reflection and action, especially in relation to the imperative of social mobility in their life journeys. In this educational approach, educators encourage students to explore themselves and society through interactions with people and places in their surroundings. Students leverage this understanding to shape their life paths instead of adhering to standardized narratives envisioning a predetermined future. Rather than simply aspiring to embody "positive energy," students find ways to seek avenues for action through critical reflection on reality. This pedagogy allows striving students to no longer view sacrificing their present lives for the pursuit of elusive educational success as the sole path with anxiety. Instead, they develop a more proactive understanding of their successes and failures. Similarly, waiting students no longer rely solely on hoping for future social mobility for solace; instead, they find empowerment in the present. Drawing on the lessons I learned from Watershed students in this study, I will discuss two themes that are important in a pedagogy that highlights the nearby for rural students: rebuilding social relations and cultivating critical hopes.

The first element of the pedagogy of the nearby is about rebuilding social relations for rural students. A key concern articulated by Xiang (2021b; B. Xiang & Kang, 2023b) in

introducing the concept of the nearby is how to reestablish the connection between oneself and others. Xiang believes that the nearby is possible to provide an alternative space for young people to solve their life problems such as anxiety, a sense of alienation, and a feeling of powerlessness. Turning to the nearby brings to light the experiences of people with diverse backgrounds around them, through whom rural students learn the collective life histories of their friends, parents, neighbors, and other individuals they encounter in daily lives. What students learn is more than normalized general narrative (such as the social mobility imperative) but different ways of living. Storytelling from the nearby brings gaps to rural students' scope of seeing, through which they develop new ways of understanding their own social positions and their relations to the future. Therefore, various ways of living can be recognized rather than adhering to a standardized pathway of upward mobility. This is in relation to the recent call to expand the meaning of social justice in rural education by moving beyond a distributive focus to recognition and participation (Cuervo, 2016).

A similar argument about the need for social relations has been put forth by Mains (2012) in his research with educated unemployed youth in urban Ethiopia, where he finds that education geared toward employment did not actually benefit young people. He writes, "[T]he goal of schooling cannot simply be the acquisition of jobs. Education…involves providing students with the tools necessary to reconstruct their social relationships with others" (Mains, 2012, p. 86). He believes that social relations in young people's life world is "a hopeful form of knowledge" (p. 156) that helps them produce and navigate aspirations. Understanding rural students' proximate social relations as a form of knowledge reminds us of the educational dimension of the nearby as funds of knowledge, defined as "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of

knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133). Therefore, the nearby provides rural Chinese students with "funds" to develop their relationships with the past, present, and future.

In today's education, whether in urban or rural settings, integrating social relationships from the nearby into the classroom proves challenging, often supplanted by abstract subject knowledge. Teachers at Watershed were aware of this difficulty, as I learned from the very first day of my fieldwork when the senior teacher, Mr. Wu, reminded me of the significance of social rules, expressing his concern that excessive school education might desensitize me to them (see Chapter 3). Aiming at illusionary social mobility fuels the disappearance of the nearby in rural China by denying the meaning of living at the bottom. In this case, the key theme of the life projects of rural youth is escaping rural and underclass origins, as my own stories in Chapter 1 and Watershed students' stories manifest. Pedagogy of the nearby brings meanings of different ways of living, leading rural students to know, embrace, and act on their backgrounds rather than merely escape. In this form of education, "schools replace the teaching of achievement ideology with a way of motivating students that acknowledges rather than denies their social statuses" (Warnock, 2020, p. 158). Therefore, a detachment between education and a changing fate narrative can be realized.

A richer knowledge of the nearby leads to a life attitude that Xiang (2014b, 2017) calls *renming bu renshu*. The term *renming* here does not imply passively surrendering to destiny without agency but rather denotes understanding an individual's life trajectory through historical and political lenses as a social group member. Thus, this term does not embody a fatalistic view of life. Stories from the nearby illustrate not only a need to get out of their origins but also tell

students how society is stratified and how poverty is produced for them. The current education system increases students' aspirations while denying the impossibility of achieving them. This makes students unable to critically reflect on their relations to hopeful futures. "We just try not to think too much." This is a quote from Ying (see Chapter 5), one of the striving students at Watershed School. By forcing herself into a state of thoughtlessness (Mains, 2007, 2012), Ying tried to balance her high aspirations and challenging realities. She was trapped between the pressure to maintain high expectations for success, as societal norms dictate, and the challenge of being unable to intricately plan how to achieve her aspirations. Given the daunting nature of these expectations, opting not to plan for the near future becomes an inevitable strategy for coping with uncertainty, mirroring the approach of the young rural migrant workers depicted by Zhan (2023).

Ying's case explains how the school becomes a "disimagination machine" where "[s]tudents are not given the opportunity to think critically about the divide between their own lives and aspirations and what the school has determined success to look like" (Cervone, 2023, p. 40). Pedagogy of the nearby provides another strategy to deal with this divide. Through a deeper engagement with the nearby, rural students can cultivate "a capacity to *not* hope" (Wrangel, 2017, p. 886). This entails a courageous act, as Xiang (B. Xiang & Kang, 2023a) articulates, of stepping back to critically evaluate society's standardized life objectives and refusing to let mainstream singular evaluation standards dictate one's life trajectory. It is important to note that I am not implying rural students should not aspire to high goals, but rather emphasizing the need for a deeper comprehension of the current educational landscape and social hierarchies. It involves reclaiming agency and empowerment by navigating the interstices between these layers

of stratification.

These different ways of knowing fate connect to the second element of a pedagogy of the nearby: cultivating critical hope. In this form of education, rural students can learn "to distinguish naïve hope—which is similar to optimism or a blind faith that things will get better—from critical hope, which is grounded in reflexivity and action for transformation" (Zembylas, 2014, p. 13). This means rural educators need to work with students to unlearn some deeply rooted assumptions and beliefs, such as problematic narratives of meritocratic social mobility and rural places. Educators work toward "a pedagogy of unlearning," which, according to Sellar and Zipin (2019), means that school educators avoid reinforcing promises of progress and upward mobility rooted in dominant narratives. Modifying Zembylas's (2022) words in his discussion of anti-colonial hope, pedagogy of the nearby "is an affirmative practice of alternative hopes of those peoples whose future cannot be adequately captured in the language of the present or the language of [upward social mobility], because it would be too complicit with the status quo" (pp. 39-40). This is why a capacity to *not* hope is significant for rural Chinese students.

Being critically hopeful is a beneficial alternative to the problematic dogged optimistic culture popular among rural Chinese students. Stories in this ethnography illustrate that dogged optimism, despite its comforting function, largely limits the imagination and initiative of rural students. This is evident in the schooling experiences of the waiting students. They gave up quickly on education when realizing the impossibility of achieving academic success. Meanwhile, they did not accept their fate as a failure, waiting for transformations brought by work and migration to urban regions after graduation. A lack of agential change made their present lives at middle and vocational high school feel " like a waste or worthless repetition"

(Richaud, 2022, p. 347). What can better serve rural students is a critical hope. “To say that someone is critically hopeful means that the person is involved in a critical analysis of power relations and how they constitute one’s emotional ways of being in the world while attempting to construct, imaginatively and materially, a different lifeworld” (Zembylas, 2014, p. 13). The cultivation of critical hope in a pedagogy of the nearby helps rural students regain capacities of action, guiding rural students to take actions to reengage with the historical present and the community that they have been taught to escape from an early age. It creates what Apple (2014) calls “spaces of possible action” (p. xvii).

Therefore, the relationship between rural students and the future changes from “navigators” to “cartographers.” As Gale and Parker (2015) claim, “At issue is the capacity for the disadvantaged to not simply become better navigators of predetermined futures, but cartographers who create and legitimise the conditions within which their aspirations are navigated” (p. 91). The pedagogy of the nearby makes this shift possible. It allows rural students to determine their own trajectories and create new maps in their navigation of the future. Therefore, this pedagogy opens up possibilities to enhance “the capacity to aspire” for disadvantaged youth, “a navigational capacity through which the poor can redefine the terms of trade between recognition and redistribution” (Appadurai, 2013, p. 126).

Pedagogy of the nearby takes place in classrooms and is needed beyond the school gate. In urban China, artists have experimented with various ways to help residents regain sensitivity to the nearby (B. Xiang, 2021b; Zhong et al., 2024). Mass media, being a favored mode of information dissemination among young people, will also play a crucial role in awakening the nearby consciousness among rural youth. The buzzword *dagongren*, explored in Chapter 6,

provides a good example of how online discourse contributes to shaping the self-understanding of rural students. Reconstructing the consciousness of the nearby among rural students is feasible through diverse channels. This aids in fostering collective solidarity to counter the prevalent individualistic competition (Owens & de St Croix, 2020).

Being attuned to the nearby does not merely mean localizing education for rural students. The concept of nearby itself is fluid and has no fixed boundaries, resemblance Anzaldúa's (1987) notion of borderland—a space where different worlds encounter. Therefore, the pedagogy of the nearby does not essentialize rural places or experiences; rather, it acknowledges the interconnectedness of rural communities and other places in students' lives. In this hyper-mobile era, none of my participants were confined solely to their home villages. They visited cities where their parents work during summer and winter breaks, engaged in shopping and socializing with friends in the county seat, and some even lived in the county seat on weekends, traversing different spaces every week. In this regard, the pedagogy of the nearby diverges from place-based education, which is gaining traction in rural education in the United States.

While I argue for the emphasis on the nearby in rural education, I recognize that implementing a pedagogy centered around it is not without challenges. It is somewhat utopian to believe that a pedagogy of the nearby can easily address various educational issues in rural China. Furthermore, not all aspects of the "funds" embedded in the nearby are inherently beneficial. Zipin (2009) contributes to the theory of funds of knowledge by shedding light on the concept of "dark funds of knowledge," which are likely experienced by students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. These dark sides of local life may include instances of violence and harassment that permeate the daily experiences of disadvantaged students. Through

my fieldwork, I have uncovered instances where these dark experiences in the nearby have influenced the lives of rural Chinese students, such as the quarrels in the township discussed by Yin (Chapter 5) and the habitual belittlement experienced by Hongbin from his grandmother (Chapter 6). Exploring the dark aspects of nearby life requires courage and thoughtful curriculum designs from educators.

Despite this darkness, the stories from Watershed students reveal an urgency to turn to the nearby and the near future to deal with the harms created by the imperative of social mobility. Pedagogy of the nearby offers opportunities to cultivate two capabilities that Dejaeghere (2021) discusses in education for disadvantaged students: recognition and the reimagining of alternative futures. These capabilities are significant for rural Chinese students to negotiate the social mobility imperative within a stratified educational and social system. Therefore, empowering through a nearby scope can be understood as what Zipin et al. (2015) describe as "resourcing and capacitating" (p. 239) disadvantaged students.

My fieldwork also demonstrates that there was still space for practicing different teaching approaches in rural China despite the context of highly standardized curriculum design. Teachers such as Mr. Yang and Mr. Wu were exploring methods suitable for rural students within their means. Growing up in rural regions, they understood the significance of moving beyond a "just-teach" approach (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014) in educating rural students. They established "Happy Farms" for students (although partly for managing disengaged students), emphasizing the educational value of agricultural life. This allowed some students who grew up in rural villages but had little involvement in agricultural labor to gain some understanding of their parents' work. After my fieldwork, Mr. Yang left Watershed and became a principal at another rural school. He

shared that his nearly 20 years of working in rural education made him realize that "education changes destiny" does not apply to most rural students. Therefore, in his new role, he cautiously maintained a distance from this discourse, hoping to explore with students how education enriches the meanings of their lives.

Concluding Remarks

This dissertation starts with a paradoxical phenomenon: while the ethic of striving has become a moral and political norm in Chinese society, many rural students behave oppositely—they muddle along and make little effort to achieve academic success. Contemporary China has produced "striving individuals" (Y. Yan, 2012, 2013) and "desiring subjects" (Rofel, 2007) since the economic reforms started in the late 1970s. Striving has become an economic, political, moral, and cultural need in post-reform China, especially in current political discourses of achieving the Chinese Dream and rejuvenating the Chinese nation. I conducted this critical ethnography to comprehend how students who grew up in rural China respond to the imperative of striving in various ways and how they understand what it means to be an aspirational subject in a stratified society.

My approach to answering this puzzle is to examine the complex entanglement between education, stratification, and social mobility. Most societies in the world treat education as a primary means for children and young people to achieve upward mobility and for society to reduce inequalities. This is particularly true in China, where expanding educational opportunities for rural students to facilitate their life project of moving upward is a central social concern. Achieving social mobility (through education) has become imperative for rural young people who find it urgent to escape their rural identity and working-class fate in a stratified society.

Class-centered Western social theories have reminded us that education, as a social reproduction institution, often fails to make upward mobility attainable for working-class youth (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Consequently, working-class students develop distinctive relationships with education, such as resistance (Willis, 1977).

Building on these cultural analyses of social class issues, I extended my theoretical perspectives to the Global South to highlight the *spatiality* and *temporality* of learning to move out and up in rural Chinese youth's educational experiences. Epistemologies, theories, and conceptual tools developed from the Global South societies bring crucial insights into understanding how children and youth navigate tensions about time and space. These insights are particularly relevant to how rural Chinese students connect to the future under the background that they feel an urgent need to escape their rurality to move up the social ladder. Situating my critical ethnography in Global South youth studies adds meaningful discussions to previous class-centered interpretations of rural Chinese students.

My fieldwork at Watershed School, a rural mountain school located in Red Mountain Township in southeast China, demonstrates that the rural school is a key site for producing different types of aspirational subjects. Through material and discursive productions of a stratified learning space, the school made some students strive while others wait. Despite facing limited resources and lower levels of educational attainment, rural schools cultivate aspirations for academic success that are on par with those of urban schools. The manifestation of this drive for academic excellence is evident at Watershed School, where we have observed how educational desire has been spatialized on the campus. However, this thirst for satisfactory academic results marginalized many rural students because only those few top-performing

students would bring reputations to the school in an exam-oriented education system. Therefore, the school created a stratified learning space, or a school within the school, to center its resources on teaching academically promising students.

The production of the educational space constructed different types of aspirational students: the industrious Magpies and the idle Winter-Cry Birds. These students employed diverse strategies to navigate the complex interplay between the moral need for hard work and multiple institutionalized inequalities. While a few students pursued academic excellence with determination, many others, recognizing the limited avenues for social advancement through education, adopted a strategy of waiting until the conclusion of their schooling. They aimed to reclaim their ability to compete for a middle-class status beyond the confines of the educational system. Rural Chinese students utilized striving or waiting as their primary approach to negotiate the tensions between social disparities and upward mobility. These practices not only shaped their relationship with the present, the future, and the educational space but also influenced their perception of themselves.

Findings from the rural mountain school reveal that the practices of waiting and striving embraced by Watershed students were characterized as "survivalist but aspirational at the same time" (Thieme, 2018, p. 541). The reluctance of rural students to actively pursue success within the school setting does not signify a rejection of meritocratic ideals; instead, it reflects their ongoing pursuit of hope, envisioning a brighter future once they regain their capacity for hard work. This discovery resonates with Richaud's (2022) research with rural migrant workers in Shanghai, who similarly exhibit a blend of idleness and adherence to the ethos of striving.

I call this attachment to a belief in a bright future and continuity in investing in hopes and

dreams “dogged optimism.” An optimistic culture become a key characteristic in rural Chinese students’ moving toward their imagined future. Confronted with immense challenges that threatened to erode their hopes, this group of students persisted in their endeavors to reclaim hope and pursue their dreams relentlessly. These efforts were either manifested within the educational sphere or anticipated to resume upon leaving school and entering the job market. Dogged optimism is both healing and hurting. On the one hand, it offers solace to marginalized students, providing them with a glimmer of hope amidst adversity. However, on the other hand, it can also prove detrimental, resonating with Berlant’s (2011) criticism of the cruel realities of optimism in contemporary capitalist societies.

Furthermore, this optimistic perspective on their life paths is precarious, often resulting in disillusionment as they become increasingly entangled in stratified educational and social systems. While steadfast optimism may function as a coping mechanism for rural Chinese students, enabling them to envisage a future despite unequal treatment (Gökşen et al., 2023), it is not a cure-all for the tensions between social disparities and the imperative for mobility. Therefore, I draw upon Xiang’s (2021b) concept of “nearby” to examine its potential in these students in marginalization as a means to anchor their hope. On the other hand, it is hurting because it shares similarities with Berlant’s (2011) analysis of the cruelty of optimism in contemporary capitalist societies. Additionally, such an optimistic view of their life trajectories is tenuous, easily turning to disappointment when they engage more with the stratified educational and social systems. While dogged optimism offers a way for rural Chinese students to connect themselves with the future when they are unequally treated, it is not the right solution to solve the tensions between stratification and social mobility imperative. Therefore, I build on Xiang’s

(2021b) concept of “nearby” to discuss its possibility to “repair the fragile relationship between the present and the future” (Zhan, 2023, p. 446).

This critical ethnography provides three implications for education policies to reimagine how to educate marginalized students under the background of “a dramatic upscaling of aspirations alongside the diminishment of the possibility of achieving them” (Pettit, 2023, p. 11). First, lack of aspiration is not a primary problem faced by students with a disadvantaged background. My discussion of rural Chinese students’ aspirations adds to existing literature that challenges an individualistic perception of aspiration and views it as socially and culturally embedded (Appadurai, 2013; DeJaeghere, 2018; Gale & Parker, 2015). Previous studies have claimed that aspiration is often the wrong target for rural education (Ansell et al., 2020; White, 2021) and education for working-class students. The rural students in this study expressed high trust in education. They treated education as the most important and promising means to move upward.

Meanwhile, many of them had to seek alternative ways because of academic failure. This is significantly different from the counter-school culture described in Willis’s (1977) ethnography. Rural Chinese students, despite being disengaged in academic learning, were aspirational subjects who believed in normative ideas of hard work and meritocratic narratives of success. What put them in a state of indolence was stratification and inequality.

Second, promoting social mobility is a goal too narrow for education. This dissertation adds to existing critiques of social mobility talks rooted in schooling. Education across the world often teaches students to cope with social mobility rather than to question the existence of stratification. Stories from Watershed School prove that anchoring aspirations on facilitating

social mobility results in a narrow focus on the meanings of education and harmfully impacts both academically engaged and disengaged students. Educational practices focusing on sending more rural Chinese students to academic high schools and colleges do not necessarily solve the inequality problems. Critical researchers should pay attention to both rights *to* education and rights *in* education, shifting from a narrow focus on the distributive aspect of social justice to including other aspects such as recognition and representation (Roberts & Green, 2013). Pedagogy of the nearby is possible to contribute to expanding justice paradigms in education.

Third, rural educators should reconsider the production of educational space to provide meaningful learning opportunities for all students. With a narrow focus on academic success, teachers paid limited attention to many students who are considered to be less promising. A stratified and exam-oriented learning space produced at Watershed limited many students from engaging in learning, pushing them to stay stuck in waiting status. Educators should work with students to deal with their waiting periods more productively. Turning to the nearby opens up opportunities for rural students to rebuild meaningful social relations at school and in the township, through which they can develop their capabilities for critical reflexivity and action.

I need to read my participants' stories as unfinished. In this dissertation, I avoid drawing a simplistic conclusion regarding whether schooling serves to facilitate rural students' social mobility or perpetuates their marginalization. The stories shared by my participants concerning education and social mobility may be more nuanced and context-dependent than certain Western theories suggest, highlighting the importance of engaging with epistemologies, theories, and concepts related to the Global South. For rural Chinese individuals, the pursuit of social mobility is an ongoing, lifelong endeavor. Their aspirations and relationship with the future are in constant

flux, particularly amidst the challenges posed by China's slowing economy following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Future studies examining how rural Chinese youth navigating their paths toward mobility will benefit from continued engagement with Southern and Eastern contexts, fostering critical dialogue with Western theories. Additionally, an analysis of gender dynamics is crucial, an aspect not addressed in this dissertation. Subsequent research could explore how gender intersects with rural students' experiences of time, space, and social class.

This dissertation was written during a prolonged period of waiting: waiting for the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, waiting to break free from personal stagnation, and waiting for the commencement of a post-Ph.D. phase of life. The stories of hope, joy, vision, and struggle shared by my participants have motivated me to complete this work, which incorporates their voices. Upon reading the following quote from Berlant (2011), I immediately found resonance with both my rural participants and myself.

> In the impasse induced by crisis, being treads water; mainly, it does not drown. Even those whom you would think of as defeated are living beings figuring out how to stay attached to life from within it, and to protect what optimism they have for that, at least. (p. 10)

My participants persist in their quest to maintain their aspirations despite the adversities they face. I would like to conclude this dissertation with a diary entry penned by Yunjin on January 12, 2020. She titled the diary entry "The Fallen Angel, Flying with Hope." In this prose-style diary, Yunjin engages in a poignant dialogue with an angel missing one wing. She not only empathizes with the angel's pain but also witnesses its hopeful flight. When Yunjin shared this

diary with me, I found myself unable to inquire about her motivation for writing. As a reader, I see herself depicted in the diary as an angel missing one wing, abandoned by her mother in childhood. I dedicate this conclusion to the resilient "angel" growing up in rural China.

If we were all approaching the end, would you still find the world beautiful? I guess you would, as hope always accompanies you. What about me? I don't know, perhaps I won't be able to discern the blurred faces in my life anymore. In that moment before life fades, I'll likely harbor deep regrets, a lifelong regret.

Regrets about what? Regrets that I didn't live authentically from the moment life sprouted.

……

And you, my dear angel, the agony of losing one wing must be excruciating, yet you persist with hope, a radiance as bright as the sun. Do you still believe in life?

There must be an end to it, but you continue to soar with one wing, striving to cross oceans and mountains. You embody hope.

Wingless angle, soaring with hope, your doggedness surpasses that of a newborn.

Appendix A: Glossary of Key Chinese Terms

Bailan	摆烂	Let it rot
Ben xiaokang	奔小康	Rushing toward a moderate prosperity society
Dagongren	打工人	Laborer, or working people
Fenceng zouban	分层走班	Stratified teaching in mobile classes
Fengdou	奋斗	Struggle, strive
Fujin	附近	The nearby
Gaokao	高考	The college entrance examination
Houlang	后浪	The next wave, or the rear wave
Huji	户籍	The household registration
Hukou	户口	The household registration
Hukou bu	户口簿	The household register
Jiayou	加油	Go for it, make extra efforts
Kudu	苦读	Bitter study, or studying strenuously
Laodong jiaoyu	劳动教育	Labor education
Laoli zhe	劳力者	Labor with minds
Laoxin zhe	劳心者	Labor with strength
Mo	磨	Grind
Renming	认命	Accepting fate, knowing fate
Renshu	认输	Accepting defeat, giving up
Sang wenhua	丧文化	Mourning culture
Suzhi	素质	Quality
Tangping	躺平	Lay flat
Xian	县	County
Xiancheng	县城	County seat
Xiang	乡	Township
Xiaokang	小康	A moderate prosperity society
Xuanfu	悬浮	Suspension
Shang'an	上岸	Getting ashore, landing ashore
Zhongkao	中考	The high school entrance examination
Zuo chi deng si	坐吃等死	Siting, eating, and waiting for death, or waiting to starve without doing anything

Appendix B: List of Major Participants

Participant Name	Gender	Class	Location of Stories
Shulan	Female	Class A	Chapter 5, Section 2
Ying	Female	Class A	Chapter 5, Section 3
Yunjin	Female	Class A	Chapter 5, Section 1 Chapter 6, Section 2 Chapter 7, Section 3
Xinhan	Female	Class A	Chapter 5, Section 1 Chapter 5, Section 3
Jingjing	Female	Class A	Chapter 5, Section 1
Pingping	Female	From Class A to Class B	Chapter 5, Section 1 Chapter 5, Section 4 Chapter 6, Section 2
Yaqin	Female	Class B	Chapter 5, Section 1 Chapter 6, Section 2
Xiaolu	Female	Class B	Chapter 5, Section 1 Chapter 6, Section 2
Weiyao	Female	Class B	Chapter 5, Section 1 Chapter 6, Section 2
Wenjie	Female	Class B	Chapter 5, Section 1 Chapter 6, Section 2
Lihuan	Female	Class B	Chapter 5, Section 1
Lei	Male	Class A	Chapter 5, Section 1 Chapter 6, Section 2
Hengliang	Male	Class A	Chapter 6, Section 2
Sunhao	Male	From Class A to Class B	Chapter 4, Section 3 Chapter 6, Section 1 Chapter 6, Section 2
Junhua	Male	From Class A to Class B	Chapter 5, Section 1
Hongbin	Male	Class B	Chapter 5, Section 1 Chapter 6, Section 1 Chapter 6, Section 2 Chapter 6, Section 3 Chapter 6, Section 4
Yonghai	Male	Class B	Chapter 5, Section 1 Chapter 6, Section 1 Chapter 6, Section 2 Chapter 7, Section 1

Kai	Male	Class B	Chapter 5, Section 2 Chapter 6, Section 2
Yuchao	Male	Class B	Chapter 5, Section 1 Chapter 6, Section 2
Taihang	Male	Class B	Chapter 5, Section 4 Chapter 7, Section 1
Mingfei	Male	Class B	Chapter 6, Section 4 Chapter 7, Section 1

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