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Stuck in the County - Household Registration System, Moral Geography, and Spatial Production of Migrant Children

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Abstract. With the advancement of urbanization in China, a large number of rural residents have migrated to cities for work, resulting in a sizable group of migrant children who accompany their parents. However, these children often struggle to genuinely integrate into urban life and continue their education. This study adopts a qualitative research approach and, through an analysis of relevant policies and existing literature, seeks to understand how institutions and social norms jointly shape the educational spaces of migrant children. It can be concluded that such barriers arise not only from the household registration system but also from societal moral judgments regarding "who should live where," ultimately shaping a distinctive spatial configuration. The interplay of institutional frameworks and social perceptions has gradually positioned counties as the spatial locus for accommodating the educational needs of migrant children.

Keywords: Migrant children, Household registration system, Moral geography, Educational equity

1. Introduction

With the continuous advancement of urbanization and labor migration in China, an increasing number of children are following their parents to cities, forming a large population of migrant children. Issues related to the education and social integration of this group have gradually attracted academic attention [1]. Although the state has been promoting policies to ensure the education of migrant children in recent years, the differences in policy standards in different regions are significant, making it difficult to form a unified and stable institutional guarantee in reality [2]. As a result, most migrant children still face institutional restrictions in their academic advancement, often being forced to return to their hometown counties during critical stages such as the college entrance examination [3].. In this context, a question worth pondering arises: How does the county become an educational space for migrant children under the joint influence of the household registration system and social perceptions?

This study employs a qualitative research methodology. On one hand, it systematically reviews academic literature in fields such as the education of migrant children, household registration system reform, and educational space production, clarifying the current research status and existing deficiencies to establish a solid theoretical foundation. On the other hand, it integrates national and local policies and institutional documents related to the educational security of migrant children and

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household registration management systems, focusing on analyzing the orientation of institutional design, implementation differences, and their direct impacts on educational spaces. Through bidirectional verification of literature and policy, the scientific validity and rigor of research conclusions are ensured. This paper identifies the institutional and social causes of educational space predicaments, reveals the formation logic of county towns as educational receiving spaces, and provides practical reference for the government to optimize educational policies and advance household registration system reform.

Concurrently, this study facilitates society in acknowledging spatial biases, reducing spatial stigmatization, creating a fair and inclusive educational environment for migrant children, and promoting the coordinated development of population mobility and educational equity during urbanization.

2. Institutional constraints: household registration system and education system

Against the backdrop of large-scale population mobility in China, the education system has become an important structural factor influencing the spatial distribution of migrant children.

Although the state has proposed the principle of "primarily guaranteeing the education of migrant children by the local government where they settle," in practice, there are still significant differences among regions in terms of enrollment criteria, college entrance qualification, and allocation of educational resources [3]. Some cities impose conditions such as the duration of residence permits and social security contributions for migrant children to participate in the junior high school entrance examination, making it difficult for some families to complete a full educational trajectory in the destination area. As a result, they are forced to send their children back to their household registration location to continue their education. Therefore, the household registration system and local examination policies exert a more direct impact on migrant children at the post-compulsory education stage [1].

This phenomenon also reflects the structural association between the household registration system and the allocation of educational resources. The household registration system not only affects the distribution of public resources but also shapes the spatial paths of population mobility to a certain extent. Since labor migration is often accompanied by the unequal distribution of educational opportunities, migrant children face restrictions on development opportunities within institutional boundaries [2].

From the perspective of spatial theory, such institutional arrangements actually participate in the production process of social space. Since space is not naturally formed but is continuously constructed through interactions between institutions, power, and social practices [4], county-level areas have become important spaces for accommodating part of the education of migrant children, which is not only a result of family choices but also an educational spatial pattern formed under the influence of institutional structures.

3. Moral geography: the spatial impact of social perceptions on migrant children

In addition to institutional factors, social perceptions and local culture also influence the educational path choices of migrant children to a certain extent. The qualification for resource utilization in urban space among different groups is often accompanied by implicit value judgments. Some social perceptions tend to view public resources as prioritized for local registered residents [3]. This resource protection logic makes locals more xenophobic towards outsiders, while incoming

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populations also segregate themselves from the cities they live in, perceiving urban resources as unrelated to themselves.

Furthermore, there exists a certain degree of spatial labeling in urban space. For example, spaces such as 'urban villages' or 'migrant workers' children's schools' are often endowed with the social perception of 'agglomerations of outsiders'. This spatial stigma influences the social identity and educational environment of migrant children to a certain extent [2], making cities nothing more than rural areas with different names in their eyes.

Population mobility not only involves geographical movement but also reflects power relations and social boundaries among different groups in space [5]. Under the influence of such social perceptions and spatial cognition, most migrant families may be more inclined to have their children return to county-level areas to complete their education, so as to obtain a relatively stable social environment and future educational trajectory.

4. Policy analysis

In recent years, the Chinese government has gradually established a policy system to address the issue of migrant children's education. The education department has proposed the principle of 'two mains and two inclusions', which means that local government management and public schools should be the main focus, and the education of migrant children should be included in the compulsory education guarantee system and the scope of financial guarantee. At the same time, mechanisms such as 'money follows people' and 'school places follow people' have been implemented to promote the concentration of educational resources in areas with a high influx of population. Local practices have optimized the points-based school admission system, expanded the supply of public school places, and piloted equal rights for migrant children in middle school entrance examinations, all of which aim to improve the educational resources and opportunities for migrant children. In addition to government efforts, some social organizations have also provided educational support for migrant children through after-school tutoring, college admission consulting, and scholarship programs. These policies and organizations have to some extent alleviated the challenges faced by migrant children in their education.

However, these measures only address the symptoms, not the root cause. The problem is not whether the policies are good or not, but whether these migrant children have a choice. Firstly, most migrant children's parents do not have a stable income or are low-level workers, and therefore cannot meet the conditions of long-term tax payment and stable housing. As a result, their children are not eligible under the policies to stay in cities to complete their education. Secondly, the cities where the migrant children flow in generally have a high economic level, and the competition for educational resources is fierce. There are limited places in high-quality schools, and the entry threshold is high. Most migrant children have moved from city to city since birth, resulting in uneven educational foundations. They are at a relative disadvantage when competing with locally raised children, which further exacerbates the gaps in educational opportunities among different groups.

5. Directions for improvement

The study posits that to address the root causes, strengthening family education and improving infrastructure development are of paramount importance.

Firstly, educational resources not only originate from schools but also from internal investments within the family. However, the long-term absence resulting from migrant parents' "migrant work"

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status not only undermines children's learning and developmental capabilities but also leads to social adaptation difficulties [6]. If parents possess educational information and have sufficient time to invest in their children's school selection planning and daily family education, children may gain advantages in school choice and academic pathways even under institutional constraints, and these children will generally exhibit stronger adaptive capacities.

Secondly, relaxing household registration restrictions, enhancing infrastructure development, and increasing cities' capacity to accommodate migrant populations should be pursued to ensure that marginalized groups such as migrant children can access average levels of public resources and social security. Considering that most migrant populations cannot meet policy criteria, the government should appropriately relax conditions to avoid institutional mismatches. Concurrently, it is essential to ensure that educational resources in migrant children's schools reach the average societal level, guaranteeing these children equitable educational opportunities and preventing them from being placed in a passive and disadvantaged position in subsequent academic advancement pathways.

6. Conclusion

This study adopts a qualitative research method, with literature review and policy analysis as its core approaches. It explores how institutions and social norms jointly shape the educational space of migrant children against the backdrop of China's urbanization and labor migration. The research findings indicate that the educational space dilemma of migrant children stems from dual constraints of the household registration system and social perception. At the institutional level, the household registration system and regional educational policy disparities lead to uneven distribution of educational resources, making it difficult for migrant children to complete their education in the cities they move to, and forcing them to return to their hometown counties during critical stages of further education. At the social level, spatial labels and social prejudices create stigmatization, prompting migrant families to preferentially choose counties as the educational space for their children. Ultimately, under the interaction of institutional constraints and social perception, the county gradually becomes the core spatial carrier for accommodating the educational needs of migrant children. This process also reflects the structural connection between the household registration system and the allocation of educational resources.

However, this study has certain limitations. The article mainly relies on literature and policy analysis, lacking empirical investigation data from migrant families and on-site research of the educational space in counties, resulting in an insufficient understanding of the actual educational needs of migrant children. Future research can adopt a mixed research method that combines qualitative and quantitative approaches. Field surveys can be conducted in typical counties and cities to explore specific pathways for optimizing the educational space in counties, further analyze the impact of policy adjustments on the educational space pattern of migrant children, and provide more targeted practical implications.

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