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# SIXTH TONE

## The Outsiders Studying Overseas

Migrant workers' children are pushed to the margins of China's biggest cities — but some have made it out to study abroad.

***Fu Danni***

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SHANGHAI — It was April Fools' Day 2011 when 19-year-old Wang Xinyue received an offer from United World Colleges (UWC) to study abroad in Canada, and her mother thought it must be a joke. No one in their family had ever gone to university, let alone overseas.

From the age of 8, Wang had lived in Shanghai with her parents, who hail from nearby Anhui province in eastern China. But to Shanghai natives, she was still a rural migrant — and she had been excluded from the city's public education system because her family lacked local household registration papers.

Across China, more than 3.5 million children of migrant workers grow up in cities that treat them as permanent outsiders, while their ID cards show hometowns that have become foreign to them. Though domestic media coverage often focuses on children “[left behind](#)” by parents who have moved to cities for work, those who move with their families are also marginalized. Not quite urban and not quite rural, they are a growing underclass in today's China.

***It wasn't that I didn't have the [academic] ability. It was a social problem. - Wang Xinyue, child of migrant workers***

“They are the products of the urbanization process,” says Zhang Yichao, the founder of Jiuqian, a Shanghai-based NGO that provides educational opportunities to migrant workers' children. Meaning “forever hand in hand” in English, Jiuqian runs several programs from its four volunteer centers: three in Shanghai and one in southwestern China's Yunnan province. One program

helps rural-born students apply for scholarships to study abroad through UWC, an organization that has 17 campuses across 17 countries. Wang was the program's first successful applicant.

Wang met Zhang in 2000, when she had just moved to Shanghai with her brother and sister to join their parents. At the time, Zhang was a Fudan University student volunteering at a private school for migrant workers' children, where Wang and her siblings studied.

More than 2 million migrant children turned to poorly run private schools because they were barred from urban public schools, according to [statistics](#) from 2014. Many private schools for migrant children close because they do not meet the government's education standards. In 2003, Wang's school was shut down, and she had to transfer to another school for migrant students.

The following year, Wang's parents sent her back to their home in Anhui. While migrant students can more often attend primary schools in the city, those who want to continue studying and eventually sit university entrance exams are often forced to return to their place of *hukou*, or household registration. But after four years with her family in Shanghai, Wang couldn't adapt to her so-called hometown.



Zhang Yichao prepares for a rehearsal with members of a chorus organized by the NGO Jiuqian in Shanghai, April 21, 2013. Zhang Xinyan for Sixth Tone

“The teachers were very stern and spoke the local dialect, which I couldn’t understand completely,” Wang tells Sixth Tone. “I wanted to return to Shanghai.”

Eventually, Wang made it back to Shanghai after winning a place at a middle school that accepted nonresident students if they passed an entrance exam and paid extra fees of 800 yuan (\$120) per semester. She studied hard and often ranked at the top of her class, but she encountered another hurdle in her final year of middle school in 2009: As a nonresident, she wasn’t eligible to take the high school entrance exam. She could only go to a [technical secondary school](#) — typically seen as a fallback option for students who aren’t academically inclined.

“I felt I was outstanding,” Wang explains. “It wasn’t that I didn’t have the [academic] ability. It was a social problem.”

***The bar [for urban education] has been raised, and I know most migrant workers can’t reach it. It’s cruel. - Zhang Yichao, founder of Shanghai-based NGO Jiuqian***

Zhang encouraged Wang to do her best despite the circumstances. “As an education worker, I can’t make policy, so I tell the children that there are many paths,” he says. He assures students that sitting the national college entrance exam is neither the best nor the only road to success. But as an advocate, he firmly believes that the government should grant nonresident students equal rights. “The government should especially protect the underprivileged class,” he says.

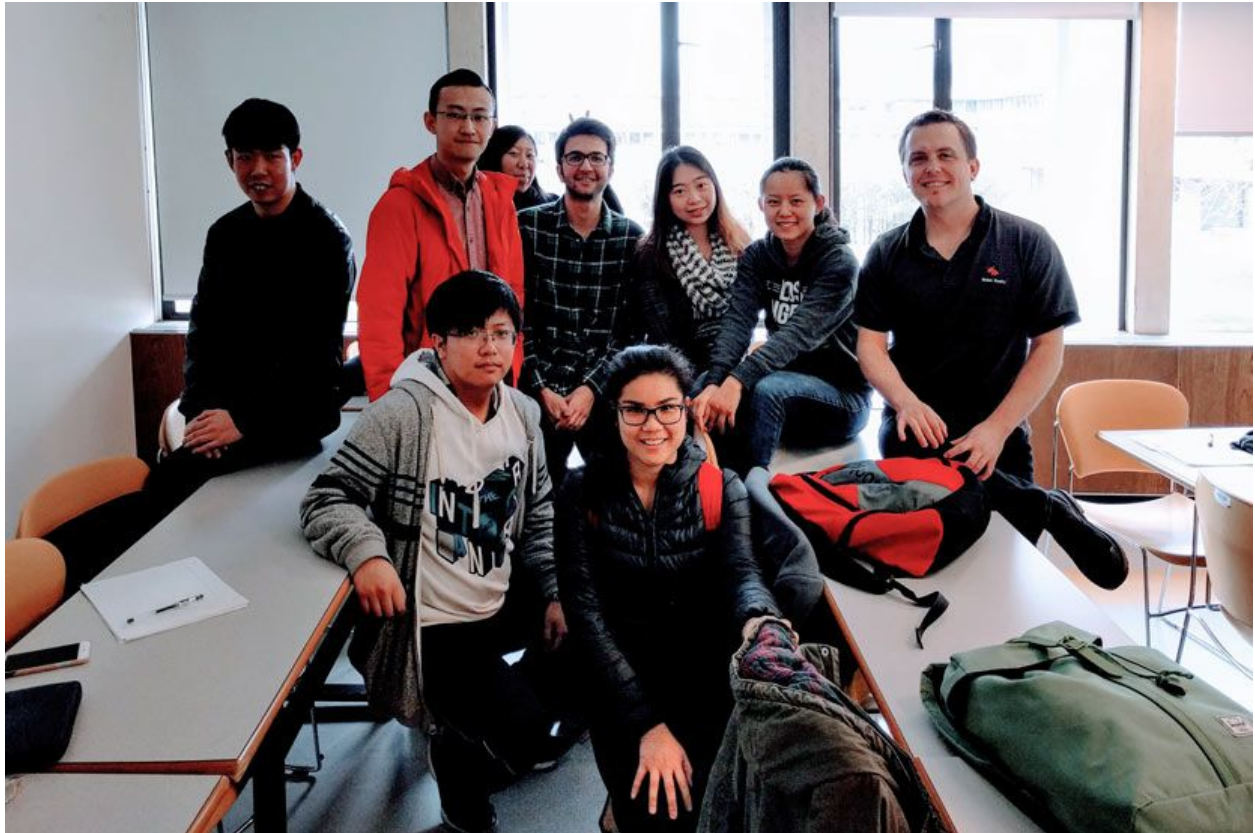
In fact, Shanghai was [once a model city](#) for education of migrant children. However, in recent years, the city has raised barriers to education in order to limit migration, demanding that parents hold local temporary residence permits for at least two consecutive years and meet other employment requirements before they can send their children to public schools in the city. As a result, elementary school enrollments dropped from 181,000 to 160,000 between 2013 and 2015 despite steady birth rates.

“The bar has been raised, and I know most migrant workers can’t reach it. It’s cruel,” Zhang says.

Zhang officially registered Jiuqian as an NGO in 2008, and by 2010, he’d started encouraging high school-aged students with good grades to apply to overseas schools. He invited Wang to join a free summer prep course for the TOEFL test, the standardized test for English as a second language used by academic institutions internationally. At the end of the summer, Wang applied for a three-month absence from her technical secondary school to focus on her English.

Wang’s mother thought it was a waste of time. “My mother had a big quarrel with Teacher Zhang,” Wang remembers. “She thought Teacher Zhang was delaying my future.” But Wang

secured a UWC offer with a full scholarship, and in August 2011, she started as a high school student at Pearson College in British Columbia.



Wang Xinyue (back row, second from right) poses for a photo with her classmates and a professor at the Simon Fraser University campus in Vancouver, Canada, April 2017. Courtesy of Wang Xinyue

When she arrived in Canada, a school coach picked her up along with two other Chinese students and drove them to the campus in the suburbs, which captivated Wang with its freestanding houses — unlike anything she had seen in Shanghai or Anhui. “It didn’t look like our village, where it’s all farmland,” she recalls. “The area looked like a forest, and I even saw a deer along the road.”

Wang found a new world in her three years at the school: dressing up for parties, making friends from different countries, learning how to cook foreign cuisines, and even joining a project revitalizing abandoned vegetable sheds. She took part in public debates and was often called on to explain China to her classmates. Her final dissertation looked at how migrant workers were estranged from the city. “I grew up in this environment, so I could explain and discuss the situation,” Wang says.

***[Each time] the policy changed, my father would think about new ways to solve my school problems. - Zhang Haimeng, child of migrant workers***

While Wang has stayed in Canada — completing a bachelor’s degree at Simon Fraser University — and now works in finance, another UWC scholarship recipient, 22-year-old Zhang Haimeng, is determined to bring the world to her hometown in rural China.

Zhang Haimeng — of no relation to Jiuqian founder Zhang Yichao — hails from Guoyang County in Anhui but moved to Shanghai as a child, where her parents run a marble processing workshop in the suburbs. She cycled through three primary schools in her youth, paying an extra 800 yuan per semester to attend one public institution. During high school, her father paid a Shanghainese local to let her register under his household. “From primary school through to high school, my father never stopped making [great] efforts to help me study in Shanghai,” Zhang Haimeng says. “[Each time] the policy changed, my father would think about new ways to solve my school problems.”

Knowing her father hoped she would take the college entrance exam and go to a good university in China, Zhang Haimeng didn’t tell her parents when she applied to UWC. When she got the offer in 2012, UWC assigned her to a campus in Bosnia and Herzegovina. “My father could not believe it,” she remembers. “He thought I was being cheated, and that the school was fake.”



Zhang Haimeng (front row, third from left) poses for a photo with local students at Dali Middle School in Guoyang County, Anhui province, Aug. 5, 2015. Courtesy of Zhang Haimeng

Now, Zhang Haimeng is studying at Macalester College in Minnesota and will graduate next year. With support from her school, she is running an education project in her hometown, bringing her friends from all over the world to teach local kids in the summer.

She wants to give children from her hometown the same sense of endless possibility that she discovered while living in Shanghai. “Shanghai gave me a sense of space, and I always came across interesting things and people,” she says. “I want the kids in my hometown to get that feeling when I bring them new things and activities. Our interaction with these kids could influence them and spark [something] that they can’t get from their regular studies.”

Both Wang and Zhang Haimeng want to cast off the labels that society has assigned them: “left-behind children” or “children of migrant workers.” Zhang Haimeng prefers the term “nonresident,” which explains their lack of civic rights without becoming an identity. “It’s true that the labels bring us attention and assistance from [social] organizations,” she says. “But that’s just because society hasn’t given us equal treatment.”

*Editor: Qian Jinghua.*