

Hooked by Hukou

-- The Adaptation of Young Migrants to Shanghai

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Abstract

This paper proposes to study the adaptation of young migrants into the city of Shanghai, and depending upon whether they have Hukou. It extends previous work on migration adaptation by focusing on a young population and looking at internal migration in a national context marked by the unique limitations to mobility imposed by Hukou policy. It based on focus group discussions conducted with 9 migrants, the study suggests a strong economic segregation on the adaptation experiences of teenage migrants – with wealthy migrants with Hukou being integrated, while poor migrants tend to be marginalized. The paper advocates for more social awareness and programming in favor of teenage migrants to ensure they are less confused by their cultural identity.

Keywords

Hukou system, teenage migrants, cultural adaptation, structural inequality, avoidant attachment, urban integration, socio-economic capital, psychological development.

1. Introduction

Previous studies about migration and Hukou have two main characteristics. First, most of them discuss the significance and development of the policy of Hukou, and explore its macro-level development consequences. What's more, most of these studies have explored the meaning and significance of Hukou and its implications for the identity of residents of the city in the objective sense. Previous studies have studied the macroscopic layer and objective effects but have not delved into cross-cultural, subjective, and personal aspects, let aside connect Hukou and its economic implications with the formation of cultural identity. Specifically, previous studies have not focused on the consequences of economic conditions that individuals experience after migrating to a big city and how migrants' cultural identities are formed after migration. Another important aspect previous studies have neglected is the cultural consequences for teenage migrants. In addition, previous studies have also not explored how various cultures from different regions and local cultures interact and integrate, forming cross-cultural migrant cities. Through this research, we can find, migrants who remain excluded and do not readily integrate Shanghai culture, and this paves the ways for designing programs to support these groups. By investigating the specific causes of their problems, we can make targeted solutions, so as to help marginalized teenagers to better integrate into megacities, ultimately improving their socioeconomic outcomes and their contributions to Shanghainese society. At the same time, through this research, we can bring attention to an important but so far neglected problems, so that more people can support these marginalized groups. In this way, they can be more considerate of these marginalized teenagers' feelings in daily life, devote themselves to helping them by participating in community services, and even set up more NGOs to help them. When everyone pays attention to this problem and makes efforts to solve it, this problem can be truly solved on a large scale in society, so that every teenager who comes to a megacity like Shanghai for different reasons can get adapted to the culture, making everyone's life is more harmonious.

I bring a unique voice to this question, as a second-generation immigrant in Shanghai, and my parents moved to Shanghai from different cities 20 years ago. At that time, they felt that they could not find their own identity since their economic conditions were poor. Now, I study at a high school in Shanghai, and I usually meet non-Shanghai peers. Many of these peers have poor economic conditions and do not have a Shanghai Hukou, and they often tell me about the perceived rejection from Shanghai culture. I can therefore provide a unique vision of a teenager through my interactions with this peer group and understanding their concerns. I can also extend my investigations to a larger group of teenagers facing similar situations. To do so, I will rely on references by my current contacts, thus having a larger snowball sample. In this way, I make greater social contributions after finishing the research and shedding light on the unique difficulties of adolescents without Hukou.

2. Background on China and its Hukou System

2.1. The Hukou System

The Hukou system is a household registration system, made essential in the context of China and its megacities. Because Shanghai is a large city with many migrants, household registration is very important: it affects citizens in all aspects. Having Shanghai Hukou opens the door to the city's high-quality education system, making it easier for students to get into local universities. Migrants without Hukou often face institutional barriers to education. Teenagers without Shanghai Hukou find it difficult to access Shanghai High School and Shanghai universities [15]. They thus face the choice between going back to their hometown for high school or stopping studying and staying in Shanghai. In addition, Shanghai has very strict restrictions on Hukou, Shanghai Hukou is becoming more and more difficult to obtain, especially for migrants who are new to Shanghai. It often takes a difficult audition process and a long cycle for migrants to obtain Shanghai Hukou.

The process for obtaining a Hukou in Shanghai is strict, long and onerous. According to the Shanghai government, there are several residency policies in Shanghai. First, after obtaining a Shanghai residence permit, one can apply for Hukou after living in Shanghai for 5-7 years, paying taxes and social security, and obtaining an intermediate occupational title. This is the least demanding policy, but there are still many restrictions, and the time cost, and process are long. Other options include having high-level education (graduating from the best colleges, obtaining high vocational qualifications, being entrepreneurs/business executives, and graduating from good universities abroad). Although these other pathways are faster, they are very demanding [20]. These requirements are very difficult for many poor families or even ordinary families to meet, and every family that can pass these policies must have a relatively good economic situation. Therefore, the hukou is the embodiment of economic discrimination: the second-generation migrants who can get Shanghai Hukou are in good economic condition, and those second-generation migrants who cannot get Shanghai hukou are economically poor, which has a great obstacle to their life in Shanghai. In the end, the system extends the economic advantages of those who already have great advantages.

2.2. Cultural Identity in China

Cultural identity is important in China. My research focuses not only on traditional Chinese culture, but also on the integration of cultures from different places in China and Shanghai culture, and the emergence of a special cultural identity. China is a vast country, with different regions exhibiting unique dialects, diets, customs, and a strong regional cultural identity. Cultural integration and identification can therefore not be taken for granted in migrant cities. As China's economic center, Shanghai continues to attract many domestic migrants, such as migrant workers and white-collar workers from Anhui, Henan, Jiangsu, and other places. These

migrants bring in their own regional culture, such as Huizhou cuisine, Peking Opera, and other different cultures to enrich the cultural landscape of Shanghai. These cultures often fuse with the local to form a special culture, a sort of melting pot blending the characteristics of many places. However, there are also potential conflicts between cultures. Combined with the strict hukou system for migration, cultural identity is affected, and migrants who have no Hukou may feel marginalized and find it difficult to form a cultural sense of belonging to Shanghai. Therefore, it is very important to explore the process of cultural integration and the formation of cultural identity, which is conducive to social harmony.

3. Theories of Migration and Adaptation

Previous studies have provided a variety of theories to explain why people migrate. One theory is the human capital approach holds that individuals will make rational cost-benefit calculations about the expected benefits of future migration and begin to emigrate when they expect to receive documented benefits [18]. Also, similar to this theory, Wolpert's stress threshold model states that individuals have a utility threshold level they desire, and they compare destinations to this threshold to decide whether to migrate. In these two theories, migration is judged by expectations given after migration [17]. Also, another model, the value-expectancy model, holds that migration decisions are not only based on economic considerations, but also that migration expectations include the subjective values of individuals, including the strength of migration intention, personal and social factors. The model considers more than economics [6].

Besides the personal motivation of the migrants at the micro level, according to the dual labor market theory, migration stems from the inherent labor needs of modern societies [5]. The dual labor market theory divides the labor market into primary labor market and secondary labor market. The primary labor market is dominated by well-paid work, while the secondary labor market is dominated by precarious, low-paid, unskilled work. The advanced countries and cities need the labor force in the secondary labor market, but the local supply is not sufficient. At this time, due to the attractive characteristics of the developed economy, these advanced areas will naturally attract workers to migrate to work in the secondary labor market to fix the conditions so that it can get a sufficient labor force to improve the economic system and promote economic development. [6]. In addition, besides focusing on the characteristics of the labor market in advanced places themselves, the neoclassical macro migration theory regards migration as an integral part of economic development and argues that migration is driven by regional differences in labor supply [2]. This model, rooted in trade theory, assumed that perfectly functioning markets and surplus labor in rural areas would be absorbed by modern sectors in developed big cities. Thus, rural labor, motivated by higher wages in urban areas, will migrate in response to economic incentives, and this migration will continue until wage levels between the two segments are balanced.

Concluding from the existing theories of motivations for people to migrate, no matter micro or macro, people move because of the main reasons that are rooted in economic aspects, while the expectations of migrants and the structural characteristics of megacities complement the theory. However, after the migrants moved into megacities, what consequences would they face? In general, migrants can be divided into two parts: the first kind is high-quality migrants with a higher education base, and the second kind is relatively uncompetitive migrants to serve as a secondary labor force. Among them, most of the first kind of migrants can get better economic development in the city, but the second kind of migrants face the risks of low wages, poor life quality, and job instability in the city [10]. The economic problems of these kinds of migrants are so severe that a lot of related problems will be carried out, especially in the aspect of cultural identity, in which they cannot integrate into the city culturally. Therefore, this research is

focused on teenagers in families in the secondary labor market and studies how economic problems affect their cultural identity.

4. Adaptive Responses

Migrants have many ways of adapting to their destination. First, the longer a migrant stays in the receiving society, the greater the assimilation and acculturation. At the same time, migrants can experience many changes during their long stay. Therefore, time is a big factor in adaptation [11]. However, this does not play a role in our research, because it focuses on teenagers whose lifespan and duration of stay in Shanghai are limited. Migrants moving to a new society can have 4 kinds of adaptive responses:

- 1) *Assimilation*: prioritizing interaction with the host culture over maintaining their original identity;
- 2) *Separation*: retaining their original culture while avoiding interaction with the host society;
- 3) *Integration*: balancing both cultures, maintaining their heritage while engaging with the host society (considered the most adaptive strategy);
- 4) *Marginalization*: rejecting both cultures, often leading to poor psychological outcomes [1, 14].

Among these 4 responses, Ying and Lee posit that younger adolescents prefer separation or assimilation as they are less cognitively demanding. Furthermore, teenagers have different choices between separation and assimilation because of different socioeconomic status [8, 19]. Besides these four strategies, migrants adapt by acquiring social and communication skills specific to the host culture. Specific actions include learning the dominant language, understanding cultural norms and non-verbal cues, and building relationships with members of the host society, all of which can foster positive sociocultural adjustment or adaptation to the new community [3, 7, 9]. The attachment theory further suggests that migrants' attachment styles influence their adaptation. Van Oudenhoven and Hofstra found that migrants with secure attachments were more likely to integrate and have less stress during the acculturation process while avoidant individuals may struggle with social interactions, leading to separation or marginalization [12, 13]. In addition, migrants can navigate their identity through 3 stages that create a smooth path for adaptation: unexamined ethnic identity, ethnic identity exploration, and eventually achieved ethnic identity. Migrants who face problems when developing identities are in the stage of unexamined ethnic identity and they reject their identities without exploration, leading them to struggle when adapting to receiving society smoothly [4]. Those struggles cause migrants to experience stress, manifesting as anxiety, depression, or identity confusion [11]. The greater the difference between cultures, the greater the stress levels. However, strong networks reduce stress and better language skills ease adaptation. The sense of cognitive control and the use of positive coping skills produce better mental health outcomes as the individual acculturates [1, 16].

5. Hypotheses about migrant adaptation in Shanghai

The central hypothesis in this research is that the adaptation of teenage migrants is strongly related to the economic status of their family. Specifically, teenage migrants from wealthier families will face fewer difficulties in adaptation and they will soon assimilate and integrate, becoming a part of the receiving society. On the other hand, due to low socioeconomic status, teenage migrants coming from poor families will find it harder to interact with the receiving culture and eventually engage in separation and marginalization. Economics can also have indirect effects via education, which is crucial for migrant adaptation. When new immigrants with limited economic conditions come to Shanghai, they often cannot afford high-quality education and cannot obtain Shanghai Hukou, which makes it impossible for them to attend

high school in Shanghai. In this way, not only have they been deprived of the crucial educational opportunities for cognitive and emotional development, but they have also lost the key space for building trust, security, and a sense of belonging. In the absence of these fundamental factors, this group of young people was gradually domesticated to believe that seeking help or relying on others would lead to disappointment or rejection. Gradually, self-protection has become a psychological need for this group of non-migrant workers, and they have developed avoidant attachments. This is not a matter of personal adaptability or a kind of failure. In fact, when the system aimed at promoting growth becomes unattainable, emotional withdrawal becomes a survival strategy. Therefore, these teenage non-hukou migrants are not only unable to quickly learn local languages and cultures but also to assert their own identity, making it harder to adapt. In this way, poor teenage migrants will struggle with unexamined ethnic identity and they will feel substantial cultural stress with no way to solve it. On the other hand, migrants from wealthy families enjoy high-quality educational resources and they can obtain Shanghai Hukou to study in Shanghai. They can easily learn the local languages and culture so that they can develop a secure attachment, making them feel less cultural stress and harmoniously develop their identity. These children can thus easily integrate into the Shanghai culture.

6. Methodology

6.1. Data

For the study, I collected qualitative data from focus group discussions with nine teenage migrants with different backgrounds. The participants' ages ranged from 14-16 years old. Because this age range is consistent with my own age, it facilitated candid communication with participants. Furthermore, this age range matters because it falls in the middle of the age range for teenagers. At this age, youth are transitioning from junior high school to senior high school. They are at a critical stage of cognitive development and identity formation, which is quite relevant in a study of social adaptation. As another important reason, migrants with Hukou can study in high schools in Shanghai, while those without Hukou can only choose to leave the city or terminate their studies. By focusing on the age range of 14-16, the study can contrast two key groups and capture the impact of the Hukou system on immigrant adaptation.

The nine participants fell in two distinct groups. The first included three well-off teenage migrants with Shanghai hukou who go to very good schools in Shanghai. Another group consists of six disadvantaged teenage migrants without a Shanghai hukou, whose parents work as cooks or sales. Therefore, the responses of the two groups can be contrasted to test my hypothesis. Also, since the study sets the ratio between the economically advantaged group and the economically disadvantaged group to 1:2, more attention is paid to migrants in the economically disadvantaged group who are easily marginalized.

The focus group discussions centered around the following questions of "Do you consider yourself a 'Shanghainese'? Where do you fit into Shanghai's culture?" while specific secondary questions contain "Do you find it easy to blend if you are coming from outside?" "What are the main difficulties in blending in?"

7. Main Findings

In the current research on urban migration, "cultural adaptation" is often regarded as an individual-level issue. However, a careful analysis of actual cases suggests that the process of cultural adaptation is deeply restricted by structural factors, especially the hukou system. The household registration system not only reflects a family's socioeconomic status but also determines the opportunities to access necessary cultural and educational resources, positively reproducing inequality. This institutional inequality significantly affects how the floating youth

population views and navigates the cultural experience and adaptation process. In other words, the hukou system keeps differentiating the adaptation trajectories of young migrant workers in Shanghai in the current days.

First of all, teenage second-generation migrants with Shanghai hukou usually assume that they naturally “belong” to this city, thus, they do not feel anxious about “integration” and do not regard cultural identity conflicts as a real problem. A 15-year-old boy from Zhejiang Province mentioned, *“When I don’t like some aspects of Shanghai and miss my hometown, I can always find a way to make myself comfortable. I don’t like Shanghai food, so I often go to good restaurants to eat Zhejiang food.”* This approach of solving problems caused by cultural differences reflects Berry’s integration strategy, in which economic resources can be selectively integrated into the local and hometown cultures. The reason why the “integration” of retaining partial identification with the original culture but also selectively participating in and accepting the local culture is possible is not because he is more cultural tolerant or flexible than others, but because he has sufficient resources to “choose” -choosing where to eat, choosing how to build his own lifestyle, and choosing when to say “yes” or “no” to the culture. However, on the contrary, non-hukou second-generation migrants face systemic exclusion due to economic reasons. Specifically, poor teenage migrants, especially a 14-year-old boy who belongs to an ethnic minority group from Xinjiang, felt he had to suffer in silence when he didn’t like Shanghai food because it was too expensive to eat what he liked. This is consistent with the separation strategy, that is, in the absence of resources, non-hukou migrants are forced to retreat to their own culture and find it difficult to interact with the mainstream culture. It is worth noticing that this kind of “separation” is not a subjective choice, but it is “structurally constrained” in which social structure gap and economic instability (for example, being unable to afford halal food) have consolidated cultural conservatism and limited migrant’s interaction with the host country’s society. This phenomenon is often misinterpreted as “maladjustment”, intensifying people’s stereotypes of marginalized groups. These teenage second-generation migrants are not rejecting participation in urban culture, but have been deprived of the ability to make cultural choices: Even having a familiar hometown cuisine has become a luxury for them, let alone participating in any deeper level of “cultural integration”. The contrast of these two groups shows that the socio-economic aspect directly affects the adaptation of teenage migrants to the culture. With wealth, many maladaptive issues can be ignored because more options are brought to migrants with hukou due to their above-average socioeconomic capital. On the other hand, non-hukou and economically poor teenagers are forced to make themselves “invisible”: not only are they unable to express their own culture, but they also suffer difficulty maintaining basic dignity. In other words, socioeconomic capital, as a structural indicator and amplifier, increases the cultural and institutional advantages of hukou holders. Ultimately, a naturalized class difference and a more consolidated cultural hierarchy system will be formed. Also, among the six participants not registered in Shanghai, 5 indicated that they would return to their hometowns to study when they were in high school. This is precisely the inconvenience of not having a Hukou. When it comes to their study status in Shanghai, students without Shanghai Hukou said that although the education in Shanghai enables them to acquire a lot of advanced knowledge, they cannot understand and comprehend it in class. After class, they are unable to attend tutorial classes like the other three children from gifted families, which creates a gap in educational performance between the two groups. This education gap further deepens the alienation of non-hukou second-generation migrants. A 15-year-old junior high school student who is facing the entrance examination said, *“My grades were not very good to begin with. I feel that I am ignored by the teachers at school. The teacher doesn’t care about me. He doesn’t assign me homework and randomly grades my test papers. I don’t know what to do. Why did she treat me like this?”* This simple yet weighty question reveals a deeper issue: These children are lacking not in potential, but in institutional support and understanding. Their sense

of powerlessness does not stem from a lack of effort, but from a systematic structure that regards them as “outsiders”. These marginalized groups, unable to keep up with the pace of students from better-off families with hukou, are labeled as “poor performers” who are “not working hard”. Once such labels are attached, they affect teachers’ attitudes and dedication towards while also eroding the students’ self-esteem. This group of children is thus undergoing a process of being further marginalized, a kind of marginalization similar to discrimination. This kind of discrimination is profoundly traumatic for vulnerable groups, making them deny their own value. It can be said that the hukou system essentially creates a boundary between “us” and “them”, and through social and economic capital, it creates a hierarchical order in the allocation of educational resources, opportunities for further education, and even social attention. The cruelty of this institutional discrimination lies in the fact that it does not manifest itself as a form of violence, but rather gradually erodes an individual’s dignity and future possibilities through long-term implicit exclusion. Therefore, a seemingly neutral household registration system is actually silently magnifying social inequality. Indeed, what was originally just a slight gap in academic performance has been magnified into a structural gap under the impetus of systems and resources. This gap not only deprives these marginalized students of educational opportunities but also may push them to the border of social exclusion, forming a vicious cycle of intergenerational poverty and blocked social mobility.

Besides, two non-Shanghai residents who love playing basketball said that when their classmates invited them to hoop, they found that the price of playing in the gym was too high for them to participate in their classmates’ activities, making them unable to become good friends with the local residents. This reflects a seemingly insignificant but profound issue. When these children were invited by their classmates to play basketball together, the social opportunity was given up because the price of the court was too high. This is a typical, direct manifestation of economic segregation. Basketball is a leisure social medium that can effectively bridge cultural differences and build deep interpersonal relationships among youth. Meanwhile, such a team project is a great opportunity to promote cultural exchange and integration. However, basketball is originally a very accessible activity that can be played anytime and anywhere, and should not be restricted by the venue. However, in megacities like Shanghai, basketball has a very high entry threshold. Even if those second-generation migrants without Hukou who have limited economic conditions have unlimited interests and enthusiasm, they still cannot afford the huge costs. As a result, they are unable to interact with their classmates and are excluded from the group. However, such incapability is not because they are unwilling to interact with society, but because they cannot afford the cost of participation. Such experiences have had very serious consequences for the cultural identities of these second-generation migrants. The repeated collective activities of these teenage migrants mean missing the opportunity to build deep emotional bonds among people and the mainstream cultural and social context, gradually marginalizing them more and more. These missed opportunities may seem small, but they had already persisted in the structural social segregation during the crucial teenage years, as children’s personalities are not fully developed, and they have a strong need for a sense of cultural belonging. Meanwhile, this economic rejection has gradually transformed into deep insecurity and self-denial. When a child is repeatedly excluded from a group, it is easy for them to develop self-doubt, such as whether they should not belong here in the first place, which damages their self-worth perception and social identity. In this way, it is difficult for these non-hukou second-generation migrants to establish a sense of belonging to the urban culture. This kind of cultural identity fragmentation will always accompany them throughout their growth process. Even if these non-hukou teenage migrants live in Shanghai, they still cannot recognize that they belong here. In fact, the ultimate integration barrier is not the product of cultural conflicts, but rather the unequal social interaction caused by economic disparities, which leads to superficial cultural alienation. Integration here is not a matter of will

but of opportunity. The non-hukou second-generation migrants have a strong sense of willingness to participate in the activities and integrate into the culture, but they do not have the financial capacity to obtain the qualifications. Without the qualification to participate, they cannot form a sense of belonging. In this way, non-hukou teenage migrants were forced to be given up by the system, and it reflects that economic insufficiency can bring integration problems to young migrants, who will gradually be marginalized by the group and develop a sense of insecurity.

In addition, one of the Muslim children without a Shanghai Hukou complained, *"At school, my classmates keep asking me why I don't eat pork. I don't understand what they say either. I'm very afraid to communicate with them."* This is precisely the important problem encountered by migrant children. This precisely reflects the situation where the non-hukou second-generation migrants are marginalized in diverse aspects of urban life. In an environment lacking cultural sensitivity, such casual comments from local classmates actually unconsciously reinforce the label that these teenage migrants don't belong here, generating a sense of exclusion as psychological suggestions. This sense of alienation and the backward economic conditions of these non-hukou teenage migrants' families reinforce each other, making it impossible for them to obtain a sense of satisfaction through material resources, and their families and social relationships are also unable to help them share the psychological impact. The double of cultural estrangement and economic disadvantages has gradually and imperceptibly deepened this group of second-generation migrants' inner sense of insecurity and lack of confidence of their own culture in the chaotic environment where they grew up. The sense of insecurity will not only affect non-hukou teenage migrants' current life but also subtly influence their judgment of self-worth and the culture they belong to in the long run, and even make them develop a sense of rejection and distrust of society. In fact, the root cause of non-hukou second-generation migrant's inability to integrate into Shanghai culture lies in the indifference of the urban system in the face of cultural differences: they cannot feel the inclusiveness of society towards culture, and thus will develop isolated emotions, and will even never be accepted or integrated with the culture of society.

Apart from the individual aspect, it is worth noting that the families in which second-generation migrants are located also have a very complex and crucial impact on their cultural adaptation strategies. In a reality where structural obstacles are hard to shake, families from different socio-economic backgrounds have demonstrated different attitudes towards cultural adaptation, and these attitudes are precisely the profound understanding of these families regarding the social power structure, identity boundaries, and resource allocation. A girl whose mother works as a street vendor mentioned that her mother warned her that when conflicts arose with people from Shanghai, she should ignore them and leave directly. Although this seems very rational, in fact, it is a defensive response caused by a lack of security. This precisely reflects that they do not pursue identity recognition, nor do they pursue cultural integration and participation to avoid social conflicts, thus bringing about the most stable life. In such families, parents play the role of so-called *"cultural mediators"*, helping their children learn to survive rather than integrate. However, this kind of *"survival"* does not bring any change to the identity of the children, making them always think that they are inferior to locals and creating a profound estrangement from the culture of Shanghai. In sharp contrast to this are families with local household registration and higher economic and social status. They don't need to teach children how to avoid conflicts, but rather teach them how to accumulate and form their own cultural capital. The parents of these families taught their children the culture, etiquette, and even the special aesthetics of Shanghai, enabling their children to combine their own personal characteristics and form their own identity. The participant from Zhejiang said, *"My parents told me that they hoped I could go to high-end places with Shanghai characteristics to experience and learn the etiquette and way of speaking in Shanghai."* This is precisely the family's

sensitivity to social status capital and its shaping of cultural capital. It is precisely these seemingly insignificant things that have had a profound impact on the second-generation migrants. The significant differences between the integration strategies of these two families are not merely a matter of cultural choice, but rather a dual impact resulting from the superposition of social structure and family resources. Marginalized non-hukou families need to adopt risk reduction for self-protection strategies, while migrant families with household registration can actively enhance their competitiveness by encouraging their children to learn the culture. This difference further intensifies the cultural hierarchical order: one side avoids being expelled, and thus they attach great importance to "survival"; The other party, on the other hand, continuously deepens its advantages in the concept of "belonging". Therefore, there is a huge difference in the concept of success between these two groups of people. Defensive non-hukou families will implicitly strengthen the self-restraint and identity shame in the hearts of the next generation, while actively integrated families will gradually expand their own advantages and widen the already existing institutional social rift.

Finally, it is worth noting that these two groups demonstrated two distinct personalities during the discussion process. The migrants with Hukou are very enthusiastic during the process, while those without Hukou have relatively lower voices and are more stage-frightened. This precisely reflects that economic conditions shape a person's character. This problem seems to be a matter of personal character on the surface, but in fact, it is a psychological consequence caused by long-term social exclusion and structural changes. The logic under this phenomenon is the sense of security bestowed by the system and resources. Migrants with hukou come from relatively stable family environments and enjoy the advantages of the social system, and thus are more likely to establish an affirmation of their own identity and cultural values. Non-hukou second-generation migrants without household registration have long been marginalized and have suffered the disadvantages of the social system, thus forming a cautious, restrained, and retreating response mechanism. It's not that these non-hukou teenage migrants don't want to express themselves, but that they are just doing their best to avoid risks. More ironically, when asked if they wanted to stay in Shanghai, five out of the six migrants without Hukou said they did. Although this answer deviated from expectations, it still reflects the allure of megacities for migrants. Even though they will encounter many struggles and might not live well in Shanghai, they still hold the hope of obtaining development opportunities in Shanghai. However, this kind of hope itself is a structural illusion. Due to the lack of hukou, this group of second-generation migrants cannot enjoy the resources of the city: they are always regarded as outsiders culturally, and in terms of education, they not only face the difficulty of the courses but also the institutional barriers. In other words, the socio-economic capital, cultural capital, and institutional capital of these migrants are far behind those of their registered peers. How the society works seems to be a very fair game, but from the very beginning, these marginalized migrants' starting line was much farther back than that of those migrants with hukou. What is more serious is that this difficulty has formed a structural vicious circle: The marginalized non-hukou migrants are unable to obtain hukou due to insufficient economic conditions, and if they cannot obtain a household registration, their children will repeat the same fate as theirs in the future.

8. Conclusion and Implications

This study examines the adaptation of young migrants in Shanghai, conditional upon their hukou status and economic background. Although the study's small sample size and qualitative design limit generalizability, the study suggests several important conclusions about the adaptation predicament of contemporary urban teenage migrants in China. Future research should conduct quantitative cross-regional surveys in multiple cities on a larger scale and over

a longer time scale to use a mixed approach to further verify and supplement the conclusions of this study.

This study indicates that Hukou in Shanghai is not merely an administrative formality but a powerful mechanism of structural inequality, which invisibly shapes the cultural and economic integration of teenage migrants. Teenage migrants with Shanghai Hukou usually come from wealthier families. Due to access to high-quality education, social resources, and economic stability, they are more likely to integrate into the urban culture by adopting cultural adaptation strategies of “integration” or even “assimilation” and flexibly switch between local culture and their original identity. However, non-Hukou migrants face the risk of marginalization. They are not only economically marginalized, but also extremely vulnerable in terms of access to educational resources, participation in social activities, and emotional support networks. These characteristics, when combined, make this group of second-generation migrants more inclined to adopt the integration strategy of “separation” or even “marginalization”, just hoping to hide themselves from the cultural rejections. This is an emergency response to institutional rejection, which brings psychological pressure and social barriers to these children, and even has a very strong negative impact on their future. This study reveals how the household registration system, through the economic divisions brought by policies, imperceptibly differentiates two distinct growth paths for second-generation migrants: the teenage migrants with hukou and economic advantages are more likely to achieve a promising future, while those who without hukou and who are structurally marginalized are trapped in struggles of self-identities and the breaking of opportunities. This will not only lead to the final outcome of social exclusion, but also weaken the overall cultural and social integration capacity of society in the long run.

Therefore, the reformation of the hukou system should become the core issue for the institutional decision-makers of the Chinese government, especially in first-tier cities like Shanghai. Specifically, the rationality of the hukou system in megacities must be rethought. The government should make greater efforts to change the hukou system and promote more inclusive and fluid urban governance mechanisms. Meanwhile, more NGOs should be aware of and address non-Hukou’s needs through legal aid, mental health services, and cultural sensitivity training in schools. This can effectively reduce unconscious discrimination and exclusion, and enhance the sense of belonging and social confidence of non-hukou second-generation migrants. Finally, the people around non-Hukou second-generation migrants should also give them more care and understandings, which are the most important variables in whether these kids can integrate into local culture and society fluently. Families, schools, and communities should form a more empathetic support system in which the predicaments faced by non-hukou second-generation migrants are not treated as problems. The unequal reality they encounter should be acknowledged by others, and others should recognize the root causes of the troubles they face and actively provide them with humanistic care.

All in all, although the problems faced by non-hukou second-generation migrants are structural, it is not unchangeable. As long as the reforms of governments continue to advance, and humanistic cares are actively participated, with public awareness gradually awakens, it is possible for the world to establish a truly diverse and open society. In such an inclusive society, every migrant, no matter where they come from and whether they are rich or not, will have the same rights to grow up with dignity, participate equally and freely imagine the future.

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