



**Politecnico  
di Torino**

# Politecnico di Torino

Architecture Construction City

## Schooling the New City:

Education Policy, Uncertainty, and Urban Development in Nansha

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## Abstract

Education is a key indicator of the right to the city, a key concept introduced by Henri Lefebvre. In the context of China's urban development, however, the distribution of educational resources is often caught in a paradox: while education is a basic public welfare, it is also used as a policy instrument to attract talent and regulate population composition. This thesis examines national and provincial policies governing migrant children's access to compulsory education in Nansha District, Guangdong Province, a national-level new development zone, and demonstrates how these policies deliberately maintain ambiguity regarding who gets the access to high-quality educational resources.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork, the thesis further explores how this policy ambiguity is strategically utilized by local governments and real estate developers, and how parents negotiate their positions within this framework. Finally, the thesis analyses the potential systemic consequences of this framework, migrants may formally gain access to the urban education system, but educational resources are embedded into a closed and isolating logic of spatial production through real estate development. Urban spaces constructed under the lead of developers, on the one hand, attract new residents by branding themselves with high quality schools, while on the other hand increasingly separate these residents from existing urban life. In a sense, they effectively constrain migrants' ability to use public space, to participate in urban life, and ultimately to truly claim their right to the city.

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## Introduction

Since the beginning of the Reform and Opening-up in 1978, China has experienced unprecedented economic growth and has rapidly emerged as one of the world's largest economies. However, transformation should not only aim to bring about GDP growth. Deng Xiaoping's well-known principle of 'letting some people and some regions get rich first, so that they can help others later' (Deng, 1986) was framed not as a justification for the consolidation of a new capitalist class, but as a transitional strategy toward the long-term goal of common prosperity. In practice, the development model that enabled China's success relied heavily on a strict urban–rural divide and the systematic marginalization of rural migrants, who became the indispensable labour force driving urbanization while receiving minimal welfare support and access to public services.

In recent years, following the official declaration that China has achieved the goal of building a 'moderately prosperous society', policy discourse has increasingly shifted toward a people-centred model of urbanization, emphasizing social inclusion. This shift is particularly visible in reforms of the household registration (hukou) system, which has long functioned as a key institutional mechanism through which population mobility is regulated while access to public resources is territorially fixed. Whether these reforms have brought about substantive change, and how they operate in practice, remains an urgent question.

Among the various public resources tied to hukou status, education—especially compulsory education—occupies a particularly revealing position. On the one hand, compulsory education is officially framed as a universal public service, with 'ensuring that every child has access to schooling' presented as a non-negotiable policy goal. On the other hand, the quality of schools is closely intertwined with urban competitiveness, talent attraction, and real estate values. Therefore, education becomes a crucial issue where egalitarian policy discourse clashes with the logic of development orientation. The various contradictions inherent in hukou reform and new urbanization models are most directly reflected and explored through education.

Guangzhou's Nansha District offers a compelling case through which to examine these tensions. Unlike the city's older urban areas, Nansha has been developed largely from scratch as part of the Greater Bay Area strategy. It is envisioned as a new urban frontier that integrates global capital flows with large-scale domestic migration, and as an experimental zone for exploring alternative models of urbanization. The allocation of educational resources in Nansha, where migrant worker families, relocated villagers, and long-term Guangzhou hukou holders coexist, provides a unique lens for understanding what 'people-centred urbanization' means in practice, and perhaps give us a chance to see how far resource equalization can be pursued without undermining development priorities.

This article examines how the Chinese state navigates the tension between promoting equality in access to education and using educational resources as an instrument for urban and economic development. Based on field research in Nansha, it analyses the specific measures taken by the government and how these measures are implemented through the interactions among state authorities, real estate developers, and parents, and how they ultimately shape the material and social production of the city.

Chapter 1 gives a brief history of the evolution of China's hukou system since the founding of the People's Republic, examining how different stages of reform produced distinct forms of geographic based inequality and how these policies served shifting national development agendas. Chapter 2 turns to China's education system, explaining how its intense competitiveness originated from the legacy of the imperial examination (keju) tradition and analysing how modern educational selection mechanisms intersect with spatial inequality.

Chapter 3 outlines the history of Nansha's development, highlighting its dual role as both an economic growth engine and a testing ground for new models of urbanization.

Chapter 4 analyses current policy documents related to primary school enrolment in Nansha, showing how the government adopts highly precise rules to ensure access to schooling while maintaining deliberate ambiguity regarding access to 'good' schools.

Chapters 5 and 6 draw on ethnographic fieldwork. Chapter 5 examines how policy ambiguity, government credibility, developers' practices of policy interpretation, and parents' strategies of accountability together constitute a real- state driven model of urban development in Nansha. While chapter 6 focuses on the spatial consequences of this model, illustrating how the resulting urban form may further hinder the social integration of new migrants into the local urban society.

# Chapter 1 Migrant policy of China

The hukou(户口) system, originated from baojia(保甲) system dated back to the Song dynasty (Wang,2005), it's an identity registration system that links an individual's legal identity to a specific household unit (hu, 户), under the direct administrative authority of a local government. It plays a central role in helping the state to record population information, enforce accountability, organize labour and production, allocate social resources, and control internal migration.

Throughout the history of the People's Republic of China, the hukou system has been constantly re-discussed and reformed, needless to say that every change results in a huge impact on all aspects of society. This chapter aims to give a brief history of the system itself and its social economic background, as well as how did the people and the state at that time view these changes.

## 1.1 The Hukou Regime in the Pre-reform Era

At the time of its founding, China adapted a soviet style planned economic model with a heavy-industry-oriented development strategy, but had a significantly lower urbanization rate compared to the USSR at the time. According to the National Bureau of Statistic, by the end of 1949, only 10.64% of the population lived in urban areas.

The early form of registration system wasn't invented to restrict internal movement of the country, rather it was more for the purpose of counting the population, thereby identifying 'enemies' who had been hiding after the war (Hayward, 2022), and cooperating with the planned economy system for food distribution (Alexander, 2014).

Later to catch up in heavy industry development, the state intentionally lowered the price of agricultural products and raised the price of industrial products, and used the income from the agriculture sector to finance urban factories. To maintain this urban-rural dual structure they need a system to control the migrant flow between the two sectors, that's when hukou came into place.

The early form of the hukou system of modern China was first introduced in urban areas in 1951, shortly after the country was founded in 1949, extended to rural areas in 1954, and finally normalized in 1956 (Chan, 1999).

The hukou system classifies people by two key information, the place of residence, and the type of hukou.

The first classification determined one's right in relation to their registered place; in the Mao era, it's mostly inherited from one's mother. If someone has personal or business activity

outside their place of hukou registration, they often need some kind of certificate from their workplace or local authority in order to travel.

The second classification divide people into two types, rural and non-rural citizens, and was considered to have even bigger influence than the first one for it determined one's right to state-subsidized grain, farmers had to rely on themselves to obtain their own food, while urban workers' food was supplied by the government.

The conversion of hukou is strictly limited by a dual control system; one needs to fulfil the policy requirements as well as get a place under the quota control at the same time in order to complete the process. At the time there were three main channels to get the quota, being admitted to a university, being recruited by a state-owned enterprise or being promoted to an administrative cadre. There were also special channels like through joining the military or other personal reasons. (Table 1)

Types	Necessary Changes in		Registration with local police	Control Mechanism	Urban-entry Fee	Entitlements to the state-provided benefits	Transferability of hukou status to other urban centers	Possibility of converting to full urban status
	Place of hukou registration	Status of hukou registration ( <i>nongzhuanfei</i> )						
A. "Formal" migrants e.g. Recruitment by state-owned enterprises, Enrollment in institution of higher education	Yes	Yes	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Subject to both policy and quota controls set by the central government</li> </ul>	Not required	Full	Yes	Not applicable
B. "Self-supplied food grain" hukou holders	Yes	No	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Subject to approval by local governments</li> </ul>	Subject to local regulations	No	No	No
C. "Blue-stamp" hukou holders	Yes	No	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Subject to approval by local governments</li> </ul>	Required	Partial	No	Yes but conditional*
D. Urban migrants under the small town hukou reform scheme	Yes	Yes	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Subject to qualification and quota controls set by the central government</li> </ul>	Not Required	Full	Yes	Yes but conditional*
E. Registered Temporary population • "Conventional" temporary population* • Job-seeking temporary population*	No No	No No	Yes Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Need to apply for the Certificate of Temporary Residence if staying longer than 3 months</li> </ul>	Not Required Annual Administration fee	No No	Not applicable Not applicable	No No
F. Non-registered temporary/"floating population"	No	No	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Need to apply for the Certificate of Temporary Residence if staying longer than 3 months</li> </ul>	Not applicable	No	Not applicable	No

Table.1 Characteristics of Different Types of Rural-Urban Migrants with Reference to the Hukou System.  
Source: (Chan & Zhang, 1999)

However, in the case of internal migration, state policy is only one side of the story. Policy is not a magic button that can regulate people's behaviour with a little push, also lots of those policies themselves are more reactive than proactive. Although the dual hukou system started in early 50s, and from 1953 to 1957, the State Council had issued several directives on preventing the 'indiscriminate migration of farmers' to cities, but because the registration process wasn't very regulated at the time, the number of urban workers still grow from 1.6 million in 1952 to 3.1 million by the end of 1957. Which led to a stricter registration process in 1958. Another example is, during the Great Leap Forward (大跃进) time, to meet the production goal, all cities and towns began vying for rural labour, together with the decentralization of labour management authority, local recruitment no longer required central approval, led to a rapid increase of urban dwellers.

In 1958 alone, the number of workers nationwide increased by 85%. The urban population increased from 100 million in 1957 to over 130 million in 1960, accounting for about 19.6% of the total population. Of the 31.24 million increases in those three years, 20 million came from rural areas.

This caused urban infrastructure and employment pressures and contributed to the food crisis, therefore in 1959 The central government issued a new policy that urgently revoked local governments' recruitment powers, and in 1961 started the first round of urban population reduction, sending 26 million people back to rural areas in three years. (Lu, Wang & Wu, 2019) Controlling internal migration can't be achieved by a single legal document, it was a continuous negotiation between regulations and reality, and between the central and local governments.

In the first three decades of the new country, as a consequence of this urban-rural dualism, more than 600 billion yuan has been transferred from rural to urban sector (Froissart, 2024). Froissart has pointed out that this system fundamentally conflicts with Mao's egalitarianism ideology. Critics believe it led to great exploitation on rural dwellers, some even say it created 'a state of internal colonisation', which the CCP used as an alternative route for industrialisation in contrast to the imperialist expansion of capitalism (Hayward 2022).

But criticising the staggering inequality embedded in the hukou system is not a privilege of today's scholars, in fact the system has been the subject of controversy ever since its inception.

The year 1953 is the seventh year of the Cold War, and the fourth year of the Korean War, which in China is officially known as the War to Resist America and Assist Korea. In that year, a member at the CPPCC, named Liang Shuming, raised the question of farmers' living conditions in the annual conference of the CPPCC. He said that as the state shifted its focus from rural problem to the development in urban area, workers were living up in nine heavens (jiutian, 九天) while peasants were living down in nine hells (jiudi, 九地):

'The revolution of the past twenty years lay entirely in mobilizing the peasants and relying on the peasants. The revolution succeeded precisely because it relied on the peasants, and the peasants themselves also grew through the revolution. But once the focus shifted to the cities, the peasants who had grown through the revolution followed along into the cities as well. All the better cadres went to do urban work—this was unavoidable. Yet in reality... today the priority of construction lies in industry, and even more so in where our spiritual energies are directed. The disparity in living conditions is such that workers are in the ninth heaven, peasants in the ninth hell. Peasants want to run to the cities, but they are not allowed to do so. Talent and financial resources are concentrated in the cities; even if one does not say that the countryside is being abandoned, or that it is being cut off, there is surely more than a little of that. Yet peasants are the people, and the people are the

peasants. If care for the people is insufficient, if education is insufficient, if resettlement is inadequate—can a nation truly be built this way?’

The day after, Mao made a speech<sup>1</sup> that was considered to be a direct response to the nine heavens nine hells claim. In the speech he introduced the concept of Big Benevolent Governance (darenzheng, 大仁政) and Small Benevolent Governance (xiaorenzheng, 小仁政), Big Benevolent Governance are policies aim to provide long term benefits for Chinese people, while Small Benevolent Governance only look at immediate benefits. Developing heavy industry and fighting the Korean War fall in the first category while giving up on industrial development to prioritize improving farmer’s living conditions falls in the latter category. ‘People’s lives must be improved, but can’t be improved too much’ he said. A few days later to emphasize geopolitical pressure China was facing at the moment, he added that if China followed Liang Shuming’s idea, ‘Beijing is going to hold a welcome party for Chiang Kai-shek and Eisenhower’.

What is worth noting is that Mao himself didn’t try to downplay or conceal the fact that certain groups’ interests had been sacrificed by the stated policy, in his speech he bluntly said that to fight the Korean War, there will be sacrifices, the war need money and therefore the agricultural tax must be raised. His bluntness might come from that it was during wartime, and people are more likely to accept the narrative that some need to sacrifice for the greater good, or simply from the fact his own son had just been killed during American bombing on the front lines in Korea. Regardless, this narrative had a profound influence on the Communist Party's propaganda style, and was repeatedly mentioned in latter social events like the mass layoffs in Northeast China and the reform and opening up.

## **1.2 The Reform and Opening-up Era**

Mao is considered by modern Chinese people to be the person that led China to the victory of the II World War and Korean War, established China’s fundamental industrial and economic system and earned China a position in the international community. When he passed away in 1976, the whole country cried devastatingly, feeling lost about the future of the country.

After a short transition period, Deng came to power in 1978. During his 1992 southern tour (jiuer nanxun, 九二南巡), he gave a speech named ‘Emancipate the Mind, Seek Truth from Facts, and Unite as One in Looking to the Future’, shifted the focus of the state from

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<sup>1</sup> This is Mao Zedong's speech at the 24th meeting of the Central People's Government Committee on September 12, 1953, entitled ‘The Great Victory in the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea and Future Tasks’.

engaging in class struggle<sup>2</sup> to building socialist modernization, which marks the start of the reform and open-up.

A series of changes in order to reintroduce market economy into China's social economic system, starting with rural areas where the people's communes were abolished and the household responsibility system were encouraged. Farmers no longer engaged in production in the unit of communes with up to tens of thousands of members, instead they could have in small-scale agriculture and animal husbandry on a family basis.

And the coastal special economic zones were established which initially were 4 cities then expanded to 14 cities. Later the experience from those zones was applied to other cities and towns. In the 12th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in 1984, the central government has officially recognized that China's socialist economy is a 'planned commodity economy based on public ownership' rather than a 'planned economy'<sup>3</sup>. Those changes have led to a huge vacancy in the labour market, resulted in the hukou system also to be reformed and the restrictions on internal migration started to loosen up.

In 1985, to better record and manage the mobile population, the Ministry of Public Security introduced two major devices, the Certificate of Temporary Residence (CTR) and the citizen identity card (IDC).

The CTR, as its name suggests, is a document for the mobile population without hukou to legally live in urban areas. Anyone aged 16 or more with intention to stay in the city for more than three months needs to get registered at a local police station or hukou office to explain their purpose in the city to get the CTR, and it needs to be renewed every year. Based on their purpose they will be divided into two categories, job-seeking temporary population who come to cities for jobs, and conventional temporary population who come for other purposes like studying, visiting families, seeking for medical services etc. (Chan, 1999)

The IDC is not really different from other ID cards of other countries, but the establishment of this system shows the change in population registration form, from one booklet for every household to one card for every individual. Although the hukou booklet is still used as a form of identity document until today, it was only used for family relationship related events like marriage registration.

The introduction of these two systems is considered the turning point of the hukou system, it adapted to the country's economic transformation: from a planned economy based on the family unit, gradually to a more market-led economy based on the individual workers. To further cope with this transformation, the existing channels of hukou conversion had been

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<sup>2</sup> A mode of governance and political practice that emphasized class antagonism as the primary driver of social change.

<sup>3</sup> See 'Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Reform of the Economic Structure'.

expanded with more quotas and a wider coverage on industries and occupations. Along with that, some new channels were also created.

The first new channel was the creation of the 'self-supplied food grain' town hukou. It's a type of hukou rural population can apply for in a market town once they meet the basic requirement like either have a business or get employed in that town. It's legally not hukou, but also not like normal urban hukou for its owner was denied by the state subsidized welfare system. As the name suggested this kind of hukou holder had to self-supply their own food. Therefore, this type of hukou has more symbolic value than practical one. This channel started in 1984, didn't really gain much popularity, and was officially terminated in 1992 together with the abolishment of the grain rationing system and the emergence of the grain market.

After the termination of the 'self-supplied food grain' town hukou, the 'blue-stamp' urban hukou channel was opened in 1992. Compared to the former scheme, the new channel covered a larger area, it included not only small towns but also small cities and special economic zones<sup>4</sup>. Also, the eligibility had changed, in the former scheme hukou was given out to people who have business or job in town, but the 'blue-stamp' urban hukou was for those who or whose relatives had made contributions to the development of the city. Those contributions include becoming an investor, becoming a management or technical staff, purchasing or building local houses, working in developing areas as a professional and technical staff, or having other outstanding contributions to the urban economy. The holder of 'blue stamp' hukou enjoys the same welfare and public service as those with normal urban hukou. At the same time, unlike normal conversion channel in which the power of granting urban hukou is in the hand of central government, 'blue stamp' hukou system was based on the principle of 'local need, local benefit, local responsibility, local validity', therefore cities could use it as an important means for local governments to increase fiscal revenue, attract talent, attract investment, and promote the sale of commercial housing. By this point hukou itself had evolved into a valuable commodity that can be bought from the market. (Nian, 2024)

Beside adding those new channels, the state was also in complete reform of the hukou system itself. In 1993, the in the 13th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party proposed to 'gradually reform the household registration system in small towns, allowing farmers to work and do business in these towns'<sup>5</sup>, and later in 1997 chose 450 pilot cities and towns with relatively advanced infrastructure and economic condition to test the reform. But at the same time the central government had also repeatedly emphasized the need to strictly control population growth in medium and large sized cities, especially

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<sup>4</sup> In China's administrative hierarchy, cities belong to the prefecture level, while towns belong to the county level.

<sup>5</sup> See 'Decision of the CPC Central Committee on Several Issues Concerning the Establishment of a Socialist Market Economy System'

Beijing, Tianjin and Shanghai. Therefore, until the beginning of the 21st century, small towns were the main places for absorbing a large number of urbanized rural populations.

This series of reforms led to two major consequences. First, it created a large group of floating population, which are de facto urban dwellers without urban hukou, therefore have little to none access to urban services like housing subsidy and education resources. In other words, it provided a great number of cheap and unprotected labour to the development of the urban economy. Undoubtedly, this structure had laid the foundation for China's economic take-off in the future. China's development model at that time was oriented toward becoming the 'world factory'. This model was fundamentally supported by the systemic undervaluation of rural migrant labour. As a result, hukou-based inequality became a structural problem that could not be resolved naturally through economic development. (Wu, 2018; Peck and Zhang, 2013)

The other consequence is that, it caused the power of granting hukou to be decentralized. The fundamental principle of reform and opening up is to accumulate reform experience that can be implemented nationwide by conducting market-oriented experiments in some regions. In order to better explore paths to develop urban economy, towns and cities need to introduce policies that suit their own circumstance, with is officially called 'adapt to local conditions' (yindizhiyi, 因地制宜). The power delegated by the central government has given local governments more opportunities to use the hukou policy as a resource to address local needs, whether those needs are investment, talent, or something else. This tendency is most evident in those special economic zones (SEZs), to a point that they were criticized to have become some sort of capitalist enclaves. (Ong, 2006)

These issues caused significant controversy at the time. Moreover, the central ideology of the reform and opening-up policy was widely considered as a deviation from or even a betrayal of the Maoist principles—people jokingly called his policy 'signal left, turn right'—leading to substantial obstacles in the early stages of reform. It was not until 1992—fourteen years after the initiation of reform and opening up—that the policy was officially established as a basic national policy. Deng's famous Southern Tour Talks that year revealed the state's attitude towards many of these issues:

*To follow the socialist path means to gradually realize common prosperity. The concept of common prosperity was articulated in this way: some regions, given favourable conditions, should be allowed to develop first, while others may develop more slowly. The regions that develop earlier should in turn help drive the development of those that lag behind, so that common prosperity can ultimately be achieved. If the rich were to become increasingly richer while the poor became increasingly poorer, polarization would emerge—yet the socialist system should, and indeed can, prevent such polarization. One way to address this problem is for the more developed regions to contribute more in taxes and profits to support the development of poorer regions. Of course, it would be inappropriate to implement this too early. At present, it is neither possible to weaken the dynamism of developed regions nor to*

*encourage egalitarianism of the “big pot” type. When and on what basis this issue should be highlighted and addressed requires careful consideration. It can be envisaged that when a moderately prosperous society (xiaokangshehui, 小康社会) has been achieved by the end of this century, this issue should then be prominently raised and resolved.* <sup>6</sup>

Although Deng’s economic policies differed from Mao, we can find their speeches shared a similar structure. They all started with a greater goal that was worth pursuing with the full power of the nation, in Mao’s case to fight the Korean War, or to defend the sovereignty of the country, and in Deng’s case ‘common prosperity’, or to develop the economy of the country. Then they would continue about the predictable cost or sacrifices, in Deng’s case, some regions will develop slower than others, which will lead to severe inequality, and that issue won’t be solved for a long time because egalitarianism may weaken the development dynamism. He then went further to make a promise: inequality will become the focus of the state once the economy has been developed to a certain level.

From today’s perspective, reform and opening up did achieve its primary objective of generating significant economic growth in China. However, the goal of building a moderately prosperous society was not reached until 2021, more than two decades later than what Deng had predicted. And ‘common prosperity’ still remains a distant objective.

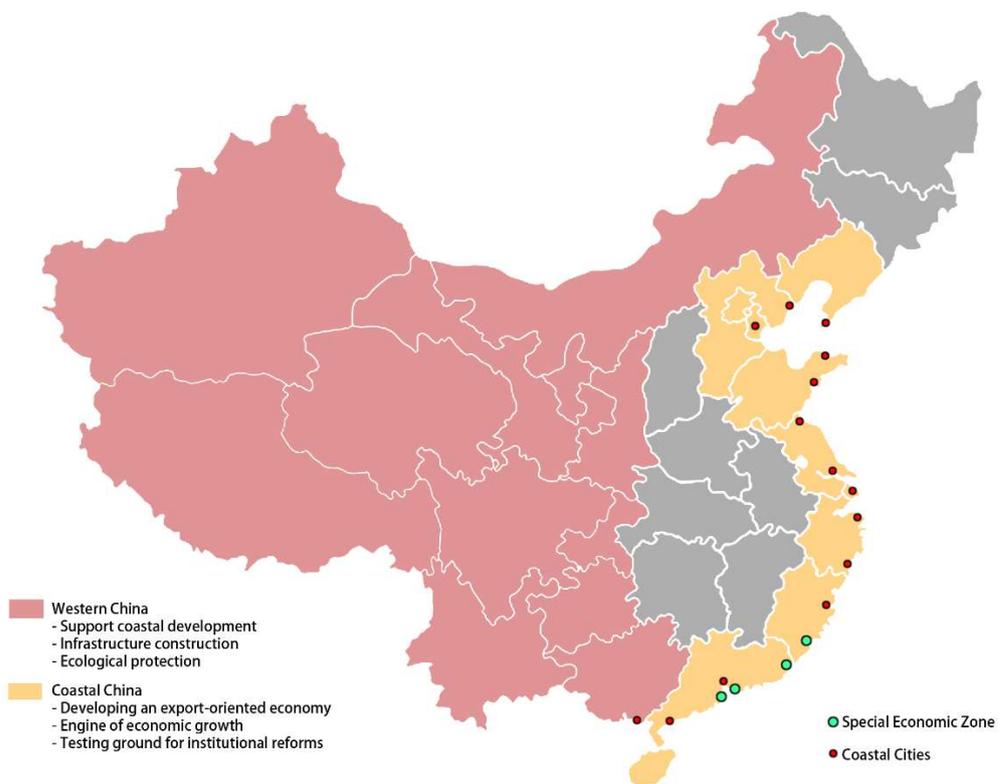


Fig.1 Regional development strategy during the reform and opening-up period

<sup>6</sup> Deng, Xiaoping. (1993). Selected works of Deng Xiaoping (Vol. 3, pp. 373–374). Beijing: People’s Publishing House.

### 1.3 People-centred New-type Urbanization

In the first decade of the new century, the hukou reform continued to ‘guide the transfer of rural population to cities with order’. There are three major changes happened in this period:

Firstly, many medium and large cities have begun to relax their requirements to obtain urban hukou, Shijiazhuang was the first provincial capital to implement those reforms, followed by Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chongqing, Chengdu, Xiamen, Wuhan, and other cities. The criteria for applying could be divided into seven categories: Investment and tax payment, home purchase, high-end talent, employment, family reunification, special contributions and others. (Nian, 2024) These policies did create a path for the floating population to settle in the cities, but at the same time excluded the majority of migrant workers with low levels of education and low-wage jobs. In large cities like Guangzhou, the number of migrant workers continued to increase during this period, but the number of those who are able to receive local household hukou haven’t increased significantly, therefore the rural–urban division had not fundamentally changed. (Wu, 2013)

Secondly, many provinces had changed the registration system, abolished rural and non-rural household registration and unified them under the term ‘resident hukou’. This policy was aiming to integrate rural dwellers, but this policy was not extended nationwide, but rather limited to areas that had already urbanized where people with rural hukou are no longer engaged in any farm production, so it ended up to be a symbolic change rather than a practical one.(Chan, 2008)

Thirdly, the introduction of residence permits. Like CTR, residence permit is a kind of legal document granted to migrant workers. But compared to CTR which only serves an identification certificate, residence permits provide holders with certain accessibility to urban welfare like education and qualifications to buy a house. This system was first introduced in Shanghai as a way to attract highly educated talents. Later it was gradually expanded to the whole nation with the application threshold removed, eventually replacing the CTR system.

It may appear that all those changes remain conservative and insignificant, but sometimes those policies are not conservative from the beginning, but the result of overly radical reforms being reversed. For example, in 2001 Zhengzhou lowered the hukou settlement thresholds, leading to 250,000 new residents in three years and a huge amount of them not even living in that city. Those people living outside the city but have accessibility to the city’s welfare caused severe administrative issues, in the end they rolled back the policy in 2004.

In 2011, the vice president of China introduced the concept of a ‘new type’ of urbanization, which marked the focus of urban development shifted from urbanization of the space to urbanization of the population. This concept was later institutionalized in the document in

2014, National New-type Urbanization Plan, 2014–2020, issued by the State Council of the People’s Republic of China as the blueprint of China’s future urban development.

The document summarized the problems brought about by previous urbanization policies, which was that a large number of rural immigrants couldn’t integrate into urban society, leading to structural social tensions in the cities, and problems of left behind elderly, women and children in rural areas. It then further pointed out that ‘The continuation of the traditional, extensive model of urbanization would entail multiple risks, including sluggish industrial upgrading, environmental degradation, and escalating social tensions. Such a trajectory may lead China into the “middle-income trap,” thereby undermining the broader process of modernization’.

Following this conclusion, the document set the goal of granting 100 million new urban hukou to rural migrant workers in 7 years, so that they can settle in the city they work in, under the following guideline: ‘Fully remove hukou registration restrictions in administrative towns and small cities; gradually ease restrictions in cities with an urban population of 500,000 to 1 million; reasonably relax hukou restrictions in large cities with an urban population of 1 to 3 million; reasonably determine hukou registration requirements in large cities with an urban population of 3 to 5 million; and strictly control population size in mega-cities with an urban population exceeding 5 million’.

By the end of 2019, the state officially announced the achievement of that goal ahead of schedule, which will bring the urbanization rate of the population from 35.93% in 2013 to 44.38% in 2019. While the policy marked a substantial improvement compared to earlier periods, the problem of structural inequality brought by the hukou system was still far from solved, especially in mega-cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong Province.

As we can see in the former document, while all other cities were gradually relaxing the restriction on hukou, mega-cities’ population size remained strictly controlled. Some local governments used it as an opportunity to clear out rural migrants and even further limited their children’s accessibility to public education. (Chan, 2018)

But at the same time the door of hukou conversion in mega-cities was still open to some people in those cities, because of the introduction of the point-based system. The point-based hukou system scores a floating population based on several different criteria; people with high total scores will be granted new urban hukou. The criteria vary from cities, and some cities also have quota control to further limit population sizes. Yet beside those differences, all point-based systems favour young, well-educated and rich people, therefore hukou is not used to provide welfare to those who live and work in these cities, but used as an award to attract talents. (Zhang, 2018)

Another phenomenon that was observed in this period, although hukou registration restrictions had been fully removed, these urban hukou no longer seem to be that attractive to rural populations. Research showed that under current conditions what matters is no

longer the type of hukou but rather which city the hukou belongs to. (Chen & Fan, 2016) This shows that beyond the urban-rural divide, there are also significant welfare disparities between different cities.

In March 2021, the release of China's 14<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan further emphasized the new type urbanization should be a human-centred urbanization, with renewed guideline: 'Fully remove hukou settlement restrictions in cities with an urban permanent population of fewer than 3 million, ensuring equal access to urban hukou registration for migrant agricultural populations regardless of their place of origin. Fully relax hukou settlement conditions in Type I large cities with an urban permanent population of 3 to 5 million. Improve the points-based hukou system in mega- and super-mega cities with an urban permanent population exceeding 5 million by streamlining scoring criteria, ensuring that the length of social insurance contributions and duration of residence account for the majority of points, and encouraging the removal of annual hukou quotas'. We can see the focus had been shifted towards protecting the welfare of new urban settlers and de facto urban dwellers, but the basic structure remained unchanged, and its impact is still yet to be seen.

There are two main narratives about the hukou system of China. One claims that it is a system that intentionally produces inequality in order to develop its economy and serve the interest of a small number of people. The other believes that China has been working to eliminate inequality to the greatest extent possible without causing economic collapse or social chaos. If we look through the history, we can see both narratives are, at best, oversimplified.

Given the industrial structure, population composition, urbanization level, and geopolitical background at the time of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the hukou system was somewhat an unavoidable choice, and since then the system has evolved as a historically contingent institution. Its trajectory has been characterized by strong path dependence, incremental adjustments, and continuous efforts to balance competing economic, social, and political interests.

In the new century, compared to the early reform era, the focus of hukou reform was increasingly shifting towards improving welfare rather than stimulating the economy. At the same time, these reforms are becoming more conservative and even seem insignificant (Chan, 2010). However, this may reflect a new governance approach. Rather than issuing a sudden, top-down directive to fully liberalize hukou access and bearing the social disruption it may cause, the government tended to first adjust adjacent policies-such as enhancing welfare entitlements for rural residents and expanding the rights attached to residence permits. As experiences with policy rollbacks suggest that, from the governance perspective, a sudden surge in migration following formal hukou liberalization would signal that reforms had outpaced, and the relative quietness surrounding each stage of hukou liberalization

may itself be understood as an indicator of the reform's intended success, rather than a sign of its insufficiency. In this sense, hukou liberalization does not initiate social transformation, it institutionalizes changes that have already taken place.

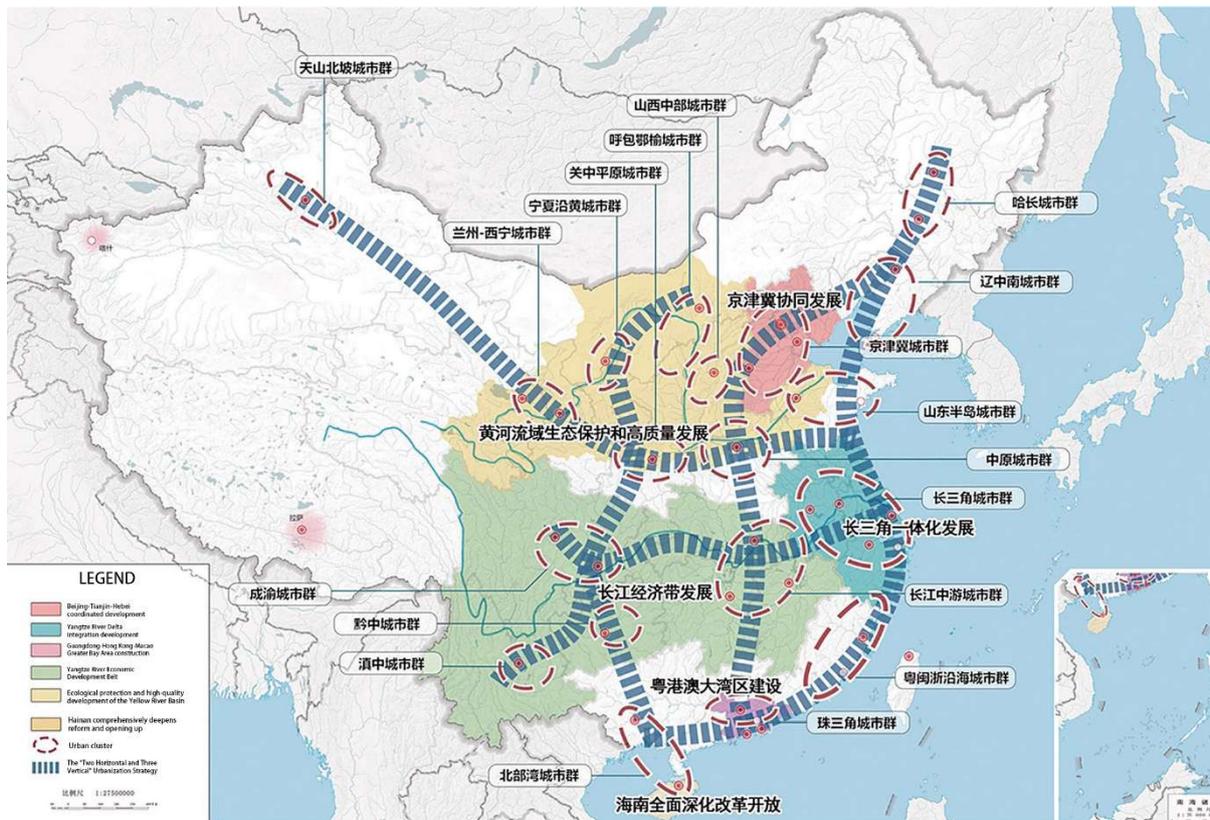


Fig.2 Regional Development Strategy during the 14th Five-Year Plan Period

#### 1.4 The Urban Social Stratification

In Mao's era, the population was divided by the hukou system to live in two completely different living conditions. But due to the restrictions on the movement of people caused by the system, people mostly live in their birth place and their feeling of the surrounding society is homogeneous.

Following the reform and opening-up period, large numbers of rural migrants entered the urban sector as unprotected workers. Newly developing cities need their labour force, but lack sufficient infrastructure to accommodate their lives. As a result, many urban villages were raised up, and the people who built these cities by their own hands were living in self-built structures surrounded by skyscrapers, enduring dampness, crowding and the risk of fire. At the same time, the poor living conditions made it impossible for them to bring their parents with them, and lack of accessibility to local education dictated that their children can only receive education in their hometown, the left behind elderly and children also

became huge problems. At this point, inequalities between urban and rural areas that had long been concealed by restrictions on population mobility were laid bare in the urban sector.

Later, the shift in economic structure changed the cities demand on labour, they no longer only rely on cheap labours, but also need highly skilled professionals. And because some of the reform policies that aimed to attract talents had further complicated the existing social stratification, for it divided migrants based on the score they got from the point-based system. Migrants with high total points would be able to settle in the cities while others have to go back to the rural side eventually.

In some mega-cities like Shanghai and Beijing, because the hukou and the social service comes with it is so favourable, it could actually attract the youngest, best educated and richest people. This will result in the rising housing prices and scarcity of educational resources, and it is impossible for locals to keep up with the competition. If you live in Beijing, you can always hear people whose family has lived in Beijing for many generations complaining about the fact they can no longer afford houses in good locations and nowadays the city centre is filled by people who are first- or second-generation Beijinger who used to be high skilled migrants.

On the other hand, after going through such an instance selection to obtain urban hukou, new city dwellers may perceive themselves as superior to the locals who 'just happened to burn in a developed city'.

Overall, as hukou reform has proceeded incrementally, the form of social stratification associated with the system has shifted from a relatively simple urban–rural dualism to a more differentiated and multi-dimensional structure. Inequality is no longer produced primarily through categorical exclusion based on hukou status alone, but increasingly through the interaction of hukou, market mechanisms, and access to urban resources.

## Chapter 2 The paradox of education resource

As the hukou system has gone through a series of reforms that was shown in the last chapter, most public services in cities are now accessible to migrant workers. Among the few services that are still limited, education is considered the most consequential.

The importance of education as a form of civic welfare is self-evident: without it, individuals' opportunities for social mobility and self-realization are severely constrained. In China, however, education is so much more than a matter of access versus exclusion. Good schools are considered to be able to give students a big advantage in future social competition, some families are even willing to relocate just to secure better schooling opportunities for their children.

This chapter will explain why education has such a great value in Chinese society, to a point that good education resources can be used as a reward to attract investment and talent to the city, and how the state has responded to the social tensions generated by this dynamic.

### 2.1 Competitive Education System in Ancient China

The competitiveness in China's education system can be traced back to the keju (科举) system in dynastic time. Keju is a series of examinations the empire used to select its officials. Its early form was established in the Han dynasty. Since then, despite the consistent changes of dynasties, the keju system remained almost completely undisrupted for more than 2000 years, until it was finally abandoned in 1905. As a selection system that had been operating for so long, its influence on the country is beyond doubt. Here I listed three main features that are the most consequential of the keju system.

First, its competitiveness. In order to become an official of the empire, candidates had to go through multiple rounds of examinations, with only a few people being able to pass each round.

In the Ming and Qing dynasty, the keju system consisted of three levels of examinations, the county exam, the provincial exam and the national level exams which take place in the capital city. It includes two parts, the metropolitan exam and the palace exam, with the later one conducted by the emperor himself. The county exam is held twice every three years, while the latter two levels are held once every three years, passing each level gives the candidate a lifelong qualification to attend the next level. Theoretically there was no on the age of the candidate or the number of attempts at each level, which also added to the competitiveness for candidates who were not just competing with their peers.

Take the example of the keju which took place in 1820, at that time the population of the country was 264 million, only 1493 candidates passed the provincial exam, and 246

candidates passed the metropolitan exam, which was 0.000031% of the total population. (He, 1997) Those 246 candidates were able to enter the palace exam that year, and were tested by the emperor himself. The palace exam didn't eliminate candidates, rather it was to decide to the top 3 candidates for that year, with the name zhuangyuan (状元) as the 1<sup>st</sup> place, bangyan (榜眼) as the second place, and tanhua (探花) as the 3<sup>rd</sup> place. Until today, Chinese people are still calling those who get 1st place in an important exam 'zhuangyuan'.

Second, the principle of absolute fairness in the keju system has been emphasized repeatedly throughout history. This principle was mainly reflected in two aspects, the universality of eligibility and the standardization of the examination. All able-bodied males were eligible to the keju system, as long as they were from families with respectable jobs. There is not a clear definition of a respected job, but prostitutes, entertainers and jailors were considered hereditary low-status groups therefore their descendants were not eligible. People who have committed crime or associated with cheating in exams weren't eligible as well. People whose parents just passed away won't be able to participate in keju for three years for they should go through a mourning period according to the Confucius tradition. By modern standards this could be described as a system that ruffed with discrimination and exclusion, for beside the ableism and employment-based discrimination, they excluded women as a whole. However, considering that it was a system in the dynasty era and it was to select officials to actually run the country, it was considered fairly inclusive at the time. Besides, since getting education and traveling to the cities where exams took place both had great costs, those from lower class normally wouldn't be able to afford it in the first place even if they were allowed to participate.

Although its universality couldn't keep up with modern standards, the standardization of keju was extremely rigorous even compared to today's exams. Starting with the pretest process. For candidates, all their physical features and characters that could be standardized were recorded in their identification document. And for officials who were creating exam questions, they would have to do it in a secured place and be locked in there until the very end of that exam. The questions would then be handed out in printed version-thanks to the development of that technique- to candidates who were locked in their small 1m by 2m cells throughout the whole exam period, which was 3 days and 2 nights for each exam level. (O'Sullivan & Cheng, 2022) The candidates would be searched through before they entered their cells, with only the basic items they needed to complete the exam. Their cell order would be dependent on the outcome of their previous exam and couldn't be changed to prevent cheating with neighbours. During the exam, invigilators would patrol between cells continuously, and since those cells all had an open front, they could be easily seen through. Aside from that there were also watch towers to overlook both the candidates and the invigilators. If all the above methods are quite common, there this one thing that were really extraordinary and couldn't be found in modern exam anymore: after the exam the original scripts weren't be hand in directly to the examiner, instead they would be delivered to a group of scribes to transcribe them with a specific writing style. This was to prevent the

chance that examiners might recognize candidates from their unique hand writings. All those efforts were just to ensure that candidates would just be evaluated by what they wrote in the exam, not their families' status.

Last but probably the most important feature of the keju system is that, beyond being an official selection system, it was also a system of culture reproduction. The content of keju exam was strictly controlled by the government, although it covered a wide range of topics like philosophy and economy and even world history, it was mostly about Confucian classics, namely the Four Books and the Five Classics. The Four Book is mainly about an ideal moral conduct and lifestyle, like how one should learn, how one should treat their parents or friends or enemies, or even how to greet people and perform ceremonies. Because from a Confucian perspective, the ideal way of living as a normal people and the ideal way of ruling a country should be coming from the same moral standard just acting on different levels, being an emperor is essentially the same of being a father, its just you are the father of the whole country, and being an official is just like being a son only your father is in much higher place. Like the Great Learning, one of the Four Books said: 'The ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom, first ordered well their own states. Wishing to order their states well, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost their knowledge.'

It's worth to notice that during Confucius' time, when he said 'people' he was referring to upper class males who didn't have to make a living by themselves therefore had time to learn about politics and train other skills, and might eventually get recognized by a king and have the chance to become a high official of a country. However, since the Four Books had already set up this handy structure in which moral standards might vary for different classes but they should all originate from the same principle, it was fairly easy for future Confucianist to keep developing it and wrote Lessons for Women (nvjie, 女诫) and Standards for being a Good Pupil and Child (dizigui, 弟子规) and eventually extend the Confucian moral to nearly all class of people.

In this sense, the real success of the keju system was not about selecting a few hundreds of outstanding officials to serve the country every three years, it was about getting the other millions of candidates complete inside the system, learning Confucian classics, and internalizing moral value. Since the keju system promised upward mobility not only to the final winners but to everyone in this system who could pass the first level test, although most of those candidates wouldn't become officials, they were most likely to become teachers, local gentries and patriarchs. Those teachers, gentries and patriarchs would continue to promote Confucianism within their sphere of power, and kept sending their sons into the keju system. At this point keju was not just a path to upward social mobility, it

became a sublime way of living, a dream that every man should have shared so that they might be able to contribute to the country and to save the common people. As a poet from the Song Dynasty wrote: 'All occupations are base, only learning is noble.' (万般皆下品，唯有读书高)

The keju system worked so effectively that it persisted for two thousand years, profoundly shaping the social structure of China. It successfully selected a great number of talented scholars to serve the government and got those who didn't get selected to believe in the government. To an extent it was precisely its success that led to its demise, although Confucianism includes a wide range of studies, it didn't cover science, technology or engineering. And since all talented ambitious young men from good families all devoted their lives to this path, later the keju system was seen to be responsible for China's industrial and technological stagnation.

## **2.2 Exam-oriented Education System and Its Social Impact**

When the new country was established in 1949, the education problem became one of the main focuses of the state, for at that point 80% of the population were illiterates, and only 20% school-age children were actually in schools. As a result, the state replaced elite private schools with public schools and established the college entrance examination as a unified admission system for the whole country. But in Mao's era the education wasn't that competitive, probably for the first time in a long history. As Maoist ideology was fundamentally Anti-Confucianism, as Confucianism divided people into classes but Maoist believe people are born equal. For the same reason the keju style competitive exam system was seen as a system for the elite to reproduce their social status. Also, scholars were no longer seen as noble professions, rather farmers and workers were more respectable for their contribution to the country. Therefore, the college entrance selection system at the time was more rely one's birth origin rather than academic performance, students were divided into two categories based on their family, 'red' and 'black'. While 'red' meant the descendants of low-income peasants, workers and soldiers, 'black' was for descendants of landlords, the rich and the anti-revolutionary. The selection favoured 'red' students, the proportion of students with peasant-worker background entering higher education raised from 20% in 1952 to 71% in 1965<sup>7</sup>, right before the system got completely shut down by the Cultural Revolution the year after.

After the Culture Revolution Deng took the leadership and restored the college entrance exam in 1977. Later with the reform and open-up, the state began to regard the promotion of economic productivity as the primary purpose of the education system. It was then that

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<sup>7</sup> China Education Yearbook Editorial, 1984.

neoliberalism started to shape China's education and the competition between students and education institutions started to intensify (Cheng & Hamid, 2025).

In 1986 the 'Nine-Year Compulsory Education' was introduced, providing free basic education (Six years of primary school and three years of middle school) to all school-age children. This policy remains in effect to this day. Under this structure there are two unified selective exams held by the country, with unified curriculum, unified exam questions, unified grading, unified student admissions, the high school entrance exam-zhongkao(中考) and the college entrance exam-gaokao(高考). The first exam takes place right after the nine years of compulsory education and will decide which high school student will go to. As a result of zhongkao, only a portion of students can enter regular high schools (academic high schools), the rest can only go to vocational high schools. With a few exceptions, such as Beijing allowing some vocational schools to offer gaokao preparation classes, students in vocational high schools are not allowed to participate in the regular gaokao, instead they can only participate in vocational college entrance examinations and enter vocational universities. This system dictates that the competition of gaokao doesn't start in high school, students have started preparation at least in middle school, just to have the opportunity to participate in gaokao.

However, the above only represents a theoretical scenario, in reality, competition began way earlier than middle school, sometimes as early as kindergarten. Because public kindergartens in China do not teach academic skills, rather they focus on cultivating children's healthy habits and social skills. Therefore, a lot of parents are willing to pay more and send their kids to private kindergartens to learn Chinese phonics, pinyin, and writing characters in advance, so that their kids will get some advantages when they first start school (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2023). Or for those parents who wish to take advantage of young children's perceived aptitude for language learning, there is always a choice called bilingual kindergarten where children will be taken care by foreign teachers from English speaking countries, so that they get immersed in an English-speaking environment at an early age.

Learning to read a few words earlier than other kids surely won't give them a huge advantage in terms of gaokao, for students all learn to read eventually. But the logic behind this is, parents believe that by learning academic skills in advance, their kids will have better performance than their peer students when they firstly entered school, and that will give them confidence and make them think that they are smarter than others, then maybe they will start to love studying and work harder in the rest of their student career. Also, from another perspective, the same behaviour might come from parents' fear, knowing a great number of other kids are learning in advance, they are afraid of their kids got left behind once they enter school and develop a negative feeling about studying. These two mindsets constitute the dynamic of competitive education, the desire of being one step ahead and the fear of falling behind collectively produced a small-scale arms race in the education

sector. The slogan 'don't let your child lose at the starting line' once became a nationwide advertising phenomenon, widely circulated by various educational institutions.

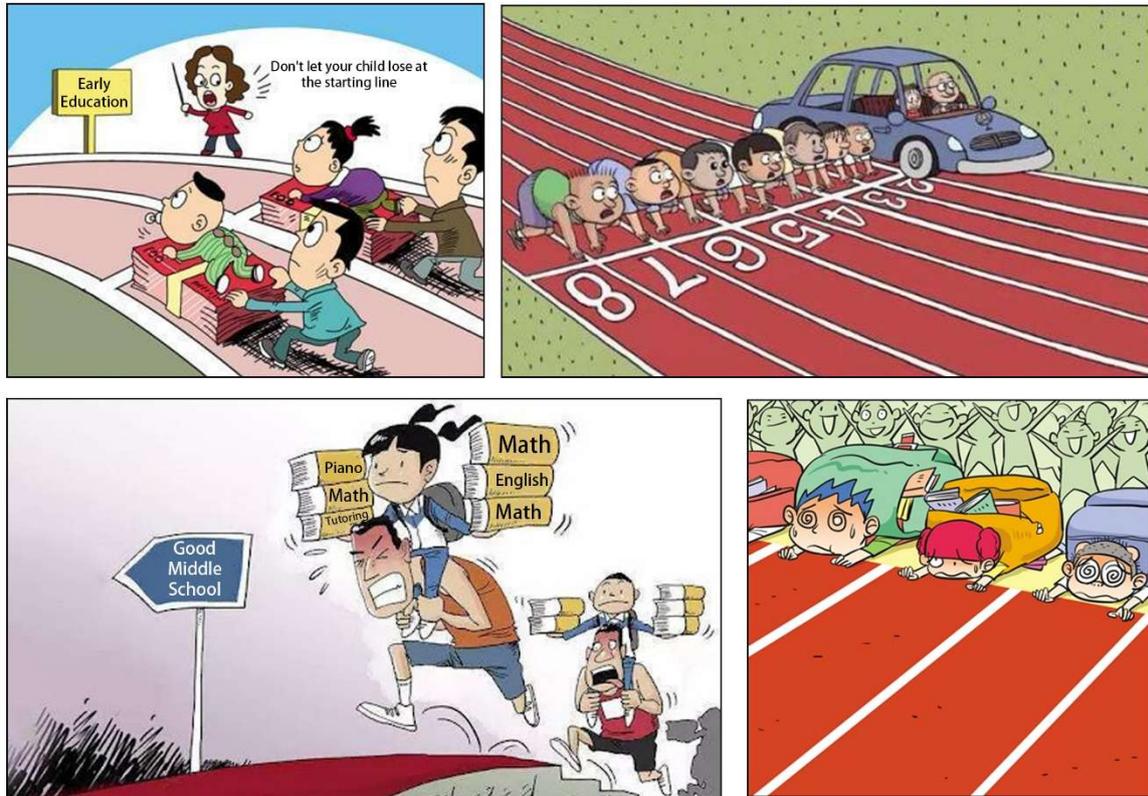


Fig.3 'Don't let your child lose at the starting line'

Then after kindergarten, the competition certainly won't get easier. Although there are only two unified selective exams, for many years primary and middle schools were not prohibited from holding their own entrance exams. The state guaranteed nine years of compulsory education, but if you wanted to get into good ones, there would be a selective threshold. For primary schools they normally needed students to go through some interviews with some questions that were similar to IQ tests. For middle school until the late 90s there were selective exams held by local governments or local education departments. After this exam was abolished, good middle schools started to hold their own independent admission examination. Passing those exams often required students to participate in the tutoring classes those schools offered, which were very time consuming and weren't free at all. Beside those schools, there were also a great amount commercial third-party education institution, providing private tutoring on school curriculum, independent admission exams of different schools (sometimes they could even find real exam questions from past years which supposed to be kept secret), and any other skill that might give students an advantage in those competitions. There was a time that having special skills in playing musical instruments would give students bonus points in middle school admission, and as a result of that the market was suddenly flooded with piano training institutions. In 2021 the

private tutoring created a market estimated at 100 billion dollars (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2023).

This level of competition was certainly hard to keep up with, it created a great financial burden for the parents, and in extreme cases, hurt both physical and mental health of the students. Started in early 10s, many cities and provinces had begun to gradually introduce policies to prohibit primary and middle schools from having independent admission system<sup>8</sup>, and instead adopt an allocation-based enrolment system that prioritizes distance from schools. These changes completely ended independent admission exams by the end of 2019. In 2021 the Double Reduction started and a series of policies came out to regulate the private tutoring market. The document Opinions on Further Reducing Student Homework and Off-Campus Compulsory Education Training Burden urged schools to reduce homework loads and provide more after school services and non-academic courses, restricted private institutions from providing training on school curriculum and strictly prohibited any form of curriculum acceleration in the education market. At the same time, it stipulated that *'Academic subject-based tutoring institutions are strictly prohibited from going public or raising funds through capital markets, and all forms of capitalized operation are banned. Listed companies are not allowed to invest in academic subjects-based tutoring institutions through stock market financing, nor are they permitted to acquire assets of such institutions through share issuance, cash payments, or other similar means. Foreign capital is prohibited from obtaining controlling stakes or equity participation in academic subjects-based tutoring institutions through mergers and acquisitions, entrusted management, franchising, variable interest entity structures, or other arrangements'* to ensure that capital won't be able to interfere in the education market.

The Double Reduction policy may have achieved what they promised, reducing the burden of education on both parents and students. But the effect of this competitive education system on Chinese society doesn't stop there. The gaokao not only determined what university the student could enter, it's also a system to hold schools accountable, therefore it also has a tremendous impact on teachers as well. In this system teachers are expected to guide students on a moral level as a traditional educator, but also help students to get the highest grade they can in the exams. In addition to that they are also the primary person responsible for students' health and safety when they are at school. *'Under this exam-oriented education system, teachers experience a significant reduction in their autonomy, concurrently facing heightened accountability for students' academic performance, both from the school system and from anxious parents. They are expected to become "teaching machines" capable of consistently improving students' scores, ultimately rendering them vulnerable to 'performativity'.'* (Cheng & Hamid, 2025)

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<sup>8</sup> See Notice from the General Office of the Ministry of Education on Further Improving the Work of Admission to Compulsory Education Without Examination and Based on Proximity in Major Cities, jiaojiyiting [2014] No. 1.

The gaokao also shaped the education system itself. A normal school curriculum will cover a wide range of subjects from math and English to art, music and PE, but under the competitive pressure only subjects that will be tested in the gaokao will be treated seriously. Some schools will even modify the curriculum to exclude non-tested subjects. And even for those subjects it's very common that an excessive amount of class time is spent training tests, taking skills or repetitively doing model tests and tests from previous years. (Emler, Zhao, Deng, Yin & Wang, 2019) This tendency to treat subjects merely as exam content is particularly evident in the subject of English. Many students have studied English for more than 12 years and have mastered the grammar but still can't speak English in daily life (Meng, Tang & Wu, 2021; Cheng & Hamid, 2025).

Another concern of this system is that, like all other standardized competitive exams, it will create 'the illusion of absolute autonomy' (Bourdieu, Pierre, and Jean-Claude Passeron, 1977) in which students' achievements would be seen as the result of their own individual hardworking, while in reality they heavily rely on schools, teachers, parents and the environment they grow up in. The winners in the system will be respected and seen as talents that drive society forward, while others may be seen as lazy and incompetent or even unethical. This is already reflected in the stigmatization of vocational schools in Chinese society.

### **2.3 Geographic Inequality of the Gaokao System**

One distinctive feature of the gaokao system is its strong linkage to geography. This linkage operates at multiple levels. First, curricula vary significantly across regions in China. Second, gaokao registration and university admission are organized primarily on a provincial basis. Third, students are generally expected to receive education and sit the gaokao in the locality where their hukou is registered.

The first layer is quite easy to understand, for China is a large country with huge regional development disparities, having different curricula is both theoretically inevitable and a result of the balance game between the state, local government and schools that have been continued for decades (Fan, 2020). Underdeveloped areas and areas with special circumstances, such as areas inhabited by ethnic minorities whose first language may not be Chinese, need to adjust course content according to local conditions. As for the relatively developed coastal areas, the country hopes to use them as testing grounds to accumulate experience for educational reform. For example, in 1988 the National Education Commission allowed Shanghai to experiment on curriculum reform, and in 5 years it developed into a series of curriculum, teaching material and education software that was suitable for all economically developed areas.

Given the uneven levels of socioeconomic development across regions in China, as well as substantial variation in local curricula, it is neither feasible nor perceived as fair for students nationwide to compete directly within a single, fully standardized examination system. Therefore, although the gaokao is organized and administered at a unified national time by the Ministry of Education, examination papers are not fully standardized, and registration and admission are conducted on a provincial basis. Students are ranked only within their province of registration, and universities allocate admission quotas to each province.

As a general rule, a portion of these quotas is first reserved for the province in which the university is located, while the remaining quotas are distributed to other provinces based on a combination of factors, including the number of candidates and relative levels of regional development. As a result, candidates from economically developed provinces with more and better universities will have a greater advantage. Furthermore, the regional distribution of top universities in China is extremely uneven. There are 34 Province-level divisions in China, including 23 provinces, 5 autonomous regions, 4 municipalities and 2 special administrative regions. Of the 39 top tier universities known as '985' universities, eight are located in Beijing and four are in Shanghai, and there are 13 provinces and autonomous regions with zero of them.

Although there are no official statistics on the admission rates for each province, estimates can be calculated using the number of test takers, the cut-off scores for each school, and their rankings. As a result of the gaokao in 2025, in provincial-level municipalities like Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin, up to 70% of the candidates were able to get into universities, while the rate in poorest provinces like Jiangxi, Anhui and Xinjiang were around 30%.<sup>9</sup>

Given the significant geographical inequalities inherent in the gaokao system, a set of institutional restrictions is required to prevent large-scale student migration across regions. It is in this context that the hukou system becomes relevant. In practice, students are generally allowed to enrol in public schools for the nine years of compulsory education only in the locality where their hukou is registered, with limited exceptions.

The most common exception applies to migrant children whose parents hold valid residence permits and maintain stable employment and housing in the destination city. However, even when migrant children are able to attend public schools outside their place of hukou registration, they are not necessarily entitled to register for the zhongkao or the gaokao in that locality. Although most provinces have introduced policies allowing migrant students who study locally to take the gaokao and participate in the admission process without systematic discrimination, the most advantaged regions, Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin, have yet to adopt these reforms (Wang, Yu, Wei & Liang, 2025). As a result, migrant children educated in these cities are often required either to return to their hukou-registered

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<sup>9</sup> Sohu, Ranking of Gaokao Candidates/Admission Rates for 985/211 Universities/Regular Undergraduate Programs in Each Province/Municipality in 2025, [https://www.sohu.com/a/913345281\\_121124319](https://www.sohu.com/a/913345281_121124319)

province to take these examinations or to enter private schools after completing compulsory education.

PROVINCE	985	211	POPULATION(M)	RATE
BEIJING	8	26	22	1.545
JIANGSU	2	11	85	0.153
SHANGHAI	4	10	25	0.560
SHANXI	3	8	40	0.275
HUBEI	2	7	58	0.155
SICHUAN	2	5	84	0.083
HEILONGJIANG	1	4	30	0.167
HUNAN	3	4	65	0.108
LIAONING	2	4	42	0.143
GUANGDONG	2	4	128	0.047
ANHUI	1	3	61	0.066
SHANDONG	2	3	101	0.050
TIANJIN	2	3	14	0.357
JILIN	1	3	23	0.174
FUJIAN	1	2	42	0.071
CHONGQING	1	2	32	0.094
ZHEJIANG	1	1	67	0.030
GANSU	1	1	24	0.083
XINJIANG	0	2	26	0.077
SHANXI	0	1	34	0.029
NINGXIA	0	1	7	0.143
NEIMENGGU	0	1	24	0.042
HEBEI	0	1	74	0.014
JIANGXI	0	1	45	0.022
HENAN	0	1	98	0.010
GUANGXI	0	1	50	0.020
HAINAN	0	1	10	0.100
GUIZHOU	0	1	39	0.026
YUNNAN	0	1	47	0.021
QINGHAI	0	1	6	0.167
TIBET	0	1	4	0.250

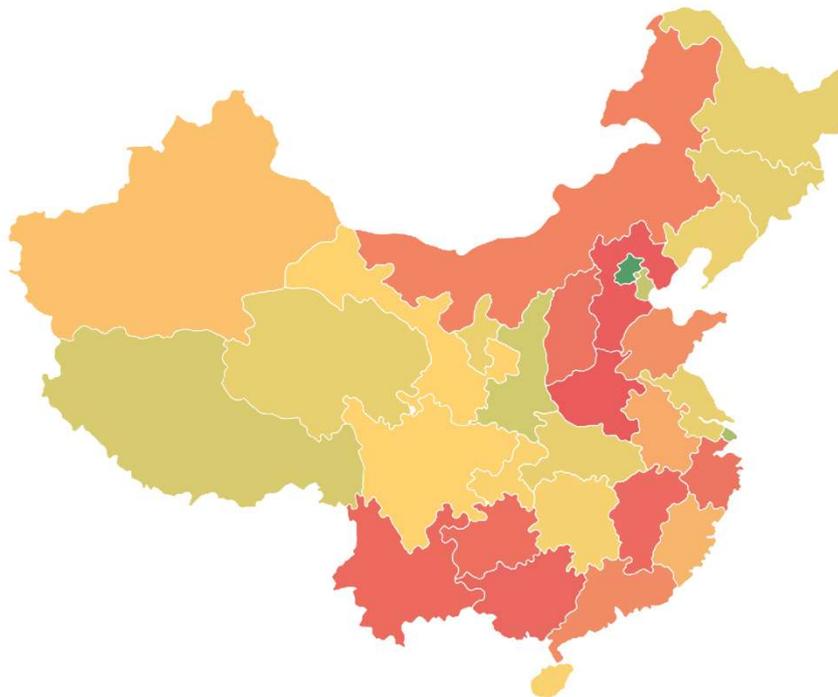


Fig.4 Admission rates of top universities in each province

## 2.4 The ‘Baking a Bigger Cake’ Narrative

The paradox of education resource in modern China is that, on one hand, the geographic inequality in education is so significant that urgently needs to be addressed; on the other hand, regions that serve as engines of China’s economic development are still using education as a reward to attract talents, or even a tool to control population growth (Liu & Zhao, 2019). This contradiction between economic development and social equity has been a subject of ongoing debate since the reform and opening up. The cake theory is the most well-known one among all those debates.

The cake theory starts with a question, should we focus more on dividing the cake more fairly or making the cake bigger? Making the cake bigger is a metaphor for economic development, while dividing the cake is a metaphor for redistribution of wealth. Supporters of the former believed that by making the cake bigger, everyone would get a larger, larger piece of cake even if it’s unevenly distributed, and we could always come back to find a better way for distribution after the cake was big enough. While the supporter of the latter argued that the unfair distribution would demotivate those who are baking the cake,

therefore it would be impossible to bake a bigger cake. In the end, the ‘baking a bigger cake’ side won, and this became the guiding principle of Chinese politics thereafter.

In terms of education policy, this is mainly reflected in the protection of migrant children’s education rights and the promotion of quality-oriented education.

For a long period, children were only permitted to enrol in public schools in the locality where their hukou was registered. As a result, children whose parents migrated to other cities for work were often forced either to remain in their hometowns without parental supervision—becoming so-called ‘left-behind children’—or to attend migrant schools in their parents’ destination cities. These migrant schools were frequently costly and characterized by low teaching quality and inadequate facilities.

Since 2004, the central state has introduced a series of policies aimed at enabling qualified migrant children to enter public schools. However, due to limited educational resources and the socioeconomic conditions embedded in these policies, children from poorer migrant families often remained excluded (Wang & Sercombe, 2023). In 2014, the State Council introduced the ‘Two Incorporations’ (liangnaru, 两纳入) policy, which required local governments to incorporate compulsory education for migrant children into both education development plans and public financial budgets<sup>10</sup>. Following this policy, local governments expanded public school capacity and gradually lowered enrolment barriers, in some cases allowing migrant children to enrol unconditionally.

While these reforms are widely regarded as a significant improvement in migrant children’s access to compulsory education, existing research suggests that their effects remain uneven and contested.

Although access to public schooling represents an important step forward, schools themselves vary significantly in quality. Empirical studies indicate that migrant children continue to face difficulties in accessing high quality educational resources, as elite public schools remain highly selective and often favour local hukou holders. And local governments may have little motivation to improve their education quality as the financial burden of educating migrant children falls primarily on local governments. This situation is often described as ‘the central government treats, but the local governments pay’ (Qian & Walker, 2015; Liu & Zhao, 2019).

At the same time, other studies highlight more positive effects of these reforms. By increasing the likelihood that migrant children can remain in destination cities throughout their schooling, policy changes have strengthened families’ expectations of long-term settlement. This, in turn, has encouraged greater parental investment in children’s education (Ye, Cai, Shi & Cheng, 2024), partially mitigating earlier disadvantages.

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<sup>10</sup> Opinions of the State Council on Further Promoting the Reform of the Household Registration System, Guofa [2014] No. 25.

While policies targeting migrant children address issues of educational accessibility in cities, regional inequality in education is yet to be addressed. There the state also introduced the policy of quality-oriented education.

Quality-oriented education is commonly presented as the opposite of exam-oriented education. With an emphasis on fostering students' innovative spirit and practical capacities, this policy aims to cultivate 'socialist builders and successors who possess ideals, moral integrity, cultural knowledge, and discipline, and who are comprehensively developed across moral, intellectual, physical, and aesthetic dimensions.'<sup>11</sup>. Beginning with the Eighth Curriculum Reform launched in 2001, this initiative sought to replace an older curriculum that was largely based on rote learning and test-taking skill training with one that is more interdisciplinary, comprehensive, and student-centred.

These reforms have certainly achieved some success, but they have also encountered substantial resistance. Many students and teachers, especially those from underdeveloped or rural regions, continue to believe that the old curriculum better suits their needs for two reasons.

First, gaokao scores remain critically important to students, and in recent years have become even more consequential as employers increasingly use them as a criterion in recruitment. Research shows that 'employers never tolerated failure in the gaokao... Even if a candidate had attended a super-elite postgraduate school, it was difficult to overcome a lower-ranked undergraduate school' (Ren, 2022). As a result, even when other abilities are encouraged, their development must be premised on the condition that exam performance is not sacrificed (Woronov, 2008). Besides, despite its many flaws and inequalities, the gaokao is still widely regarded as the only relatively fair channel for upward mobility available to the poor. The slogan 'the gaokao is the only way to outcompete the second-generation rich' is widely circulated and deeply believed among students (Howlett, 2023).

Second, the quality-oriented curriculum places significantly higher demands on teachers' professional capacities and on school facilities, making it difficult for underdeveloped regions to keep up with (Lin, 2011; Yin & Mu, 2022). Although the state has attempted to address this gap through the use of live-streaming technologies in rural schools, empirical studies suggest that rural students often struggle to follow these courses and experience a sense of inferiority when comparing themselves with their urban peers on screen (Li & Zhang, 2024).

Therefore, although curriculum reform has produced certain positive effects, it is unlikely to resolve the fundamental problem as long as the underlying competitive education system remains unchanged.

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<sup>11</sup> See Decision of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on Deepening Education Reform and Comprehensively Promoting Quality Education, zhongfa [1999] No. 9.

## Chapter 3 Nansha, A City of Tomorrow

Nansha is located at the mouth of the Pearl River and the southernmost point of Guangzhou. It is situated at the geographical centre of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, 38 nautical miles from Hong Kong and 41 nautical miles from Macao. All 11 cities in the Greater Bay Area are gathered within a radius of 100 kilometres of Nansha. Locating at the intersection of four cities with a GDP of over one trillion yuan, today's Nansha district is one of the 6 state-level new areas, the sub-centre of Guangzhou, and an important hub connecting the city clusters on both sides of the Pearl River Estuary with Hong Kong and Macao. But back in the early 1990s, Nansha was just a collection of fishing villages and endless banana fields.

### 3.1 From Fishing Village to Pilot Free Trade Zone

In 1993, the Guangzhou Nansha Economic and Technological Development Zone was established under the management of Panyu City, which was the early form of today's Nansha New Area. In 2005, Panyu City was merged into Guangzhou, and Nansha was upgraded to a district under Guangzhou.

In 2008, the State Council approved the Outline of the Plan for the Reform and Development of the Pearl River Delta Region (2008–2020), which further identified the Pearl River Delta as an experimental zone for exploring new models of scientific outlook on development and deepening reform and opening-up. The document also emphasized the need to further promote integration between Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao. Within this framework, the plan proposed the development of the Guangzhou Nansha New Area as a cooperation zone with Hong Kong and Macao, aimed at strengthening collaboration in areas such as the service sector and high-tech industries.

Following the Twelfth Five-Year Plan period, the State Council formally approved the establishment of Nansha as a national-level new area, making it one of only six such national new areas in China at the time. In the Twelfth Five-Year Plan, under the section titled 'Maintaining the Long-term Prosperity and Stability of Hong Kong and Macao,' the Nansha New Area was listed as one of seven major Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao cooperation projects. It was described as a commercial service centre, technological innovation centre, and education and training base that would 'serve the mainland and connect Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao', as well as a cooperative zone supporting port-based industries.

These policy documents indicate that, from its inception, Nansha was assigned multiple functions based on its particular geographical position. These functions reflected not only economic considerations, but also geopolitical ones. At the time, Hong Kong had marked the fifteenth anniversary of its return to Chinese sovereignty, and the state expected the new

area to function geographically, industrially, and culturally as a linkage between the mainland and Hong Kong and Macao. At the same time, it was hoped that by relying on the two economically advanced and externally oriented cities of Hong Kong and Macao, Nansha would be able to develop its own technological capabilities and industrial base.

On this basis, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) formulated the Master Plan for the Guangzhou Nansha New Area (2012–2025). This plan further clarified the urban nature of Nansha as: a national-level new area for comprehensive cooperation among Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao; a national demonstration zone for new-type urbanization; a service platform linking the mainland with Hong Kong, Macao, and the international market; a hub city within the world-class urban agglomeration of the Pearl River Delta; and the maritime gateway of Guangzhou as a national central city.

The plan also identified Nansha's main functions as 'two zones, two centres, and two bases':

- (1) a national new area for comprehensive Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao cooperation
- (2) a pilot zone for exploring new forms of urbanization
- (3) a regional centre for high-end modern service industries
- (4) an international shipping and modern logistics centre
- (5) a national base for science, technology, and innovation industries
- (6) a base for marine industries and equipment manufacturing

During this period, Nansha's primary role was to serve as a physical connector between Hong Kong and Macao and, by leveraging these cities, to develop high-end service industries. Priority sectors included commerce and exhibitions, financial services, technological information services, education and research, and shipping and logistics—industries broadly categorized as producer services. In addition, Nansha was expected to build upon its existing industrial strengths in automobile manufacturing, shipbuilding, marine engineering equipment, and nuclear power equipment to develop high-end manufacturing.

In 2015, the Notice of the State Council on Issuing the Overall Plan for the China (Guangdong) Pilot Free Trade Zone (Guofa [2015] No. 18) approved the establishment of the Guangdong Pilot Free Trade Zone. In this document, facilitating connections among Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao was no longer placed as the top priority. Instead, the construction of a new system for an open economy and the creation of an internationalized, market-oriented, and law-based business environment became the primary aim of the pilot zone.

The pilot free trade zone consists of three sub-areas: the Guangzhou Nansha New Area, the Shenzhen Qianhai Shekou Area, and the Zhuhai Hengqin New Area. Among them, Nansha is

the largest in terms of land area, roughly equivalent to the combined size of the other two areas. The functional positioning of the three sub-areas is described as follows:

*'The Guangzhou Nansha New Area focuses on developing shipping and logistics, specialized finance, international trade, and high-end manufacturing, aiming to build a modern industrial highland led by producer services and a comprehensive service hub of world-class standards. The Shenzhen Qianhai–Shekou Area focuses on finance, modern logistics, information services, and technological services, and aims to become a demonstration window for the opening-up of China's financial sector, an important global base for trade in services, and an international hub port. The Zhuhai Hengqin New Area focuses on tourism, leisure and health, business and financial services, cultural and educational industries, and high-tech sectors, aiming to build a pioneering zone for openness in culture and education and an international base for business services, leisure, and tourism, while serving as a new platform for promoting the moderately diversified development of Macao's economy.'*

From this functional division, it is evident that the three sub-areas show substantial overlap in their positioning in sector like logistics, international trade, finance, and other high-end service industries. Moreover, Hengqin is geographically adjacent to Macao, while Qianhai Shekou is significantly closer to Hong Kong than Nansha. As a result, in sectors that rely heavily on Hong Kong and Macao resources, Nansha faces a competitive disadvantage relative to the other two areas. At the same time, the urban core of Guangzhou, which is geographically closer to Nansha, has been implementing a policy of 'retreating from secondary industry and advancing into tertiary industry' (tuierjinsan, 退二进三), aimed at reducing high-pollution and low-end manufacturing while expanding commercial and service sectors<sup>12</sup>. This has limited the potential for complementarities between the city centre and Nansha, which was expected to develop high-end manufacturing. Consequently, Nansha has been left to rely largely on its own capacity to develop manufacturing, while the above-mentioned plans provided relatively limited concrete support in this regard.

Overall, during this period, Nansha occupied a high position within national policy discourse—as a national-level new area and a pilot zone for free trade—yet these policies lacked clear and specific guidance regarding its concrete development path. Under this tension, a disjuncture emerged between Nansha's urban construction and the pace of population growth.

On the one hand, by the second decade of the twenty-first century, China's infrastructure sector had reached a high level of maturity, enabling Nansha to rapidly develop an extensive transportation network. By 2023, Nansha had completed two railway lines (the Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong High-Speed Railway and the Nansha Port Railway), two metro lines (Metro Lines 4 and 18), and nine expressways, with numerous additional projects under

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<sup>12</sup> Opinions on Advancing the Adjustment of Urban Industrial Structure, Sui Fu [2008] No. 8.

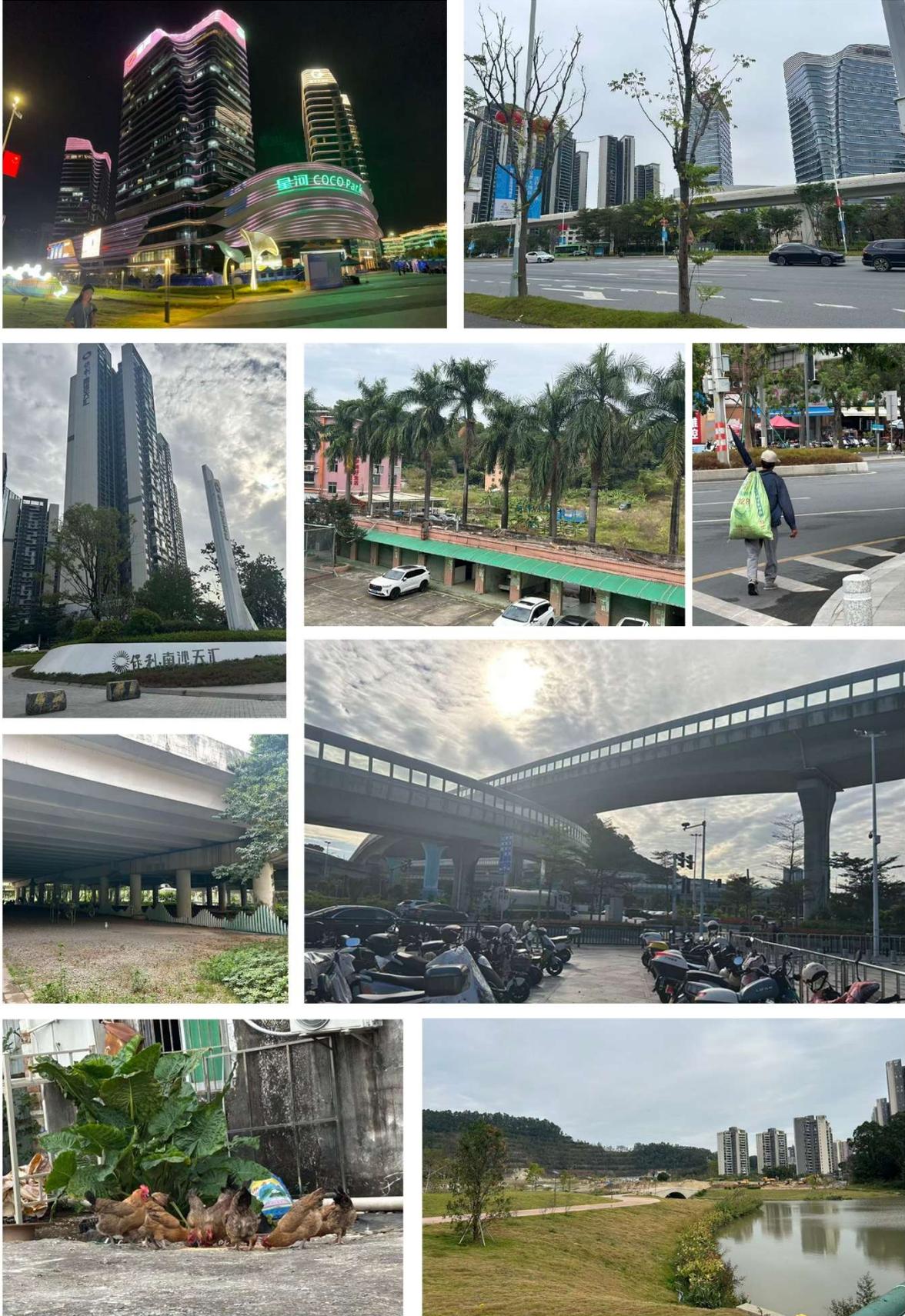


Fig.5 Collage of today's Nansha

construction<sup>13</sup>. Newly built roads, commercial housing developments, and shopping centres also appeared alongside long-established villages.

On the other hand, the Master Plan for the Guangzhou Nansha New Area (2012–2025) predicted that by 2020 the permanent resident population would reach between 1.7 and 1.9 million. However, according to the results of the 7<sup>th</sup> National Population Census, as of November 1st 2020, there was only 846 thousand permanent population in Nansha, less than half of the lower bound of the original prediction. Moreover, public facilities and municipal infrastructure had been planned according to the principle of ‘moderate advance’, based on the predicted total population of approximately two million. This substantial gap between population size and infrastructure provision contributed to the perception of Nansha as a ‘ghost city’ during this period.

### 3.2 The Vision

In 2019, the CPC Central Committee and the State Council issued the Outline Development Plan for the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, which pointed out that *‘development disparities within the Greater Bay Area remain significant, coordination and inclusiveness need to be strengthened, and in some regions and sectors, problems of homogeneous competition and misallocation of resources persist’*.

In 2021, the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan once again emphasized the need to *‘deepen cooperation between Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao, as well as broader Pan-Pearl River Delta regional cooperation, and to advance the construction of major Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao cooperation platforms such as Shenzhen Qianhai, Zhuhai Hengqin, Guangzhou Nansha, and the Shenzhen–Hong Kong Lok Ma Chau Loop’*.

Shortly thereafter, in 2022, the State Council issued the Overall Plan for Deepening Guangzhou Nansha’s Cooperation with Hong Kong and Macao toward the World (hereafter referred to as the Plan). Unlike earlier, more generalized development strategies, the Plan explicitly adopted a principle of “advancing step by step and using key points to drive broader development.” It designated three areas, Nansha Bay, the Qingsheng Hub, and the Nansha Hub, as pilot launch zones, with a combined area of 23 square kilometres.

The Qingsheng Hub is anchored by the Qingsheng High-Speed Rail Station, which is already served by the Guangzhou-Hong Kong-Shenzhen High-Speed Railway and connected to

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<sup>13</sup> Guangzhou Municipal Government, Deepening the ‘Hundred, Thousand, Ten Thousand Project’ in Nansha to Build a Transportation Hub in the Greater Bay Area, [https://www.gz.gov.cn/zt/nsyghzfa/gzxd/content/post\\_9235768.html](https://www.gz.gov.cn/zt/nsyghzfa/gzxd/content/post_9235768.html)

Metro Line 4. This area is planned to prioritize leading industries such as artificial intelligence and information technology.

The Nansha Hub, which is expected to become a major interchange for multiple rail lines, including the Nansha Port Railway, the Shenzhen-Maoming Railway, the Zhongshan-Nansha-Humen intercity line, the Zhaoqing-Shunde-Nansha intercity line, and Guangzhou Metro Line 18. This area has planned to prioritize technological innovation as its core development direction, with the aim of becoming a Guangdong-Hong Kong youth innovation and entrepreneurship base.

The Nansha Bay area is the earliest site of cooperation between Nansha and Hong Kong and Macao. It already has relatively mature supporting infrastructure and several Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao cooperative projects, including information technology parks, the Nansha Passenger Port, and the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. With ferry connections allowing access to Hong Kong within one hour, Nansha Bay has been designed as Guangzhou’s coastal international gateway, as well as a zone for international science and technology innovation cooperation and cultural and creative industries<sup>14</sup>.

Through the Plan, a clearer developmental pathway for Nansha began to emerge, relaying on existing and planned transportation infrastructure to foster science and technology-oriented innovation industries.

Under the requirements of the Plan, other central government departments introduced a series of supportive policies for Nansha. In 2023, the National Development and Reform Commission, together with the Ministry of Commerce and the State Administration for Market Regulation, jointly issued the Opinions on Supporting Guangzhou Nansha in Relaxing Market Access and Strengthening Regulatory System Reform (Fa Gai Ti Gai [2023] No. 1786). This document relaxed market access for integrated unmanned systems across sea, land, and air, and promoted the development of industries such as commercial aerospace, biomedicine, and marine science.

In 2025, five institutions—the People’s Bank of China, the National Financial Regulatory Administration, the China Securities Regulatory Commission, the State Administration of Foreign Exchange, and the Government of Guangdong Province, together issued the Opinions on Financial Support for Deepening Guangzhou Nansha’s All-Round Cooperation with Hong Kong and Macao toward the World. This policy further clarified the need to strengthen financial support for Nansha and to build it into a pilot demonstration zone for China’s financial sector’s opening-up. At the provincial and municipal levels, Guangdong Province and the City of Guangzhou also introduced a range of policies supporting technological entrepreneurship, financial investment, and talent attraction.

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<sup>14</sup> Nansha District People’s Government of Guangzhou, Three Pilot Launch Zones Press the ‘Fast-Forward Button’, [https://www.gzns.gov.cn/zwgk/rdzt/nanshafangan/nszxd/content/post\\_9054153.html](https://www.gzns.gov.cn/zwgk/rdzt/nanshafangan/nszxd/content/post_9054153.html)

The Plan projects that ‘by 2035, Nansha’s regional innovation and industrial transformation system will become more mature, with significantly enhanced capacity for the transfer and commercialization of international scientific and technological achievements; the production and living environment will be continuously improved, with public services reaching world-class standards; the number of Hong Kong and Macao residents in the area will increase markedly; and an internationally first-class business environment will be further established. Nansha will play a leading role in the Greater Bay Area’s participation in international cooperation and competition, work jointly with Hong Kong and Macao to build a high-level gateway for opening-up, and become an important platform for comprehensive Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao cooperation’.

Whether these goals can be achieved remains to be seen. However, it is clear that the central government’s commitment to Nansha has not diminished because of earlier setbacks. Rather, it signals an intention to continue supporting Nansha over the coming period.



Fig.6 The vision

## Chapter 4 Primary school admissions in Nansha

Given the current stage of development in Nansha, a number of challenges can be identified in the allocation of educational resources. On the one hand, as a relatively new area with strong policy support, Nansha is undergoing rapid urbanization, during which it has become crucial to manage evolving urban-rural dynamics. On the other hand, if Nansha is to pursue its development goals, it must attract talent from outside the region, and education is frequently mobilized as a key instrument in this process. How to address tensions between local residents and migrant populations therefore constitutes a major issue in the allocation of educational resources.

Traditionally, issues of this kind have been addressed through a standard developmental narrative, dating back to Deng Xiaoping's idea of 'letting some people get rich first', and later reframed through the notion of 'baking a bigger cake'. However, following China's achievement of the goal of building a moderately prosperous society in 2021, the government has shifted its policy priorities and no longer places economic growth above all other concerns. Moreover, Nansha is not only designated as an engine of regional development, but is also envisioned as 'a pilot zone for exploring new forms of urbanization'. Under these conditions, the government needed to seek new solutions for these longstanding tensions.

The aim of this chapter is to analyse the government's strategy for allocating educational resources through compulsory education enrolment policies.

As junior high school admissions require students to submit individual applications, and also some schools retain discretionary enrolment quotas for selecting high-performing students, this chapter mainly focuses on policies about primary school enrolment, which is predominantly allocated through government-administered mechanisms.

### 4.1 Eligibility and Admission Channels

According to the Implementation Guidelines for Compulsory Education School Admissions in Nansha District, Guangzhou (suinanjiaoguizi [2021] No.2), all children who meet the statutory age requirements are entitled to compulsory education. Children who are eligible to enrol in public primary schools in Nansha fall into the following categories:

(1) Children whose 'hukou and residence are consistent' (renhuyizhi, 人户一致)

It refers to one of the following two situations:

a) The child's registered hukou address is the same as the actual residence of their parents or legal guardians, and the parents or legal guardians own 100% of the property rights of that dwelling.

or

b) The child's hukou address is the same as that of their grandparents, the child has lived with them in the same household for more than three years, the dwelling is owned by the grandparents, and neither the parents nor the child owns any property in Guangzhou.

(2) Children with a Nansha hukou who do not meet the 'renhuyizhi' condition

(3) Children with non-Nansha Guangzhou hukou whose parents and children do not own property in their hukou district, but own a legally registered property in Nansha as their sole actual residence

(4) Policy-protected categories

This group includes:

Preferential protection groups, such as children of martyrs, firefighters, and orphans;

Special occupational groups, including children of workers in geological exploration, funeral services, sanitation, and Tibet-support programs;

Talent categories, including children of PhD holders, returned overseas students, and holders of provincial or municipal talent cards;

Overseas groups, including children of Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan residents and foreign nationals.

(5) Migrant children whose parents have lived in Nansha continuously for five years and paid social insurance in Guangzhou for five years

Their parents must also have stable employment and comply with family-planning policies.

According to the Implementation Measures for Compulsory Education of Migrant Children in Nansha District (suinanfubangui [2024] No.2), another category is added:

(6) Migrant children whose parents hold a Guangdong Residence Permit in Guangzhou for at least one continuous year

In 2025, following the introduction of the Several Measures on Promoting High-Quality Development of the Real Estate Market in Nansha District, another category was created:

(7) Children whose parents or grandparents (who have lived with the child for over three years) purchased newly built commercial housing in Nansha and hold 100% ownership of the property after 10 January 2025

There are three official admission channels in Nansha: neighbourhood-based admission (duikou, 对口入学), coordinated admission (tongchou, 统筹入学), and points-based admission (jifen, 积分入学).

Neighbourhood-based admission:

This channel applies only to Category (1) children ('renhuyizhi'). The government assigns each child to a designated primary school based on the child's registered residential address. Each residential area (housing estate or village) corresponds to one specific primary school, while one school may serve multiple residential areas. The correlation between residential areas and schools, together with each school's enrolment quota, is determined annually by the Nansha District Education Bureau before May, following principles of proximity and taking into account school capacity, population size, school distribution, and transportation conditions. Although the boundaries may be adjusted, provincial policy requires that major changes to school catchment areas must involve public consultation and advance notice, and once defined, they should remain relatively stable for a period of time<sup>15</sup>.

Coordinated placement:

After neighbourhood-based admission is completed, the education authority assigns all remaining eligible children to schools with remaining vacancies, following the principle of proximity. This channel applies to Categories (2), (3), (4), (5), and (7). Families cannot choose schools under this system, but the government guarantees placement in a public school.

Points-based admission

Only after the above two channels are completed can Categories (5) and (6) participate in points-based admission. The points score consists of two parts: Guangzhou municipal points, which follow a citywide scoring system also used for hukou applications and access to other public services. This system favours younger, wealthier, better educated, and higher skilled applicants<sup>16</sup>. Nansha district bonus points, which give greater weight to length of residence and employment in Nansha, and additional bonuses for employees of strategically important local enterprises.

Points-based admission is conducted in two rounds. Only the vacancies remaining after the first round are passed to the second round. In each round, applicants may list up to three preferred schools. Applicants are ranked by their total points. Starting from the highest scorer, the system checks whether their first-choice school still has vacancies. If yes, the applicant is admitted. If not, the system checks the second choice, then the third. If all three

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<sup>15</sup> Guiding Opinions of the Guangdong Provincial Department of Education on Further Regulating the Enrolment of Students in Ordinary Primary and Secondary Schools, Yuejiaoji [2020] No. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Notice of the Guangzhou Municipal People's Government on Issuing the Regulations on the Point-Based Service Management of Migrant Workers in Guangzhou, SuiFuGui [2021] No. 7.

options have no vacancy, the applicant is rejected for that round. Only after one applicant is processed does the system move to the next. In the case of tied scores, priority is given to applicants who have held residence permits for longer periods.<sup>17</sup>

In the first round, only Category (5) applicants (those whose parents have lived in Nansha for more than five years) may participate. Those who fail in the first round may join Category (6) applicants in the second round. As a result, Category (5) applicants can almost always get a place in a public school, as long as they do not list only the most competitive schools.

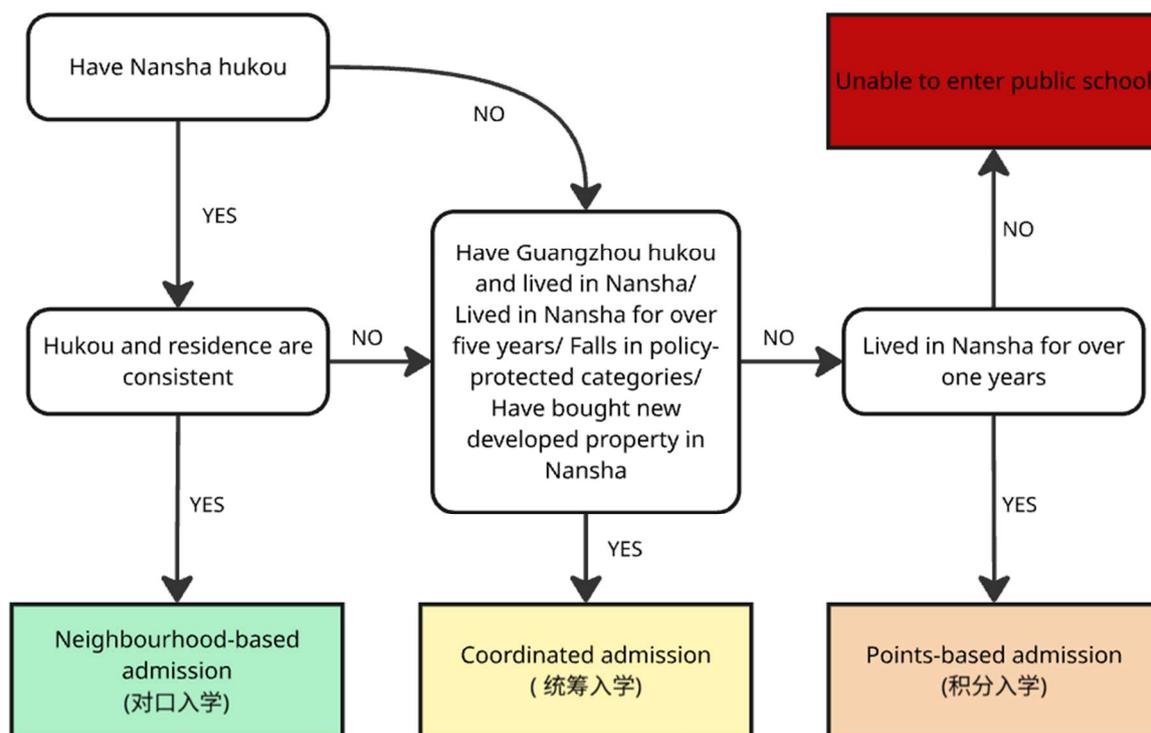


Fig.7 Admission channels

## 4.2 Who Can Get into Good Schools?

Almost all existing policies revolve around one central question: who is eligible to attend school. But schooling has never been a simple matter of access or no access. Especially under the highly competitive context of Chinese education, the quality of the school itself, or to what extent it can provide students with advantages along the pathway of upward social mobility through education, also matters a lot.

<sup>17</sup> Notice on Ensuring Compulsory Education for Children of Migrant Workers in Nansha District, Guangzhou in 2025, SuiNanJiao [2025] No. 134.

Because the zhongkao and the gaokao provide standardized, quantifiable results, the quality of junior high schools and high schools is relatively easy to assess. Primary schools, however, don't have those metrics, which makes it hard to tell differences in school quality. Even so, primary schools can still have informal rankings through their histories, official honours they have received, and the accumulated reputations produced by generations of students and parents through word of mouth. In Nansha, primary schools are commonly described using two popular labels: 'elite schools' (mingxiao, 名校) and 'village schools' (cunxiao, 村小). Neither term has a clear definition, and some schools fall into neither category. Generally speaking, elite schools refer to the best tier of schools, while village schools refer to the lowest tier.

Drawing on information from Guangdong government websites, news outlets, private media such as WeChat public accounts, social media platforms, and my own fieldwork, there is no one specific list of elite schools. However, schools widely regarded as elite tend to share one or more of the following characteristics.

First, they often have a long history. For example, Guangzhou Zhixin High School Nansha Campus was founded by Sun Yat-sen in 1921, while Nansha Primary School traces its origins to the Mingde Academy established in 1924. Both have histories of more than a hundred years. Their history not only implies a longer period of institutional development, but also means that these schools have produced many generations of graduates who are now embedded throughout the city's social hierarchy and across different sectors. Graduates of these schools are widely distributed across all levels and sectors in the city, which not only brings prestige to the schools but also sometimes leads to preferential policies.

Second, some schools are directly administered by higher-level institutions. For example, the Guangzhou Foreign Language School Affiliated School and the South China Normal University Affiliated Nansha Primary School. Guangzhou Foreign Language School is one of the most prestigious high schools in the city, and South China Normal University is the leading teacher training university in Guangdong. It is widely believed that because they have stronger educational resources and professional expertise, they will bring more advanced and forward-looking educational practices to their affiliated primary schools.

Third, some schools enjoy a higher administrative status. Most public primary schools are managed by the district education bureau, but a small number are under direct control of the municipal level administration. People believe that this is a sign of greater government attention and, consequently, a higher likelihood of preferential resource allocation. Nansha Bay Area Experimental School is one such example. Although it does not belong to either of the two categories above, it was jointly established by the Nansha District Government and the Guangzhou Municipal Education Bureau, and is therefore also widely recognised as an elite school.

By contrast, the definition of village schools is even more ambiguous. The word ‘cunxiao’ literally means rural primary schools. Many of Nansha’s schools were established in the early years of the People’s Republic of China to meet the educational needs of villages. They are usually named after their corresponding villages and continue to serve as the designated schools for children from those villages. For example, Taishi Village corresponds to Taishi Primary School, and Dajian Village to Dajian Primary School. These are uncontroversially considered village schools. They are widely perceived as having poor resources, low levels of government attention, and weaker student performance. As a result, the term village school has gradually become a generalized label for ‘bad schools’, and any school that is not widely recognized as elite may be described in this way on the internet.

This was the older landscape of Nansha’s primary schools. However, with Nansha’s rapid development and population growth, educational provision has necessarily expanded. According to Nansha’s official primary school enrolment plans, in 2020 the district had 65 public primary schools offering 10606 places, in 2025 this had increased to 79 schools and 16020 places. These newly established schools were, by definition, outside the traditional hierarchy. Together with the introduction of group-based schooling reforms (jituanhuabanxue, 集团化办学), the distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ schools has become even more blurred.

The group-based schooling refers to a model in which a high-quality school functions as a core brand and expands through branch campuses, trusteeship arrangements, joint operations, and educational alliances, therefore educational resources can be shared between elite schools, ordinary schools, and newly established schools.

The idea itself originated in the 90s, but it was only widely promoted after the 2019 Opinions of the State Council on Deepening Education and Teaching Reform and Comprehensively Improving the Quality of Compulsory Education, which called for ‘giving full play to the exemplary and radiating role of high-quality schools, improving mechanisms such as strong-school–weak-school partnerships and urban–rural paired assistance, and fostering the growth of new high-quality schools.’ In 2020, Guangdong’s Guiding Opinions on Promoting Group-based Schooling in Primary and Secondary Schools and Kindergartens (Yuejiaojiban [2020] No. 19) set the target of establishing no fewer than 100 education groups by 2022.

Under this policy framework, all of Nansha’s recognized elite schools have taken the lead in forming education groups and opening multiple branch campuses and partner schools. Nansha Primary School, long known locally as a good school, now has five institutions bearing its name: the main campus, the Zhujiang Bay campus, the Times campus, Jinye Primary School of the Nansha Primary School Education Group, and Luyi Primary School of the same group. Some of these are newly built, while others are pre-existing schools that were later incorporated into the group. Under such arrangements, it has become increasingly difficult to assess differences in school quality.

### 4.3 The Certainty and Ambiguity

Overall, Nansha's primary school enrolment policies are highly deterministic when it comes to whether a child can get into public schools. Mechanisms such as neighbourhood-based admission, coordinated admission, the two-round application system for families with over five years of residence, and the nearly 60 percent increase in school places over five years together ensure that children from the district's resident population are, in principle, guaranteed access to schooling.

On the other hand, when it comes to who can attend a good school, and how, policy becomes really ambiguous. Although children from households with matched hukou and housing are assigned specific designated schools, these boundaries are not fixed and may change from year to year. For coordinated admission, the school a child is assigned to depends entirely on the education bureau's internal decisions, and the process remains a completely black box. Also, although group-based schooling formally requires resources to be shared within education groups, there are no explicit rules governing how such resources should be distributed, and how to achieve that in practice.

While it cannot be definitively stated that this ambiguity itself was one of the objectives of the group-based schooling policies, it would be technically easy for the government to eliminate it, by just simply introducing a standardized test at the primary level.

In fact, they not only didn't do that, but they further restricted the number of standardized tests in compulsory education. As a part of the Double Reduction Policy, The 'Notice from the General Office of the Ministry of Education on Further Strengthening the Management of Daily Examinations in Primary and Secondary Schools' (Jiaojiting [2025] No. 3) requires that written examinations be prohibited for grades one and two in primary school, and other grades can only have one in-school final exam per semester, with cross-school unified examinations strictly prohibited. Furthermore, exam results can no longer be published as scores, but only as grades, and ranking is prohibited as well. In other words, what was originally 'You got 95 in math, ranking fifth in your class' has now become 'You got an A in math.' This at least proves that the government does indeed want to further blur the quality differences between public schools.

## Chapter 5 Path to a Clearer Future

Although the current compulsory education policies in Nansha blur the differences among public schools and make it difficult for competition to take place at the primary-school level, policies are still just policies. What I really care about is whether parents therefore give up this kind of competition, where they get their information from, and how they process and use that information.

To figure this out, I came to Nansha. At first, I planned to interview local parents to learn about how they saw the educational situation there. After being turned down again and again, some of them even looked at me with panic in their eyes, I gave up on that idea. However, it was not solely because of the refusals. More importantly, I realised that if I myself were in their position, I would not answer those questions either, partly to protect my own privacy, and partly to protect the city and the country I live in.

Therefore, I changed my strategy. I asked myself: if I were a young parent about to graduate from a master's programme, planning to settle in Nansha and therefore needing to understand local educational resources in order to make sure my child could receive a good education, how would I collect information? With this thought in my mind, I began to observe local schools and talk to people there.

This approach had several advantages. First, this really is the most reasonable reason for anyone to want to learn about a school. In fact, as a 26-year-old woman, most of the time I did not even need to explain myself, people would naturally assume that I was a young mom choosing a school for my own child. Second, it ensured that the information I received was the same as what ordinary parents would get. This was especially important when I talked to people in sales related jobs: if they knew I was asking these questions for a thesis, they would certainly answer with more caution, instead of treating me like how they treat other customers. Finally, although I do not have children, I genuinely do have plans that maybe one day I would work and live in that area after graduation, so this approach was even somewhat sincere.

### **5.1 The Maze of 'Good Schools'**

Before visiting each school, I would look up its history, designated area, education group, facilities, and online reputation, and form a rough expectation of its quality and what I may see and hear there. But once I actually went there and talked to people, I was always surprised by the answers I received. Once I even heard two completely opposite opinions in a row.

Huannan Normal University Affiliated Nansha Fengting Primary School (hereafter 'School T') is a primary school jointly run by South China Normal University and the Nansha government. It only started enrolling students in 2024. Its designated catchment area includes just two places: Tingjiao Village and Poly Tianhui, a commercial housing estate developed by the Poly Group. The school itself was built by Poly as part of the Tingjiao Village redevelopment project. The entire project is located on the seaside area directly opposite the original village, which the Nansha government hopes to turn into a 'Creative Gateway', focused on arts, creative industries, and cultural and sports services.

When I arrived at Tingjiao Village, I found that it had mostly already been demolished. Grass was growing over large empty lands, and only a few scattered houses were still there with people living inside. The newly built apartments and the school were all on the other side of the road, I could even see the buildings from this side. But the problem was that I had no idea how to cross the road.

As someone born and raised in Beijing, I always thought I was used to long pedestrian bridges and underground passages. After all, roads with six lanes in each direction are not unusual in my city. But the road separating the village from the new district was wider and more chaotic than anything I had ever seen, to a point it was slightly revolting. Three levels of traffic, five different directions of elevated lanes, more than twenty lanes divided by green belts, it was impossible to see how to get across. On top of that, because of all the construction in Nansha, there were far too many trucks on the road, and I did not dare to just cross it directly, for they might run over me without even noticing. For the first time in my life, I had to ask for directions just to cross a street.

Next to the now empty village committee building, I saw a small security booth with two men inside. One looked to be in his twenties, the other in his forties. I asked them whether School T was across the street and how I should get there. The younger one kindly showed me the way.

Then I asked, 'Do you know what School T is like? Is it a good primary school?'

The young man replied, 'Not really sure. It's only been open for two years. It's probably okay.'

I asked again, 'Isn't it affiliated with South China Normal University?'

While the young man smiled awkwardly, not knowing what to say, the middle-aged man suddenly joined in. He asked me, 'Are you going to buy a house, or you already bought one?'

I said I had not bought yet.

He immediately became animated, not by anger, more like he was excited to give his opinions. 'How could that be a good school? It's just something real-estate developers build

to sell apartments. What kind of good school could it be? Did anyone famous graduated from there?’

‘It’s only been open for two years, there won’t be famous graduates then I guess. But doesn’t South China Normal University manage it?’ I asked.

‘Manage it? It’s just using their name, you know, it’s just a label! As long as you pay enough, you get to use the name. Nobody actually manages anything. It’s an advertisement for the houses’ He went on talking confidently.

‘Why do you think that? Do you have family studying there?’ I asked.

He suddenly smiled and lowered his voice a bit, ‘It’s just what I think.’

At that moment, the younger man, who had been silent, started speaking to him in Cantonese. I could not really understand their words, but I could tell that the younger man was saying that the school was not that bad, while the older one disagreed. In the end, the younger man told me that the traditional elite schools in the city centre were the real good ones. It was a hot day and I was sweating, he even gave me a bottle of water before I left.

Following his directions, I walked toward the school, crossing several zebra crossings and narrow pedestrian bridges. Pushing a heavy shared bike, I felt as if I were climbing a mountain. I also took a wrong turn because everything was so confusing. In the end, it took me almost half an hour to reach my destination. School T was surrounded by construction sites, at the end of a brand new road that was only finished on one side.

I arrived a bit early, before school was out. Only an elderly woman was sitting on a stone block at the school gate. When she saw me, she smiled. So I walked toward and sat down next to her and asked if she was waiting for a child. She said she was picking up her grandson. We chatted for a while. I learned that she was not a local resident and only had three or four years of primary education, but her son had done well in school and managed to buy a home and settle in Nansha, bringing her to live with them.

I asked her whether this was a good school.

‘This school is good. It’s not a village school. There’s a village school even closer to our home, but we chose this one on purpose.’ She pointed in the direction of her home. ‘My son chose it.’

Then I asked her, since this school is affiliated with South China Normal University, what exactly is the university in charge of?

She replied, ‘Oh, they are in charge of the education.’

When I asked this, I had all kinds of possible answers in my head-curriculum design, teacher rotation, shared lesson planning, and so on. I did not expect a very detailed answer from a parent, but I also did not expect to hear the simple word ‘the education’. I suddenly realised

that in my mind, education is something that can be broken down into components and analysed, but in her mind, it might just be a complete black box.

My surprise must have shown on my face, and she probably misunderstood me. So she suddenly stood up, pointed at the sign above the school gate that read 'South China Normal University Affiliated Nansha Fengting Primary School', and said, 'Look, it's written right there, it said South China Normal University. The government is watching it. It can't be fake, right?'

Later I realised that these two opinions actually came from the same fact: this school is a government-university project built as part of a real-estate development. It's just one person chose to trust the government and therefore thought it must be a good school, the other distrusted real-estate developers and therefore thought it must be a bad one. Another possible factor contributing to this contradiction is that, compared to other affiliated primary schools of South China Normal University, this school experienced some setbacks in its early stages of establishment, which will be discussed in detail later.

However, not all parents were completely unaware of what education groups are actually doing. A young mother outside School T told me that the principal of the school had been sent by South China Normal University. Then she added, 'My daughter's class advisor even has a master's degree.'

Among the parents I talked to, I also found some who, when talking about education, did not look outward for information but instead started to reflect on themselves and their children.

Guangdong Second Normal University Affiliated Nansha Dongwan Primary School (hereafter 'School G') was originally called Dongwan Primary School and was founded in 1950 as the village school of Dongwan Village. In 2019 it joined the Jinlong Primary School Group, and in 2022 it was taken over by Guangdong Second Normal University. In theory, after being renamed, School G should no longer count as a village school. But because neither Jinlong Primary School nor Guangdong Second Normal University is considered particularly prestigious, joining their group did not significantly improve the school's reputation. Moreover, because the school has no designated catchment area and relies entirely on coordinated admission or points-based admission, it is even more widely regarded as a bad school. After all, everyone knows that good schools raise property values in their designated areas.

I approached a father sitting on the steps outside School G, playing with his phone. Through chatting I learnt that he was a local resident with two children. His older son was already an adult, and his younger son was studying at School G. When I asked him what he thought of the school, he honestly said that it was just a village school.

I then asked whether the school had changed after joining an education group. Instead of answering directly, he said, 'The school is fine, but my son just isn't good at studying, he is just not talented. My older son was also bad at school, he didn't even take the gaokao (which means he didn't get into a regular high school after the zhongkao). The younger one is the same, too naughty.'

I did not know what to say for a second. Seeing that I was silent, he continued, sharing his thoughts about education.

'When I was young, I also went out to work in other places, like Hebei. I think studying is something you have to 'juan'(卷). Only by 'juan' can you produce talent. My son just isn't cut out for that.'

The word 'juan' or 'neijuan' often translated as 'involution', refers to people competing fiercely for limited resources, exhausting themselves without increasing overall returns. In this context, it could be roughly translated into let a student study for 16 hours a day. What he was really saying was that he believed, and could calmly accept, that his child would not be able to achieve upward mobility through education, and that he thought this was because his child lacked both talent and effort.

In contrast, there was another mother outside School G. I did not really speak to her, but I overheard her conversation with her daughter. Or rather, I overheard what she said, because she was very loud and her daughter spoke very softly.

She first asked whether her daughter still had a headache. After repeatedly confirming that she didn't, she said, 'If your head doesn't hurt, why did you ask me to cancel today's course? If it doesn't hurt, you should go to the basketball course. What did I teach you? Great people are those who persist. Since you don't have a fever anymore, why can't you just push through?'

The child murmured something, probably saying that her head still hurt a little bit.

Her mother became even angrier. 'With such a little discomfort you won't go to class? Why can't you persist a bit more? Besides, your headache is because you go to bed too late. Why do you spend so long on your homework every day? Why don't you listen more carefully when I explain things to you?'

They then moved on to everyday matters-when she drank her milk, what she had for lunch. I listened while looking at the skinny little girl, she couldn't be more than eight years old. I was really wondering why a basketball class was so important that she had to attend even when she was still unwell.

After a while, the mother returned to the topic. 'You know why I make you persist? Because when you're not studying, other people are. And then you fall behind.'

She paused for a few seconds, then added, 'Falling behind means that in the future other people will be driving big cars, and you'll only be driving a small one. So, if you want a better life in the future, you have to persist.'

I was so shocked by this sentence that I began to look around. Then I noticed that there was a circular driveway next to the school gate. Some parents drove in, made a loop, honked their horns at the side that was close to the school, and their children would run out, get into the car, and be driven away without the parents ever stepping out. Meanwhile, this mother had not taken off the pink electric scooter helmet on her head the whole time. 'Falling behind means others drive big cars and you drive small ones' might have been a childlike way of explaining things, but it might also have been her way of expressing anxieties and suffering from her own life. She desperately wanted her child to change her life through education, but had little idea how the whole system works, so all she could do was demand that her daughter try a bit harder and endure it for a bit more.

Under the current system, not only do parents have a strong need to understand whether a school is good or bad, schools themselves, as providers of education, also have a need to prove that they are 'good schools', or even to compete for the power to define what counts as a 'good school'. However, the Double Reduction policy has restricted standardized testing, depriving schools of the most straightforward way to advertise themselves. Moreover, public schools are not commercial, profit-oriented institutions. They do not operate according to the logic of 'anything not explicitly forbidden is allowed', rather they must take good consideration of the real purposes of those policies. As a result, they normally do not try to exploit loopholes by finding other ways to evaluate students' exam performance. Therefore, they have turned to promoting their after-school programs instead.

After-school programs refer to activities that students may choose to attend after regular classes end. In essence, they are a service provided by schools to accommodate parents who finish work late and cannot pick up their children on time. Because policy prohibits these programs from teaching content directly related to the formal curriculum, there are normally two kinds of after-school programmes: supervised self-study and interest-based courses, such as dance or drawing.

Outside Primary School G, there is a large digital screen that continuously plays videos showcasing its after-school programs. One day I arrived too early, before anyone else was there, and stood watching the videos on repeat. They displayed more than a dozen different programs. In addition to common ones like badminton, basketball, and painting, there were also origami, robotics, and even agricultural courses. Watching a group of children harvesting cucumbers they had grown themselves in a field, I said to myself that today's

children are truly fortunate. When I was in primary school, although we also had interesting classes, most students went straight to off-campus math or English tutoring after school.

If the after-school programs at Primary School G only made me feel a little envious, what I saw at another school was on an entirely different level.

The Dongyue Bay Campus of South China Normal University Affiliated Nansha Primary School (hereafter “School D”) was established in 2022. Although it is also managed by South China Normal University like School T, administratively it is not treated as an independent primary school, but rather as a campus of the traditional prestigious school ‘South China Normal University Affiliated Nansha Primary School’. This school was introduced as a supporting facility for the Xinghe Group’s Dongyue Bay residential development, which itself was built on the original site of Dongwan Village, mentioned earlier, that has already been demolished. As a result, the school’s designated catchment area includes Xinghe Dongyue Bay, Dongwan Village, and three other commercial housing estates.

Unlike Primary School G, there was no promotional screen at the entrance of School D. Instead, the list of after-school programs was printed on three separate sheets of paper and posted near different exits to make it convenient for parents picking up their children. I counted the number, there were 87 programs in total. This was a staggering number. Since the school was designed to have only 24 classes in total. Even at full capacity, with about 40 students per class, that would amount to fewer than a thousand students. And in fact, since the school has only been open for four years, it currently has no more than 16 classes.

Looking more closely at the list, I noticed that ‘graphical programming’ alone was offered in three levels: Basic A, Basic B, and Advanced. Basketball had four levels: A, B, C, and Advanced. In the arts category, beyond common subjects like hard-pen calligraphy, there were also highly niche courses such as paper quilling and cloisonné enamel craft. Some course names I could not even understand at all, such as Radio Direction Finding M/W8 and Radio Direction Finding M/W10.

For a brief moment, I was genuinely persuaded by this list of courses, to the point that I even found myself thinking that if I were to have children in the future, and sent them to a school like this, I might be able to feel at ease. But I quickly realised that, at the end of the day, ‘programming’ or ‘advanced graphical programming’ were both just primary school students spending a few hours after school each week learning basic computer skills. This is not a university major. But language itself always has this kind of power, the same thing, when phrased differently, will attract completely different groups of people.

Later, I visited a truly rural village school surrounded by banana fields. At the entrance, there was a utility pole with a small colourful advertisement attached to it. It read: ‘Elite After-School Program Now Enrolling’, followed by a QR code. I scanned the code and was taken to the program’s WeChat page, which showed videos of children attending the program. It seemed to be doing fairly good business.

Advanced Visual Programming Club	Basketball Basics Club A	Fancy Rope Skipping Team B	Hard Pen Calligraphy Basics Club B
Visual Programming Basics A Club	Basketball Basics Club B	Chinese Martial Arts Team	Advanced Hard Pen Calligraphy Club
Visual Programming Basics B Club	Basketball Basics Club C	Kayaking	Cantonese Nursery Rhymes Club
Young Makers Club	Advanced Basketball Club	Optimist Sailing	Street Dance Club
Aeromodelling Basics Club	Badminton Basics Club A	School Tennis Team	Chinese Dance Club
Advanced Aeromodelling Club	Badminton Basics Club B	Track and Field Team A	Latin Dance Basics Club
Basic Electronics Club	Advanced Badminton Club	Track and Field Team B	Advanced Latin Dance Club
Advanced Electronics Club	Football (Soccer) Basics Club	Radio Direction Finding M/W8	Cloisonné Enamel Art Club
After-school Care (Grade 1)	Advanced Football (Soccer) Club	Radio Direction Finding M/W10	Cantonese Opera School Team
After-school Care (Grade 2)	Roller Skating Basics Club	Lion Dance	Comprehensive Art Team A
After-school Care (Grade 3)	Advanced Roller Skating Club	Swimming Team A	Comprehensive Art Team B
After-school Care (Grade 4)	Fancy Rope Skipping Basics Club	Swimming Team B	Saxophone Team A
Go (Weiqi) Basics Club	Advanced Fancy Rope Skipping Club	Orienteering	Saxophone Team B
Advanced Go (Weiqi) Club	Cheerleading Club A	Creative Art Basics Club	Song and Dance Performance Team
Chess Basics Club	Cheerleading Club B	Advanced Creative Art Club	Choir Team A
Advanced Chess Club	Physical Fitness Club A	Children's Chinese Painting Club	Choir Team B
Young Thinkers Club	Physical Fitness Club B	Intangible Cultural Heritage Paper-cutting Club	Chinese Folk Music Team
Children's Emotional Intelligence Club	School Football Team A	Quilling Handicraft Club	Brush Calligraphy
Huarong Puzzle Club	School Football Team B	Young Hosts Basics Club	English Drama
Rubik's Cube Club A	Girls' School Football Team	Advanced Young Hosts Club	Whole-Book Reading Team A
Rubik's Cube Club B	Fancy Rope Skipping Team A	Hard Pen Calligraphy Basics Club A	Whole-Book Reading Team B

Table.2 List of after school classes of School D

Which is more beneficial to a child's development: an 'Elite' after-school program or a Radio Direction Finding M/W8 course, is not my place to determine. What can be sure is that parents who would send their children to Radio Direction Finding M/W8 would almost certainly not send them to a program called 'Elite' that offers no information beyond its name. Conversely, those who accept this kind of naming are also very likely to see that the Radio Direction Finding M/W8 course is just a waste of time.

In the era when primary school entrance exams and middle school entrance exams were widespread, everyone was competing on the same track. Hard barriers such as household registration, wealth, parental time and energy, and children's talents separated people from one another. Nowadays, that track has turned into a maze. Parents' capacity to access information, their understanding of education, their habits of language use, and the industries and social classes they belong to have become soft barriers, quietly guiding people toward different paths, almost without their noticing.

## **5.2 The Authority to Interpret Policy**

In fact, even parents who are highly attentive to education will rarely read official policy documents that were released by the government directly. Instead, whenever a new education related policy is introduced, most parents learn about it through two primary channels: private educational institutions and real estate sales agents.

One day, while I was sitting outside a school gate taking notes for my fieldwork, with several parents sitting nearby waiting for their children to finish school. Suddenly, a man in a suit approached us. He was holding a QR code in one hand and a small gift bag in the other, asking people to add him on WeChat in exchange for a small giveaway. After I added him, I was quickly invited into a group chat called 'Nansha Parents Information Group 1', which had more than two hundred members.

This group was for selling various types of tutoring services. Every day or two, staff members would post summaries of key exam points, revision materials, information about 'star teachers', and advertisements for courses, covering all educational stages from Grade One to senior high school. At the same time, these staff members also provided free explanations of education policies. Rather than answering questions casually in the group chat, they were very serious, organized formal policy briefing sessions, inviting parents to register and attend offline lectures.

Their credibility among parents came not only from their professional analysis of policy texts, but also from the belief that, through their involvement in extracurricular tutoring, they had access to a large number of real cases. By observing students' eventual outcomes, they were seen as capable of inferring the unspoken rules and implicit mechanisms that

## 2026 Winter Break Catch-Up Plan (Grade 5)

	TIME	TASK	SUBJECT	DURATION	周一	周
MORNING	8:00-8:30	wake up	english song, chinese playlist	30 min		
	8:30-9:00	breakfast	/	30 min		
	9:00-9:30	morning reading	ancient poems in textbooks	30 min		
			textbooks alphabet			
			english vocabulary			
	9:30-9:40		rest	10 min		
	9:40-10:10	winter vacation homework	chinese, math	30 min		
	10:10-10:20		rest	10 min		
	10:30-10:50		homework english, science	30 min		
	10:50-11:10	workout	outdoor	20 min		
	11:10-11:40	preview	chinese texts, new words, vocabulary, math formulas, English vocabulary texts	30 min		
11:40-11:50		rest	10 min			
11:50-12:10	practice calligraphy	textbook vocabulary, daily beautiful articles	30 min			
NOON	12:10-12:40		lunch	30 min		
	12:40-13:30		rest	50 min		
AFTERNOON	13:30-14:00	review	chinese, math, english	1 hour		
	14:00-14:10		rest	10 min		
	14:20-14:50	advanced learning	english leveled reading, phonics	30 min		
	14:50-15:50	outdoor activity		1 hour		
	15:50-16:20	reading	chinese, english	30 min		
	16:20-16:30		rest	10 min		
	16:30-17:00	preview	textbook	30 min		
17:00-17:30	advanced learning	ancient chinese	30 min			
EVENING	17:30-18:00		dinner	30 min		
	18:00-18:30	parent-child time	parent-child time	30 min		
	18:30-19:00	reading	extracurricular reading	30 min		
	19:00-19:30	advanced learning	documentary	30 min		
	19:30-19:50		wash up	20 min		
	19:50-20:20		english, chinese listening	30 min		
	20:20-20:40	parent-child time	parent-child time	20 min		
20:40-21:00		sleep	20 min			

Fig.8 Winter holiday schedule for fifth grade students from Wechat group

were not explicitly stated in policy documents. As a result, although the group chat itself was usually silent, photographs posted by the staff members afterward showed that policy briefing sessions were consistently well attended.

However, since educational institutions typically begin interacting with students from the first grade onward, their policy analysis tended to focus on transitions such as primary-to-junior-high admission and the high school entrance examination. When it came to primary school enrolment, which is most closely tied to residential location, real estate agents were often considered the most knowledgeable.

Among real estate professionals, agents dealing in second-hand housing were also keen to study and analyse education policies. However, sales staff working for property developers were generally regarded as more trustworthy, as they were believed to have access to first-hand information regarding cooperation between their companies, schools, and government departments. During my time in Nansha, both Poly Tianhui and Xinghe Dongyue Bay had new housing units on sale, so I visited the sales offices of both developments and spoke with their sales representatives.

At the Poly Tianhui sales office, the salesperson enthusiastically introduced the primary school affiliated with their development-the School T mentioned earlier, she described it as an excellent school established in cooperation with a prestigious university. However, she did not address differences in enrolment policies related to household registration status. Instead, she repeatedly emphasized that most property owners in the development would be assigned to that school. Only after I repeated questioning about the exact policies related to us, did she mention the names of several other primary schools to which the area might be allocated through coordinated admission.

She also explained other policies, which largely matched what I already knew and therefore I will not be repeated here. What was particularly interesting was her reaction when I asked whether there were resettlement housing units within the development. She suddenly flinched, as if she had touched something really hot that burnt her finger, and replied, 'All developments in Nansha have resettlement housing.'

I was quite sure that my question carried no negative implication, so her reaction surprised me a bit. Therefore, I continued by asking, 'Then do their children attend the same school as ours?'

With a somewhat helpless expression, she answered, 'Yes. They meet the 'hukou-residence consistency' requirement, so their children are actually prioritized ahead of yours.'

At the time, I sensed that she didn't want to continue the conversation about the school, but I wasn't sure why. Later, I searched for more news related to School T and learned what had happened.

Several years earlier, when the development was first started to sell, Poly had publicly promoted the project by promising to introduce an upgraded 'prestigious school'. Yet by May 2024, when the government released the official enrolment announcement before the primary school admissions, the school had still not been incorporated into any high quality education group. In official documents, it was still referred to as 'Primary School of the Tingjiao Old Village Redevelopment Project (provisional name)'.

Homeowners in the development were outraged. Many hung red banners from their windows reading slogans such as 'Return Our Prestigious School', and began filing complaints with government regulatory agencies, accusing Poly of false advertising. After a month of sustained protest, South China Normal University formally signed an agreement to take over the management of T Primary School.

This incident was not unique in Nansha. In 2025, a similar situation occurred on Hengli Island. A school promised by a developer as a prestigious institution was revealed in the government's pre-enrolment announcement to be an ordinary school, School F. Homeowners from multiple nearby developments that are designated to that school started to hang out banners, some of which were even more radical in the tone, not only demanding 'No Village Schools' and 'Return Our Prestigious School', but also slogans such as 'The Nansha Plan Has Become an Illusion' and 'How Can the Financial Island Be Paired with a Village School', directly challenging government planning narratives.

Parents repeatedly contacted regulatory authorities and education departments. After four months of negotiations, just one week before the school year started, it was finally confirmed that the school would be taken over by the Chinese Academy of Educational Sciences, a prestigious university.

Compared with the Poly salesperson, the Xinghe sales representative appeared much more composed and confident. In fact, when he began introducing his company's project, his opening line was: 'Xinghe is a model private enterprise!' He then pointed at a massive city map on the wall, explaining how the commercial facilities his company had introduced would enhance the overall quality of urban life and increase the commercial value of surrounding developments.

When I asked about enrolment policies, he provided a very detailed explanation of the various admission routes. Based on my personal situation, he even recommended that I apply for the Nansha Talent Card, explaining that this would allow enrolment through coordinated admission rather than the point based one. I then asked about resettlement households. He assured me that there was no need to worry, explaining that School D had been introduced by Xinghe itself, therefore, priority would be given to ensuring successful enrolment for homeowners in the development.

'But resettlement households meet the hukou-residence consistency requirement. If places are really limited, shouldn't they be prioritized before us?' I asked.

'If that happens,' he replied, 'we would first open additional classes and increase enrolment quotas. If that still isn't enough, then when the education department formulates its allocation plan, resettlement households would be reassigned to other school zones. In any case, priority will be given to ensuring that homeowners' children are enrolled.'

Later, I brought up the cases of School T and School F, and asked him whether he thought those schools were eventually able to secure reputable education groups because it had been planned that way all along, or because of the actions taken by those parents.

He looked surprised by the question, as if he found me being really naive. 'Of course it was because of the parents,' he replied.

As I left the sales office, I noticed countless display boards nearby introducing government policies related to Nansha. The content ranged from State Council directives on the establishment of the new district to Nansha's repositioning under the current trade war between the US and China. Gradually, the relationship between these elements became clear to me.

Once the government rendered enrolment policies ambiguous, the authority to interpret them was effectively devolved. Part of this interpretive power was taken up by educational institutions, but a much larger portion fell into the hands of real estate developers. Developers, based on their contributions to urban construction, are able to negotiate with the government. But more importantly, as sellers, when exercising this interpretive authority, they must rely on the credibility of the government to gain their customers' trust. As a result, they actively display the policy support they have received, and may even disclose certain unwritten rules that lie beyond formal policy.

Because customers have received such information at the time of their purchase, later when discrepancies happen between developers' promises and actual outcomes, they tend to bypass the developers and hold the government directly accountable. Each time, the government intervenes to resolve the issue by introducing new education groups, and they don't even impose significant penalties on the developers. This suggests that the government tacitly accepts this mechanism.



## Chapter 6 Becoming a member of the city

In the preceding chapters, I have repeatedly emphasized the role of primary schools in the competitive examination system and discussed their 'quality' based on this. However, in the end of the day, schools are not just factories that produce students with high exams performance, as places where generations of children live and learn, they also have their own unique place in the city, which is what I want to discuss in this chapter.

### 6.1 Safe Disciplinary and Good Chaos

Nansha is located in Guangdong Province in southern China. Although most local residents can speak Mandarin, Cantonese is the language used in everyday life. I do not speak Cantonese at all, and my accent clearly marks me as someone from northern China. Therefore, before going to Nansha, I expected communication with local residents to be really difficult, and assumed that I would find it easier to talk to migrants, for after all I am also an 'outsider' myself.

But once I actually arrived in Nansha, I realized that things were completely different from what I had imagined.

As mentioned earlier, School D is located among several newly built commercial housing estates, therefore, its students are mostly children of homeowners in those developments. One day I arrived shortly before school dismissal, hoping to chat with parents who were waiting to pick up their children. But when I got there, I started to hesitate. At most schools I visited, parents waiting at dismissal time would chat in small groups of three or four. But at the gate of D School, parents did not talk to each other at all. Even as more people arrived and the small square in front of the school gradually filled up, everyone remained silent, looking at their own phones, no one was talking at all.

The scene made me nervous, but eventually I gathered the courage to approach a few parents and asked some questions about the school. Their reactions were similar, almost all of them responded to my question with another question, what do you want or why are you asking this?

I explained that I had just come from a real estate sales office and wanted to learn more about the designated school. Even then, the answers I received remained vague: 'It's okay', 'My child only just started school, so it's hard to say', 'What difference does it make, it's just a primary school'. When answering my questions, they rarely even look at me directly. Their bodies were turned slightly away, facing me with their shoulders, and their eyes either fixed on their phones or staring at the school gate, clearly showing me that they would rather not continue the conversation.

Not wanting to appear suspicious, I gave up after a few attempts and found a place to stand, scrolling through my phone like everyone else, quietly waiting for dismissal.

Because of after school care programs, dismissal at Nansha's primary schools happens in multiple waves. The earliest dismissal is usually around 3:30 p.m. for students who do not attend after school programs. Since most parents get off work late, however, the real peak is the 6:00 p.m. wave.

In front of School D, there are movable metal barriers surround the entrance, dividing the small square into an inner and an outer area. As six o'clock approached, several security guards stepped out of the school, wearing uniforms and helmets and carrying riot control forks. They stood at the three exits formed by the barriers.

At 5:50 p.m., students began to walk out in groups, each class led by a teacher. After reaching the gate, they did not exit immediately. Instead, they lined up inside the barriers, two by two, waiting for announcements from the speaker.

At exactly six o'clock, the loudspeaker came on: 'Grade Three after school class is now dismissed, dismiss at exit A'. 'Girls' martial arts school team is now dismissed, dismissed at exit B'. 'Song and dance performance team is now dismissed, dismissed at exit C'. 'Cloisonné workshop class is now dismissed, dismissed at exit A'. Each group, once called, was led to the designated exit by a teacher holding a sign with the group's name, such as 'Grade Three After School Class'. At the exit, some teachers high fived each child, and then the children sprinted toward their parents. (fig.11)

Children and parents chatted and laughed as they left, but no one lingered in the square. Everyone moved really quickly. By 6:15 p.m., the square was completely empty. There were no parents still waiting, no children unable to find their parents, not even a single piece of trash on the ground.

This pervasive sense of discipline made don't know what I was feeling. On the one hand, I genuinely wondered whether it was necessary to treat something as routine as school dismissal with such tension in a city that is already so safe. On the other hand, I still remembered my own childhood, when I was running wild on campus after school and leaving my father anxiously waiting outside for an hour, therefore I had to admit that this kind of discipline is at least necessary to some extent.

However, later I learnt that this tension mostly belonged to the newly developed area. The atmosphere in the old neighbourhoods was entirely different.

One day I went to a village called Tangkeng Village, one of the oldest settlements in Nansha, with a history of more than six hundred years. It is a provincially protected cultural heritage village in Guangdong. When I got there, Tangkeng Village was on the verge of demolition. Most residents had already moved out, and seals had been pasted on many doors.



Fig.11 Dismission at School D

Wandering around the village, I tried to climb over a wall into a dilapidated courtyard when I suddenly noticed an elderly man sitting in a doorway nearby, looking at me. Feeling a little embarrassed, I waved and greeted him. To my surprise, as I approached, he greeted me loudly in Mandarin with a Cantonese accent: ‘Good morning!’

Feeling relieved by the fact he was so friendly, I chatted with him about the village, and he answered my questions about the demolition seriously, even though most of his responses were along the lines of ‘I don’t really know, my son is handling it, I’m just waiting to move’. After saying goodbye to him, I continued walking and found that others in the village, both young and old, were similarly friendly and unguarded toward me. They did not initiate conversation, but whenever I asked questions, they answered earnestly, even to questions that could almost be considered private. For example, when I asked a woman holding a child how the government was arranging housing during the demolition, she told me they would be given money to rent apartments elsewhere.

After leaving Tangkeng Village, I crossed the road to the village’s designated school, Nansha Primary School—a school with more than a hundred years of history and widely recognized as a top tier school. Despite its name, Nansha Primary School is actually a nine-year compulsory school. It has two main entrances: the front gate for older students, and a smaller side gate for first, second and third grade students.

Outside the side gate are two pavilions separated by a one-way turnstile that allows exit only. The inner pavilion is for children waiting for their parents, and the outer one is for parents waiting for their children.

As dismissal time approached, the outer pavilion began to be filled with parents. Some chatted in groups of up to even 10 people, others looked at their phones, or pretended to while actually listening to nearby conversations. When school ended, children who spotted their parents would cross the turnstile on their own. Some did not rush to leave, rather they would sit down beside their parents in the outer pavilion, excitedly telling them about their day. Children who had not yet found their parents would not exit the school. Instead, they would pull out a small colourful chair from a stacked pile, sat in the inner pavilion, and waited while reading or chatting with friends.

As more students arrived, more children began to run around the square and play in front of the entrance. Street vendors appeared pushing their carts, set up stalls right outside the school to sell snacks with bright colours that children love. I happened to visit on the day of the autumn outing of the school, several buses were parked outside, and children returning from the trip ran toward the gate wearing hand-coloured straw hats that they must have painted by themselves, and holding sugarcane, bouncing with excitement. Soon after, school buses for daily transport arrived, and another group of children, led by teachers, ran toward the buses.

For a moment, the square was super chaotic: chatting parents, running children, shouting vendors, and passersby all occupied the space at the same time, each doing their own thing. But this chaos felt harmonious and relaxing. No one seemed worried that their child might get hurt or lost at all.

Compared with the strict orderliness of School D, I felt that this kind of controllable chaos represented a more ideal state for a school. Of course, such a state has prerequisites. The design of the two pavilions, the one-way turnstile, and the school buses provide material guarantees of safety. More importantly, Nansha Primary School's century long reputation, the trust built over decades among neighbours in this old district, and the many watching eyes of vendors and passersby together create this sense of security. Without these conditions, chaos would simply be chaos.

Although the discipline at D School is partly driven by its attempt to present itself as a high-standard, high-efficiency 'elite school', for a newly established school that cannot yet compete with Nansha Primary School in either hardware or social relations, introducing stricter rules to some extent may simply be the only choice.

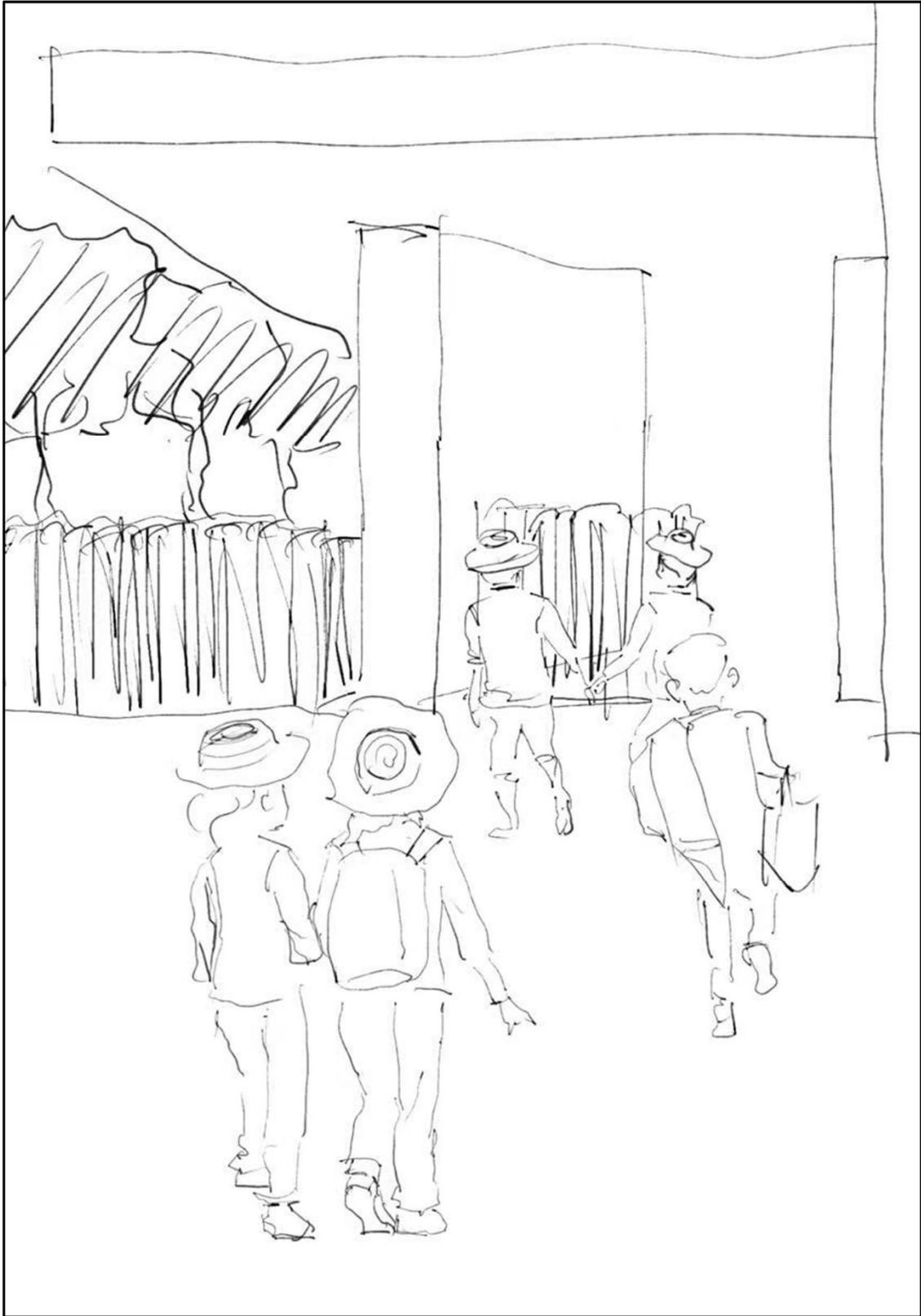


Fig.12 Dismission at Nansha Primary school

## 6.2 School as A Lonely Island

Fengma Primary School is located among stretches of banana fields in the southern part of Nansha. Established in 2005, it was built after the former Fengma First Village Primary School, Fengma Second Village Primary School, and Fengma Third Village Primary School were merged and relocated. Today, its designated enrolment area still consists of Fengma First, Second, and Third Villages. It is, in every sense, a genuinely rural primary school.

Before going there, I felt somewhat nervous about my trip. After all, this was not even an 'urban village', but an actual rural area. However, once I actually arrived in Fengma First Village, I found it to be a remarkably calm and peaceful place. Two rows of two or three story self-built village houses lined beside a small river, each with its own courtyard. Because I went there on a weekday during working hours, there were hardly any young people around. Only some elderly residents sat on stone benches outdoors, chatting and while relaxing in the sunlight, they nodded to me politely when I passed by. Even the village dogs were not aggressive at all, or perhaps even timid would be a better word. Some of them fled in panic as I was running toward them, sprinting through the village, which made me suspect whether they could be used as guard dogs or not.

Looking into Fengma Primary School from the front gate, I figured that it did not match the stereotypical image of a 'shabby rural school' at all. Instead, it looked no different from any primary schools in the city. In fact, during my time in Nansha, none of the primary schools I visited looked noticeably different from one another.(fig.13) I actually think that if I show some photos of these school buildings to people who are unfamiliar with them, it would be difficult for them to tell which one was a prestigious, highly sought-after school and which one was just an ordinary rural primary school. Perhaps this is because, given China's current level of infrastructure development, building large and visually impressive structures has become a very basic requirement.

Still, a rural school cannot be exactly the same as an urban one. What shocked me about Fengma Primary School was that when I walked all the way around the campus, passed from the front and entered a small backyard, I suddenly found myself facing an open-air corridor of the teaching building. In other words, all it would take was crossing a few meters of grass and climbing over a wall about chest high, and I would be inside the school building.

As mentioned earlier, Fengma Primary School is located in a genuinely rural area. It took me nearly an hour from the city to get there with a taxi, so naturally there are very few outsiders in the area, and the school has little need to guard against strangers. What confused me was not this, but why the students themselves did not run out. Primary school children are certainly capable of climbing a one-meter-high wall. In my primary school days, I would definitely run out when the teacher was not looking and they would never be able to catch me.



Left:  
 Primary School D  
 Fengma School Primary  
 Nansha Primary School

Right:  
 Primary School G  
 Primary School T

Fig.13 School buildings

Then I realized, perhaps this is exactly the difference between rural and urban school. At my primary school in the city, once I ran out of the school gate, no one would know me, and there were a great number of interesting places to go. For children at Fengma Primary School, if they ran out, almost every adult in the village would probably recognize them and send them straight back. Even if they somehow avoided being caught, the only places they could go would be nearby streams or farmland, which perhaps are not more interesting than the school playground anyway.

While I was peeking through windows to watch classes in session and debating internally whether I should actually climb into the teaching building, someone called me from behind. I turned around to see a man in a security uniform asking what I was doing there. It was only through talking with him that I realized I had already passed through a large iron gate and entered the school's internal area. The gate was simply too wide and too opened and too

inconspicuous therefore I really didn't notice it at all. I felt intensely embarrassed and quickly left. After wandering around the area for another hour, I returned to the school and found that the iron gate was still open, and there was still no guard in front of it.

One day, while wandering aimlessly around Nansha Primary School, I grew tired and sat down to rest at a bus stop by the roadside. Behind the bus stop was the school's sports field. There was no wall between them, only a thin metal fence. Through it, I could clearly see the wide playground and the colourful stands. After a while, some classes began their PE lessons. I could hear the teacher's whistle and students chatting with each other.

This suddenly reminded me of my own primary school, which was also located in an old part of the city and had a history of over a hundred years. It too had a large playground separated from the street by nothing more than a metal fence, directly facing a bus stop. Back then, the adults waiting in line for buses with their backs facing us, seemed incredibly powerful, able to move freely through the city on their own. Sometimes they would turn around and smile at us, but more often they simply stared in the direction from which the bus would arrive, absorbed in their own lives. It was said that people's sense of time seems to change as they grow older. Six years is not a short period even for adults, but for a primary school student, it feels incredibly long, as if it would never end. I remember my younger self staring longingly at the traffic and pedestrians on the street, imagining that this was the outside world, the real world.

Now I have become one of those adults sitting at the bus stop, watching the children and imagining what they might become in the future. Some of them will grow up and enter various professions-doctors, teachers, government officials-and one day they may meet again, in the 'outside world', with those people they once looked at through the fence. Some of them may be children of parents who once attended this same school, and may also send their own children here in the future. This is just a particular power an important school has in a city, it connects people of different social positions, occupations, and even different generations, creating a shared memory, a memory of life and also of the city.

I had this sudden realization because, in the days before, none of the newly built schools introduced by real estate developers had allowed me to hear the sounds of students studying or playing. In fact, their playgrounds were all hidden behind thick walls or placed on sides of the campus difficult to reach from main roads. Without satellite imagery, I would not even be able to figure out where their sports fields were.

Take School D as an example. The only place from which one can see inside the campus is through the main entrance. But the main entrance does not face the playground or teaching buildings, it actually faces a staff parking area. Everywhere else is blocked either by walls or

by dense shrubs planted behind metal fences, tall enough to completely hide the campus. Unless one happens to pass by during arrival or dismissal times, it is impossible to see students or hear their voices. The actual spaces of teaching and learning are hidden deep inside, away from the street. Under these conditions, the school becomes an island within the city, and this spatial arrangement is clearly intentional.

The old town of Nansha is located south of Nansha Primary School. Because it was developed in the early days, there is no unified architectural style in that area, just many low-rise buildings in different colours and materials. However, after wandering there for an hour, I noticed that the entire area was filled with the scent of osmanthus. At first, I thought this was due to street trees planted by the government, but after looking more carefully, I realized that there was no unified planting at all. Instead, every three or four households or shops had placed a pot of osmanthus in front of their doors, and together they filled several streets with its fragrance.

In the old town area, I also saw a kindergarten located right by the street. Through a metal fence, I could see its courtyard, with classrooms opening directly onto it. The classroom doors were open, therefore, I could see children playing at their desks. The door to the corridor was also open so that from where I stood on the street, I could even see a portrait of Chairman Mao hanging in the corridor. In neighbourhoods like this, everyone has their own life, yet they are also part of the city as a whole. This is something rarely seen in newly built commercial housing estates. Those compounds are clusters of high-rise buildings sealed off by walls, usually with a grand and ornate gate that requires a key card to enter. Rather than feeling like parts of a city, they are more like enclaves of real estate companies.

It is true that migrants arriving in an unfamiliar city often experience a natural sense of anxiety and insecurity, and may therefore need spaces that feel safer than local norms. Real estate developers frequently exploit this psychology, packaging invisibility as safety and isolation as a sense of class. They ignore less quantifiable needs, such as how to integrate into the city, and instead focus on easily measurable ones, such as introducing prestigious school groups. Some even go so far as to cater to a mentality among new migrants that they would think that 'we had to pass multiple layers of selection to settle in this city, why should we live the same way as locals who just happened to be born here?' Being far away from resettlement housings becomes a selling point, and constructing a 'utopia detached from the local context' becomes a goal that is worth pursuing.

From the perspective of developers, this behaviour is simply normal business practice, it's an effort to meet customer demand within the boundaries of the law. However, precisely because of this, as long as urban educational development continues to rely on real estate led models, the problem of schools becoming isolated islands-stripped of broader social functions and reduced to factories for producing academic performance-will remain a structural issue that cannot be resolved through simple policy adjustments. And because this logic is embedded in physical space itself, these schools may even become institutions

that reproduce a way of life characterized by the neglect of social relations and an overriding pursuit of utilitarian success.



Fig.14 Kindergarten in the old town

## Conclusion

In recent years, the Chinese government has promoted reforms to the hukou system and gradually improved institutional arrangements aimed at ensuring migrants' access to urban public resources. In the field of compulsory education, continuous adjustments to enrolment policies, clarified institutional pathways through which different social groups can enter public schools and expanded overall enrolments capacity, together have largely resolved the issue of whether the children of migrant populations can attend public school locally. At the same time, a series of education reforms, including the Double Reduction policy and group-based schooling reform, have to some extent facilitated the sharing of educational resources across schools and regions, contributing to the promotion of educational equity. However, these reforms have not aimed to establish a unified and quantifiable standard for evaluating school quality. Instead, they have operated through a form of institutionalized ambiguity, which plays a significant role in contemporary urban governance.

This ambiguity has reshaped the way educational resources are competed for. Lacking of a standardized exam system to provide a quantitative ranking of school quality, competition that once was structured primarily around hard criteria such as hukou status and economic capital has been transformed into a process of 'natural differentiation' mediated by soft barriers, including educational background, information access, linguistic competence, and levels of social understanding. While this transformation might have intensified anxiety among some parents, it has also mitigated the pressure that early and excessive educational competition places on students, and reduced the inefficient consumption of public resources came with it.

Under conditions of policy ambiguity, parents rarely rely directly on official government documents to understand enrolment rules and institutional arrangements. Instead, they tend to depend on interpretations provided by third parties. In this process, real estate developers have emerged as the most influential translators of education policy. By introducing capital and educational infrastructure into urban development projects, developers gain greater discursive power and are able to use government credibility as to back up their promises, thereby gaining consumer trust. In some cases, informal rules that are not explicitly specified in policy texts are even transformed into tools for market differentiation.

Within this framework, consumers are gradually 'trained' to be able to understand their collective position and rights within the policy system, giving rise to a distinctive mechanism of accountability. When developers fail to fulfil their commitments, homebuyers often bypass developers and direct their claims to local governments. Given that local governments continue to rely heavily on the real estate sector as a driving force of urban development, they frequently intervene and provide institutional 'backstopping' in response to these claims, thereby sustaining the overall functioning of the system.

While this model has indeed contributed to an overall improvement in educational provision in Nansha, it has also generated new problems in the spatial organization of the city. As the primary purchasers of commercial housing, migrant populations lack established local social networks and a strong identification with local history and culture, therefore they often rely more heavily on visible order and highly disciplined environments to cope with uncertainty. At the same time, the selective nature of the hukou system itself means that migrants who successfully pass through this filter may develop a psychological expectation of access to better than average resources. Real estate developers, who are not responsible for comprehensive urban planning but are instead accountable primarily to their target consumers, tend to cater to and amplify these demands. Under the banner of 'safety' and 'high quality', they produce spatial forms that are relatively isolated from the surrounding urban fabric, further constituting a structural obstacle to migrants' integration into local society.

Although this study is grounded in the specific case of Nansha, its implications extend beyond the local context. On the one hand, the Pearl River Delta has long functioned as an experimental zone for China's reforms, and its governance practices often carry the potential to be applied elsewhere. On the other hand, how to mitigate inequalities in public resource distribution while maintaining economic growth remains a structural challenge faced by all developing countries.

One limitation of this study is that it primarily focuses on parents as consumers of newly developed commercial housing. The extent to which long-term local residents and resettled villagers participate in this system of negotiation, the channels through which they access policy information, and the ways in which they understand and exercise their rights remain questions to be addressed by future research.

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