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FROM FACTORY WORKERS TO TALENTED MIGRANTS. THE MANAGEMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES FOR NEW RESIDENTS IN DONGGUAN, CHINA

Since 1978, the management of the floating population has become a big challenge for China. Dongguan, one of the major migrant cities, is widely considered a reference city, as it was the first to professionally manage migration, and it has a more permissive policy. This research chooses Dongguan as a case study for exploring the perspectives of the staff involved in service provision. Staff members from all 33 'migration centres' (NDSBs) and from 38 (out of 45) social organizations working with migrants filled in an online questionnaire. The data was complemented by four in-depth interviews with people in helping professions, who assist migrants. The paper analyses several institutional challenges and structural limitations that prevent migrants from integrating, such as understaffing of social work services, insufficient funding and reliance on temporary, subcontracted social workers. The research suggests that, despite progressive policies, the education of migrant children is still a source of huge inequity between the local and migrant populations. It argues that the recent policy goals of shifting from manufacturing to high tech industries, further disadvantages the largest majority of migrants, who are low-skilled. The research clusters respondents' proposals for change into five categories: (i) the preservation of the status quo; (ii) awareness raising and insubstantial change; (iii) assisting migrants to fit in. The absence of another two possible modes: (iv) 'acting for structural policy reform' and (v) 'shaping the views of the locals on the "New Dongguanese"' is examined later.

Keywords: internal migration, Dongguan, social workers, social services, China

As of 2017, China's floating population³ reached 244 million (China's National Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Over the last few years, the philosophy of managing internal migrations has changed from strict control, to an increased focus on services. Different cities have developed different management styles for managing internal migration, largely based on social organizations (Xiao, Guo & Yin, 2009). Dongguan has a special story to tell. With

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³ This paper will use the terms 'internal migrants', 'migrants' and 'floating populations' interchangeably.

a population of 6 million internal migrants, it is one of the biggest migrant cities in the country. Recently, Dongguan gained a reputation as ‘world factory’ (Wang, 2018) and qualified as a ‘new first-tier city’ (Zhang, 2019). Its growing economy is fuelled by the labour-intensive manufacturing sector, which is largely maintained by migrants. The city has frequently changed its policies relating to internal migrants (more recently referred to as ‘the New Dongguanese’). There are now 33 migrant centres: the so-called ‘New Dongguanese Service Bureaux’ [NDSB], subordinated to the public authorities and dealing exclusively with migration issues. In addition, over 45 social service organizations and foundations have a focus on assisting migrants.

This study focuses on the management and services provided in Dongguan for internal migrants, by exploring the perspectives of the staff involved in delivering those services. For the purposes of this research, all 33 migration centres and 38 social organizations were invited to fill in an online questionnaire. The data was complemented by four in-depth interviews with frontline social workers. The research adds light and shade to the idea that the Dongguan administration has tried to create structures to deal with the management of migrants. Authorities rely on a specific team and a management agency made up of dispatched social workers⁴, public staff, and staff with social work attributions at a grass-roots level. The centres that deal with migrants have become increasingly receptive, and the policy environment has become friendlier towards them. However, there are also several problems in this process. In particular: (i) understaffed and under-qualified service teams; (ii) restrictions on the New Dongguanese in applying for public resources; (iii) difficulties in the social integration of the New Dongguanese.

1. INTERNAL MIGRATION IN CHINA

After the economic reform of 1978 and the relaxation of the household registration system, China witnessed a massive internal migration⁵, that led to an unprecedented increase in the urban population. By and large, the internal migration has involved moves from rural areas to urban areas, as well as from the central and western inland regions to eastern coastal provinces, which are more developed (Zhu & Lin, 2016). The enormous rural-urban discrepancies sit at the core of this migration process. The underemployment and poverty in rural areas are in stark contrast to the capital-intensive technologies that develop rapidly in cities, with an increased need for labour.

Despite playing an important economic role in today’s China, most of the internal migrants are marginal populations, usually living in the suburbs of major cities, or in urban villages on the outskirts, where exclusive communities are formed, along the lines of blood-ties, clan and homeland (Zhu & Lin, 2016). Their contacts with the local communities are marginal, if they exist at all. Over half of China’s 244 million internal migrants have only a junior high school education, and earn very low salaries. It goes without saying that their quality of life in the cities is very poor, especially when moving with their families. From 2010 on, a reverse trend started to emerge, with many migrants returning to their original homes. Nevertheless, the scale of internal migration continues to pose major challenges to

⁴ A social worker who is procured by the government or other agencies through a contract, and is dispatched to public institutions to provide social services (Xie, 2019).

⁵ For the purposes of this research, internal migration refers exclusively to internal migrants with a Chinese household registration (Hukou system, with the role of limiting population mobility in its early stage).

China's social services. Of concern are issues such as decent work, social insurance, children's education, and political rights when they work in the city (Chen, 2013).

China's migration policy is strongly intertwined with *Hukou*, the main system of household registration, largely based on rural vs. urban residency. The change in registration was traditionally associated with a loss of rights and possessions in the community of origin. Because it led to unequal access to housing, health and education (among other things), *Hukou* sat at the centre of heated controversies and protests. In the last few decades, the Chinese government has experimented with several approaches towards the management of migration, based on making the *Hukou* system more accessible. Its philosophy has moved from imposing strict limitations, to fully opening up the flow of people.

Previous research (Chen, 2013; Xiong, 2012; Yang & Xiao, 2009) discerned three main stages in the internal migration policy. The first consisted of a policy of control, from 1978-1983. A strict *Hukou* (household registration) system was in place, which made the rural population unable to move freely. By 1984, the policy started to be loosened, and the government allowed farmers to work and do businesses in the towns. This triggered an overflow of migrant labourers. Soon, the government found that the situation was out of control, as more and more people went to the eastern cities indiscriminately. As a measure of last resort, the government issued successive restrictive documents at the beginning of the '90s. This led to a second type of approach, aimed at promoting mobility in nearby regions. For instance, policies encouraged rural people to work in the cities near their registered locations, rather than migrate towards major metropolitan areas of the southeast coastal provinces, especially the Guangdong province. But state institutions still retained a high level of control over what appeared to be disordered flows to the eastern provinces.

From 2000 onwards, it became obvious that alternative ways of managing migration were needed. The government decided to reform the *Hukou* system and to reduce the previous employment limitations imposed on the cities' internal migrants. Now, 'promoting the social integration of migrants' ranks high in the policy discourse. The central government advances a general philosophy on the management of migration, with the local administration systems playing an implementation role. The actual way of achieving these stated policy goals varies from one place to another. Depending on local conditions, local governments gradually form their own styles, work systems and services.

At city level, the management of migration falls within the responsibility of various entities. First, there are the official departments (like labour bureaux, and public security institutions) and subordinate units (grass-roots agencies). More recently, the state started to subcontract social work services (e.g. poverty-relief) to the so-called 'Shè huì zǔ zhī'⁶ (social organizations), which are undergoing an unprecedented increase in their number and role (over 800,000 registered as of January 2019) (Luo, 2019). Their stated focus is on enhancing the personal and social lives of migrants. However, these goals might conflict with a rather crude governmental approach, which is often focused on preventing juvenile delinquency (Zhao & Han, 2018). Often, public institutions rely on temporary dispatched

⁶ These 'social organizations' make for a third category of entities, other than government and business organizations. They do not have a unified definition in China. There are three forms in which social organizations can be registered: (i) as foundations; (ii) as social teams/groups, formed voluntarily by Chinese citizens to carry out activities agreed upon by their members; (iii) as private non-enterprise units, which are set up by enterprises, institutions, public organizations etc., and which use private assets to engage in non-profit social service activities (Chen, 2009).

social workers, transferred from social organizations to public institutions. However, once working on behalf of state institutions, their roles are more administrative than client-oriented (Xie and Pantea, forthcoming).

2. THE CASE OF DONGGUAN

In many ways, Dongguan makes for an excellent setting to carry out research on the management of internal migration. It is a prefecture-level city, located in the south-central Guangdong Province, 50 miles from Hong Kong and 60 miles from Macau. Dongguan comprises 32 towns and 350 villages. The richest, southern towns, closest to Shenzhen, attract the highest number of migrants. It is estimated that out of its 8.34 million population, between 70-80% are migrants (Dongguan Municipal Bureau of Statistics & Dongguan NBAC Investigation Team, 2018). A recently compiled 'Ghost City Index' (Qihoo 360) ranks Dongguan as the top Chinese city that is emptied of internal migrants during Chinese New Year.

The city has witnessed a radical transformation from an agricultural entity in the '70s, to an international modern manufacturing metropolis. Its gross domestic product (GDP) in 2018 was the 4th highest in Guangdong Province and the 19th highest in China (Wang, 2019). The incoming migrant population makes the biggest contribution to the city's economic development. These positive economic transformations have shaped the general perception towards migrants. From derogatory names such as 'blind flow' or 'migrant workers', internal migrants have started to be referred to as 'New Dongguanese'. Whilst a change in the way the local population regards migrants is a long process, bringing in the right policies has started to matter in Dongguan's institutional environments.

More recently, however, Dongguan set itself new economic goals. The policy aim is to shift from a manufacturing focus, towards high tech. The ambition is for Dongguan to build itself up as a high-quality innovation city with an international influence by 2025. Curbing environmental pollution, encouraging high-tech enterprises, improving urban public welfare and developing educational opportunities are major parts of this city strategy. Attracting 'talented migrants' is also part of the project. Because of the increase in labour costs, Dongguan's low-end manufacturing industry is finding it hard to keep its competitive advantage. More and more factories are closing down or moving away from the city. Increasingly, robots are replacing low-skilled workers in labour-intensive enterprises (like clothing, furniture, and the food industry) (Du, 2017).

But redundant migrants do not just go home, as imagined in an ideal policy scenario. The proportion of those going back to their hometowns, or continuing on their way to other boom cities, is rather small; the majority still struggle in the city (Guo, 2018). Recent research paints a disconcerting picture. Those born in the '90s appear confused about the future and many others are attached to the city they have spent most of their adult years in (Guo, 2018). In the meantime, more and more social problems and unresolved tensions have emerged. Some of the problems (i.e. illegal factories not complying with environmental policies, prostitution, gambling and drugs) have called for harsh government action (Wu, 2016). Interventions have gone from a thorough reorganization of public institutions (e.g. the removal of high officials from public security institutions), to the punishment and intimidation of those breaking the law. In the context of remoulding the social order, city security, migrant children's education, the healthcare system and community management all stand out as major concerns.

But Dongguan is also a barometer and a compass for Chinese policies. The city follows the regulations of the central government, yet it learns quickly from other developed cities and has sufficient strength to test new social interventions. What happens in the social and policy life of Dongguan carries weight, as Dongguan is considered a reference city (Hu, 2012). It was the first city in the country to practice the professional management and coordination of migration. The 'New Dongguanese Service Bureaux' [NDSB] was set up in 2008 under the Human Resources and Social Security Bureau of Dongguan. This was the first full-time service agency of its kind in the country (Mai, 2015). It comprises a migration service with 32 centres in the towns and 621 stations at community and village level (Lin, 2018). In the implementation of specific services, the NDSB and its sub-mechanisms register and collect information, issue documents, and sometimes carry out career training for migrants. The NDSB claims a major role in safeguarding the legal rights of the New Dongguanese.

In 2018, Dongguan cancelled the 'points-based *Hukou* system' as it applied to housing, health and employment. The city reduced the requirements for migrants registering in Dongguan, without limitations on age, educational background and housing etc. (Wang, 2018). Migrants no longer need to apply for the Dongguan *Hukou* based on how many points they have. The stated rationale was for internal migrants (the so called 'New Dongguanese') to enjoy the same social security and public services as other citizens. Yet, the exemption does not apply to education. For access to schooling, rigorous criteria and points are set. Family size, criminal record, stable employment, residence, parents' educational background and tax contributions are all important factors. Migrants with higher technological skills, or a higher educational background, gain the *Hukou*. Their children have higher chances of being accepted into public schools.

Social workers in the administrative departments and at community level are at the forefront of the processes meant to assist the New Dongguanese. Typical services include legal aid, life coaching, parent-child education, recreational activities or risk prevention in the workplace (Zhang, Cheng & Huang, 2017). Whilst the policy ambition is high, anecdotal evidence has started to emerge about low levels of efficiency and constant friction between the administrative staff and internal migrants (Lin, 2018).

3. AIMS AND METHODS

This research sets itself the goal of exploring perspectives on the management of migration among those in social work positions⁷. The underlying rationale is that the policy reform needs to engage with service providers' views. The research is based on the results of 37 questionnaires filled in by staff from 33 service centres and 38 social organizations⁸ (10 public employees, 17 dispatched social workers, 2 social workers, 4 community workers⁹, 2 members of social organizations and 2 volunteers). Virtually all public institutions and

⁷ As social work is a recent occupation in China, and there are still very few qualified social workers, the term is used rather loosely. This paper will refer to those in social work positions, regardless of their qualifications, as 'social workers', which is the convention in China's public services.

⁸ The authors were unable to secure a valid email address for the remaining 7 organizations.

⁹ Community workers do not have a social work degree. Their role is to interact with clients at community level, including in villages, in order to 'maintain social stability at the grassroots level' (Li, 2017).

social organizations with a stated link with migration issues in Dongguan were invited to fill in an online questionnaire.

Despite migration being high on the policy agenda, an early finding was that the actual entities in charge of the claimed integration of the New Dongguanese were rather few (N=3, according to CNKI, China's biggest knowledge resource database). As well as the demographic questions (occupation, type of service and the groups assisted), the questionnaire included several open-ended questions. It asked respondents to comment on the quality of services, their experiences in assisting internal migrants and their proposals for change.

In addition, four respondents were interviewed: a dispatched social worker, a staff member from a public institution dealing with migration, a social worker from a social work organization, and a volunteer who is part of a university programme aimed at facilitating students' engagement with migrant children in an after-school setting. The in-depth, semi-structured interviews explored their general perception of the work carried out with the New Dongguanese and its main challenges. The narrative input from questionnaires and from the transcribed interviews was interpreted in NVivo. The analysis was based on coding and successive comparison. In order to protect the anonymity of respondents, pseudonyms are used throughout the paper. As the research is very small in scale, its purpose can only be tentative and exploratory in nature.

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The legal framework and registration dilemmas

The research suggests that, despite progressive policies, the New Dongguanese still struggle with the dilemma of registration. Unlike migrants elsewhere in China, they are not subject to assessment based on the 'credit entry rule' for many services. They can register as Dongguan residents, which makes them eligible for housing, healthcare and some education facilities. However, whilst accessible, the facilities following registration are not guaranteed. Moreover, upon registration in Dongguan, internal migrants automatically lose their registration back in their home communities, together with any land and housing there. For the vast majority, the problem of their children's education sits at the core of this dilemma.

China has a nine-year compulsory education policy. Public education is free of charge for residents, but not always for migrants, who need to pay a high fee, sometimes prohibitively so. By 2015, as many as 39.1% of the New Dongguanese had an average monthly income of between ¥2001-¥3000¹⁰(cf. the National Statistics Bureau, 2017). However, the termly tuition fees at a private school were one to six times their incomes (Huang, 2017; Dongguan Development & Reform Bureau, 2019). The fee waiver policy is only open to students who have registered (with a city *Hukou*). In some migration cities, migrants without city *Hukou* need to compete to apply for the fee reduction. This means that students and families who do not belong to the city's household registration system are always under the stress of expensive tuition fees.

Dongguan has two ways of dealing with the education of migrant children. One is to change their original census register into Dongguan's (and thus to become 'New Dongguanese'), which allows them a fee reduction at a public school of their choice. But,

¹⁰ aprox.260–390 euro.

as many families do not want to change¹¹ their household registers, yet want to send their children to a public school, they use a second route. This entails applying for a place at a public school through the points-based education system¹². However, this path is even harder and more competitive than the first one. Figure 1 shows how the system works in practice.

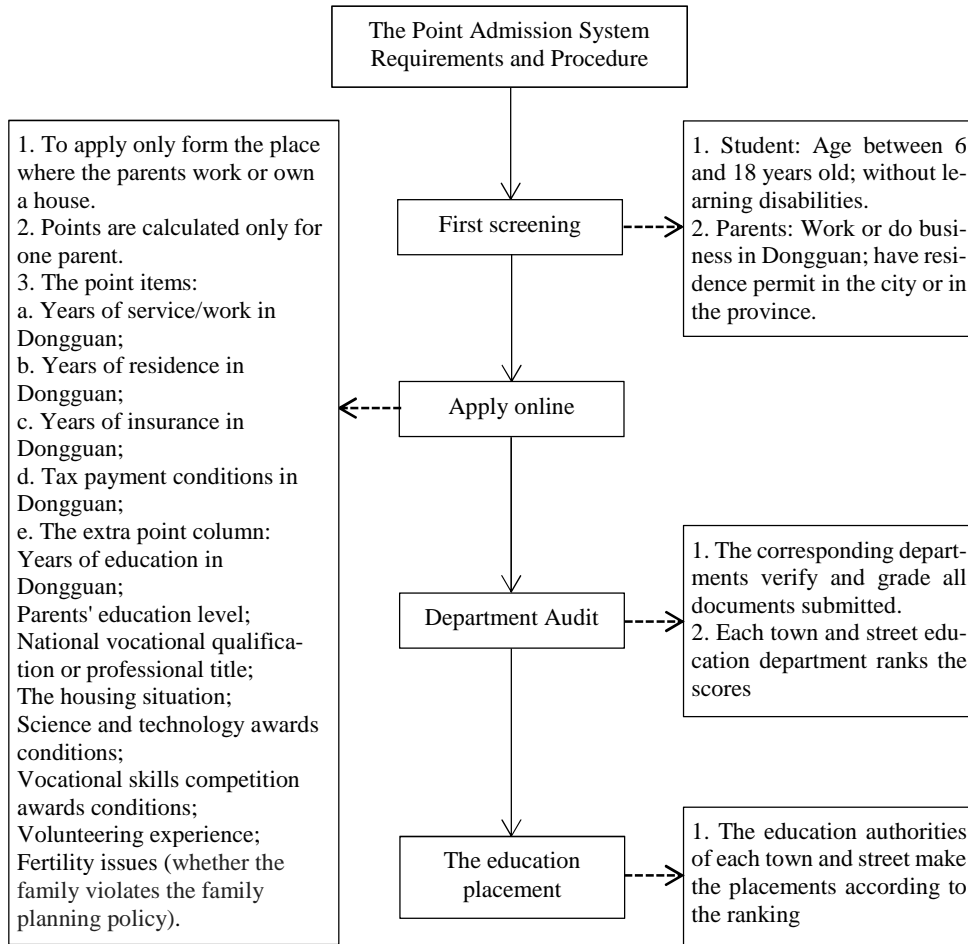


Fig. 1. Requirements and procedure for the point admission in Dongguan’s public education system

Source: Compiled by the authors.

¹¹ Changing household registers to another city means giving up all benefits in the original location, including any share of the land.

¹² The points-based education system has similar requirements and procedures as the points-based Hukou system, with the city allocating a limited number of fee-reduced places, according to the number of points a person has.

Unregistered migrants apply for the school online. Their scores are calculated and assessed by the relevant departments. Finally, the educational authorities of each town and street allocate the school places according to the grade ranking. Based on the family score, a child can win a place at a public school, or receive subsidies to apply for a private school. Private schools mainly attract the migrant population and are generally considered of lower quality.

There are many structural limitations that make the education registration process a very difficult one for migrant families. Firstly, there are insufficient places for migrant children in public schools. As of 2018, for instance, from a total of 1.55 million students (under 18 years old) in Dongguan, 1.18 million were migrant students (without a Dongguan *Hukou*). Out of all migrant students (at the compulsory education stage), only 40.18% were studying at public schools or at subsidized private schools (Dongguan Education Bureau, 2019). This means that nearly 60% of migrant children (in compulsory education) had to rely on private schools. An inconvenient alternative provided by the state is subsidies for private schooling, or for public schools located in other towns.

The competition for school places is actually a competition between migrant parents. Authorities allocate the places according to score rankings, and the number of places available at town or street level. This means there is no *default* pass score. And applicants never know how competitive the process will be each year, or in their neighbourhood. The lower end of the hierarchy is, however, certain. Parents who are new to Dongguan, and who have low salaries, a poor education or no specific technical skills, or those with more than one child, are definitely 'the losers' in this process. They make up the largest proportion of those in need of social work support.

Applicants need to submit information and upload supporting evidence from their employment, housing and educational history. The novel online application system allows applicants to fill in the forms themselves. This reduces the administrative workload, yet it potentially excludes the most disadvantaged and technically illiterate migrants. Interviewees complained about this procedure as being highly complicated and time-consuming for both themselves and the applicants. The staff from the social organizations and service centres had to not only upload data into the electronic system, but also to help the most disadvantaged applicants secure any missing papers. To add to the complexity, even students who had previously attended a public primary school had to go through the same application again for junior high school (unless registered with Dongguan's *Hukou*). This bureaucratic hindrance made many migrants register with the Dongguan household census and renounce any other benefits they might have had back in their communities of origin.

Dongguan increases its education budget each year, and intends to build 267 more schools, offering 174,000 places by 2020 (Dongguan Education Bureau, 2019). However, migrant children's educational rights involve more than just access. The difference in quality between public and private schools is a major concern. According to the interviews, migrant parents may want to send their children to a public school, not only to avoid the expensive tuition fees, but also because they do not trust the educational quality in the private system.

The structural constraints of migrants and the challenges of reaching the 'hard to reach'

Children's education is not an issue of the educational system alone. Their mental health emerged as a key, yet silent, problem during the interviews. It was also included as a major

concern in the '2018 Report on China's Migrant Population Development' (Migrant Population Service Centre, 2019). Interviewees stressed that many children have serious behavioural problems and under-diagnosed learning disorders. According to an interviewee working as an after-school volunteer, the children are generally introverted, self-abased, not very talkative, and with no enthusiasm for studying. Several research participants attributed the children's mental health problems to the parent-child relationships being stretched to the limit, by the parents' work commitments. One extreme example of a poor parent-child relationship was expressed by an interviewee:

'The child's parents work in a factory in separate day and night shifts. Each time the child goes back home, the parent at home is sleeping. These parents are too busy to take care of their children, so the children need us.' (Susu, 21, volunteer)

Ironically, whilst mothers may complain that social workers do not know 'how to communicate with their children,' social workers often lack consistent training, and are very young and inexperienced in providing such help: 'I also felt that I lacked this kind of knowledge myself' (Ma, 25, social worker). The typical services provided by social workers are after-school classes, education for health and family activities.

Housing sits at the core of the children's (mental) health problems. Besides the New Dongguanese who are able to buy an apartment, other New Dongguanese workers usually have three options. The first is to live in a dormitory built by their employment units (usually used by single workers). The second is to rent an apartment which has been built or converted for workers near the industry district. The last option is to rent a room from the locals (children and parents often live in the same room). As indicated by an interviewee, however, many rent their accommodation from a third person (a tenant who sublets the apartment after illegally dividing up the rooms). In this last case, the migrants face the risk of eviction, unless they can renew their contract with the superior landlord. According to one interviewee, it is very hard for migrants to apply for policy-based housing if they cannot meet the high requirements, such as being highly skilled (another path towards registration in Dongguan).

Regardless of their living arrangements, the quality of housing is very poor for most migrants. As stated by one interviewee: 'One can hardly put a bed in their rooms, which are very humid. If it rains, the whole ground becomes wet. There is a strong, bad smell in the room and passageway' (Susu, 21, volunteer).

'These kinds of old rental housing estates collect a lot of tenants who are in a poor economic situation, such as security guards, peddlers, junk dealers, sanitation workers, and old people' (Yin, 24, dispatched social worker).

The lives of the majority of migrants revolve around the so called 'factory-towns' and villages¹³. In very close proximity, one can find the factories, their dormitories and some

¹³ In the process of rapid urban development, the state requisitioned most of the cultivated land (land nationalization), and some villages ending up being surrounded by urban architecture or business areas (the so-called 'cheng zhong cun': 'villages in the city'). This is where most migrants find more affordable, if very modest, housing. These villages are threatened with disappearance, as (sometimes contested) compensation is provided to the locals.

small private primary schools. As migrants live in the industry district, they are less likely to interact with the local population. Their lives are strongly marked by routine, between their apartments and their work places. When given an opportunity to establish contacts with the local population, the barriers start to fall:

‘My parents also rent out a house to a family. They have lived upstairs for more than 10 years. They get along with my parents very well, and even if their factory moved a little bit further away from here, they are still willing to rent this house, not just for the cheaper rent, but also because they are familiar with my parents’ (Ma, 25, social worker). In these kinds of cases, each side's children usually play together too.

In order to attract talent and become a tech hub, Dongguan’s current housing policy prioritizes new, highly qualified migrants over low-skilled migrants who have worked in its manufacturing factories for a long time. To those with longer working histories in Dongguan, this policy raises moral questions of legitimacy.

By and large, the New Dongguanese do not have a strong sense of belonging, partly because they live outside the circle of the local community. For many reasons, they rarely engage voluntarily in structured social activities, organized by various organizations for the purpose of ‘integration’. According to several interviewed social workers, they are ‘too busy to take care of anything else on top of their work’ (Susu, 21, volunteer). As seen above, there are indeed many structural constraints on their lives, that prevent their involvement in public activities.

Language is a significant barrier. Mandarin is the language of schooling and the language of social organizations. But the majority of Dongguan's local people do not speak Mandarin well; instead they speak Cantonese, a variety of Chinese. This influences the quality of communication and leaves the migrants stuck in a vicious cycle: poor language proficiency limits their social contacts and weak social contacts outside the migrants’ circles negatively influences their language competence.

It is also hard for migrants to integrate because of their high mobility and because of their many family commitments. Without structures in place to assist in many areas of their lives (e.g. elderly and childcare, health issues), migrant families rely on each other. Finding time and space for external activities is difficult:

‘Those women who find a job can stay in the group longer, but when their families need them, when a baby is born, for instance, they need to go back and help. Besides, the New Dongguanese move an awful lot. They follow the location of their children's education. Sometimes we start working with some family members, and soon after, they are about to leave’ (Ma, 25, social worker).

A programme designed for the children who are ‘left behind’ allows families to reunite for a ‘season’ (winter and summer holidays). The ‘migratory bird’ project in Dongguan allows children a safe place to study and play (Yao, 2018). However, time constraints do not allow social workers to open up a case, even when they discover major issues of concern.

The New Dongguanese Service Bureaux and their institutional limitations

The questionnaires show that 16.22% (N=6) respondents declare themselves very satisfied with the current management mode and consider that it completely protects the rights of the New Dongguanese. 48.65% of respondents (N=18) declare themselves moderately satisfied, whilst 35.14% (N=13) declare themselves not satisfied by the current management mode and consider that the rights of the New Dongguanese are not respected. No respondent completely disagreed with the current management system. Overall, despite stated policy goals of 'social integration', reaching, involving and maintaining migrants in support programmes is not easy. Several limitations on intervention are related to the institutional *modus operandi*. Others are rooted in the migrants' social worlds, yet are not independent of various structural constraints.

To start with, the activities of the NDSB are often centred on data collection and information provision. A common practice is for employees from the migration service to periodically visit public places and enterprises. Whilst previous research (Zhang, Cheng & Huang, 2017) argued that the relationship between the public representatives and the migrants are conflict-ridden, our interviews suggest this may not always be the case. An interviewee with over five years' experiences, for instance, was not able to recall any such situation. What does seem to be a challenge, however, is the enormous administrative workload which prevents direct, client-focused interventions.

Social work is an occupation with a high turnover in China. Indeed, many respondents stated that it is usual for social workers to change their jobs, moving to different organizations and fields. For some public service areas, including the NDSB, the government temporarily hires social workers based on a public competition (usually for a period of two years) (Dongguan Civil Affairs Bureau, 2018). Once the contract expires, the position is open to a new bid. This is likely to entail a new, subcontracted organization and a new social worker. Exceptions - when the contract with the dispatched social worker is extended for another year - happen less frequently. Overall, the frequent changes in services and staff do not just affect the sustainability of those services, but also the ability of the social workers to specialize in a particular field. These processes leave the NDSB with a short-term institutional memory and a structural inability to build up any expertise.

Interviewees and questionnaire respondents described an excessively overburdened workforce. The dispatched social workers in the NDSB, who increasingly make up the majority of those working on migration issues, play multiple roles: from carrying out policy propaganda and administrative tasks, to case work and the organization of events. Previous research also confirms a continuous sense of tension felt by social workers. On the one hand, social workers often lack sufficient funding to continue with new and meaningful activities (for example, inviting a circus troupe to teach the children how to communicate with their parents if they suffer a sexual assault), as told by an interviewee. On the other hand, some long-term objectives cannot have visible and easily measurable effects. Interviewee Yin organized a cultural exchange programme in 2018, to help the New Dongguanese learn more about the local culture. Whilst he is certain this was a meaningful experience for many participants, the results of these activities can only be limited in scope and short term. The policy of the moment takes priority over any measurable outputs.

Ultimately, all questionnaire respondents selected 'the government' as their main financial source, and only 31.58% (N=14) of them also relied on donations. As elsewhere, small organizations encountered more financial difficulties than larger ones. The larger organiza-

tions, with more stable financial resources, however, tended to provide services for local people, rather than New Dongguanese.

Proposals for change from below

Both the questionnaire and the interviews prompted research participants to elaborate on possible solutions. One can cluster their responses into three possible modes: (i) the preservation of the *status quo*; (ii) awareness raising and insubstantial change; (iii) assisting migrants to fit in. The absence of two other possible modes: 'acting for structural policy reform' and 'shaping the views of the locals on the "New Dongguanese"' is examined later.

The preservation of the *status quo* was the conservative option of respondents who either considered themselves very satisfied with the current management mode, or were somewhat reluctant to come up with options for change. This situation can be attributed to a weak sense of initiative, cultivated in occupations that are executive in nature, and in environments where compliance is the norm. 12 out of 37 questionnaire respondents expressed their regret at 'not having the ability or experience to change the field', or they declared 'never thinking about this question before'.

'Policy change is not our responsibility, we just do what we need to, and what the job involves. But anyway, we hope everything can be better' (Lu, 29, public staff).

A second choice indicated a high degree of sensitivity towards equal rights, while at the same time, not offering any bold initiatives for change. The proposed ways forward were rather prudent, focusing on image and political correctness, rather than on radical departures from the current situation. For example, one community worker thought we needed to give up the distinction between local and migrant populations and stop using the name 'New Dongguanese', in order to highlight their (arguably) identical entitlements with the local population. Whilst powerful, such a choice risks overlooking the structural constraints that maintain social disparities, regardless of the names to be used.

A third way proposed for relating to migrants was proactive, yet conformist in nature. Several research participants called for the need to reach migrants wherever they are: in factories, in schools, in their neighbourhoods. The policy measures were considered a given. What was needed was increased outreach, to provide information, and more pro-activeness in involving migrants in community-level activities likely to increase their level of social integration: 'Try your best to give New Dongguanese a sense of belonging', 'invite them to join volunteering'. However, it is debatable whether involvement in volunteering for over-worked migrants is likely to provide the social glue needed, or whether it further deepens their notion of exploitation and adds to the pressure.

'We regularly set up stalls in public places to answer the questions of New Dongguanese, to inform people about our recent policies [children's education and *Hukou* registration] and in enterprises to let them know more about preferential policies, to solve the problems of their children's education, and to give them have a sense of belonging to Dongguan' (Lu, 29, public staff).

A fourth possibility: 'advocacy for policy change' is included here, mainly as a *presence in absentia*. Social workers are one of the groups who are most aware of the difficulties facing New Dongguanese. Indeed, research participants often described with empathy the

restrictions migrants face in their children's education and medical treatment, and also their major housing and integration problems. But their proposals for improvement rarely went beyond 'waiting for a change' of government or a change of policies. Whist questionnaires and interviews conveyed a sense that 'something needs to change in regard to the migrants' situation', the solutions were invariably considered as top-down, and social workers' role in the process of change was heavily downplayed.

In a climate where duties and hierarchies are clear and reinforced, Chinese social workers in general may be less likely to see their role as related to advocacy for policy change. As became evident in the questionnaires and interviews, they do not think they have the ability to change policy. Yet, the rights of the New Dongguanese are tightly linked to policy-making. Therefore, training social workers to understand, analyse and act for policy change, is important.

Another important level of intervention that was missing was 'intervening in order to change the perception of the locals in regard to the "New Dongguanese"'. Social integration was invariably considered the responsibility of the migrants themselves, via their more active involvement in the local communities, or the responsibility of decision makers, through friendlier policies. Shaping the more general perception of migrants towards a more positive one was never an option.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Dongguan owes a great part of its economic advancement to the low-skilled migrants who now make up a population of 6 million. It developed from a small county into a famous manufacturing industry city, now aspiring towards the status of a high-tech hub. Along with the change of city strategy, the role of the migrants is also changing, and solutions for managing the social turmoil brought about by the transition from manufacturing to innovation are needed. Dongguan's management mode is highly celebrated as a model of integration. This makes it a great case study for examining the challenges of this process. This paper has discussed the social services put in place for Dongguan's migrants and has explored the perspectives of those involved in their provision. Despite all the limitations inherent in small-scale research, the paper has highlighted the shortcomings of the process and has advanced several insights from research participants.

This research has confirmed that, indeed, migrants make for a challenging group to work with. They have different regional backgrounds, numerous economic and educational disadvantages, and language differences that call for culturally competent interventions. Specialized social workers and coherent programmes are a must. As a matter of practice, however, the social workers offer services that aim to change the individuals to fit in with the environment. Environmental limitations remain unquestioned. Also, given the strong governmental control, the clients see themselves as mere recipients, without any ability to proactively ask for change in those services. Furthermore, insufficient funds mean that the professional services on offer have a reduced impact (Zhao & Han, 2018). Against this backdrop, it is not only government departments, but also social organizations which are in a state of exploration, searching for suitable ways to manage migrants' problems. And new, unanticipated challenges continue to surface.

Dongguan gradually changed the restriction on public services for internal migrants. However, the actual extent to which the policy change made a real difference in education is unclear. After competing for public resources with the local population, the New

Dongguanese now find themselves in the unfortunate situation of competing with other, more desirable migrants. Dongguan did increase the resources made available (by building new schools or planning to do so), but it also encouraged and increased the benefits for those considered ‘talented’, now deciding to establish themselves in Dongguan.

Dongguan's services for the management of migration are severely understaffed. Social workers providing universal services apart, there are only 36 dispatched social workers (in subordinate units of the NDSB) involved in assisting the New Dongguanese. Their number is severely undersized for a population of 6 million. Social workers are not only small in number, but also new in the field of migration. Many respondents called for increased support from their organization and employing unit, including finance, training and communication. As an occupation, social work itself is new and young in China, with insufficient maturity as a profession and without the political backing to engage with the complexity of migration in a meaningful way.

The research suggested that for the New Dongguanese, children and women make the majority of social workers' clients. Besides information on the registration process and administrative affairs, social workers were hard to connect with migrant men and women without children who are working in Dongguan factories. When providing alternative services, these usually take the form of leisure and entertainment, urban adaptability and legal advice. But the New Dongguanese are mostly concerned by their children's education. And social workers know this too well. Yet, services respond to different questions or manage to address the concerns to a smaller extent.

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