

Scott Rozelle and Natalie Hell, *Invisible China: How the Urban-Rural Divide Threatens China's Rise*

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Invisible China is a clearly written book full of policy prescriptions for China based on decades of research by Scott Rozelle's research team at REAP (Rural Education Action Program). Though both Rozelle and Natalie Hell's names are on the cover, the authorship of the book seems vague. The author(s) of the book refer(s) to themselves (himself) as "I" instead of "we," REAP is described as "my" research team rather than "our" research team, and the "Author's Note" that begins the book is signed by Rozelle alone. I felt that the main arguments come from Rozelle and that Hell was more of a writer, clarifying Rozelle's prose for a popular audience. While I find myself convinced of the value of many of the book's policy recommendations, I disagree with its basic arguments.

These arguments conclude that it is in the interests of Americans to support China's continued economic development (China's rise), and that China's underinvestment in the education of its rural youth threatens China's transition from a middle-income to wealthy country. Since many popular images of China's education system come from the hypercompetitive schools and students of its urban regions, and few other than academic researchers are aware of the problems rural students face, Rozelle and Hell title the book "*Invisible China*."

Rozelle and Hell's data is convincing for the most part, though one aspect is misleading. They begin with statistics that show that the average education levels of Chinese workers are low for a country of its economic means, but much of the discussion of this data does not address the fact that these low education levels reflect the availability of schooling thirty or more years ago, not the circumstances of the twenty-first century. When Rozelle and Hell focus on the contemporary situation and its remaining shortcomings, they are much more convincing. Yes, China has built primary and junior middle schools with good facilities and well-trained teachers across most of its rural areas; yes, China has expanded its university enrolments to the extent that roughly 25 percent of students can attend university; yes, China has systematically built vocational high schools so rural students who do not go to university can at least attend a vocational high school. But these measures are still inadequate for several reasons. First, the vocational high schools offer poor-quality education; they are not as well-administered as the primary schools, junior middle schools, and academic high schools, and the students who attend them often learn little. Second, many rural primary school students suffer from nutritional deficiencies (mainly anemia) and public health problems (mainly intestinal worms and myopia) that sap their energy and capacity for learning. Third, rural students are often raised by grandparents who lack cultural capital and do not give their grandchildren enough intellectual stimulation. In my own research on rural education during the early 2000s, I discovered that rural children had been remarkably successful in testing into university. However, that situation has changed, and I attribute the change to the fact many of the children with relatively high levels of cultural capital tested into universities and then migrated to cities during the 1980s and 1990s. Rozelle and Hell also do not mention the fact that the majority of university spaces are reserved for urban dwellers, meaning that many rural students must achieve even higher scores on the university entrance exam than their urban counterparts to make it to university, top universities especially.

Rozelle and Hell make several policy recommendations related to these problems. These include providing vocational schools with greater investment and monitoring, rolling out public health programs across rural China, and providing parenting classes to rural parents. Rozelle and Hell also suggest ending the rural-urban divide of China's household registration system so that rural children in general, including those who are labeled "rural" by the household registration system but who actually live with their migrant-worker parents in large cities, can receive better educational opportunities. Amending the household registration system would also end the systematic anti-rural bias of the university entrance exam. On humanitarian grounds, I support most of these measures, but I am convinced neither that American or Western institutions should donate money to encourage China to implement these measures nor that these measures are the key to China's continued economic development, nor even the happiness of China's youth, as Rozelle and Hell suggest.

The authors assert that economic interdependence makes it in America's interest to support China's rise. They do not analyze the possibility that one country's rise and another's fall can be interlinked. Nor do they mention China's support of authoritarian governance around the world. As someone located in Hong Kong, who sees the downside of China's authoritarian governance every day, I do not feel that charitable American organizations (such as the Gates Foundation) should be encouraged to donate money to Chinese causes. The authors also take a rather dichotomous view of economic development. Either a country develops or it remains poor, stuck in the "middle-income trap." Rather than a gradation of levels of economic prosperity, countries are either rich or poor and China will remain poor if it does not develop its rural education. I prefer to view levels of prosperity on a continuum and would be perfectly content if a bit more prosperity went to places and people other than China. There are plenty of countries poorer than China and plenty of poor people in wealthy countries like the United States. Insofar as the world economy is interrelated, I do not see why slightly more prosperity in China should matter more to the United States than a bit more prosperity in India or Indonesia. Support for democracy should be a major factor when considering where to donate.

I am also not convinced that investment in education is the key to China's continuing economic development. Rozelle and Hell assert that as automation increases and income levels rise, the capacity to continually learn new skills is paramount and that only highly educated workers can succeed at this. Such a view of economic development suggests that employers would hire people if only they could learn quickly enough. I tend to think that employers will hire people only if they need them. Though employers will attempt to select those people who seem to need the least training, they will provide enough training if they really need the workers. There are plenty of academic theories that suggest an overly educated workforce is more of a problem than an undereducated one. In my own research in Shandong province, I found that many young people, particularly those who had a high school education or above, refused to work in factories, even though factories paid close to double what was paid by the service sector jobs that these youths accepted. The book suggests that automation will cause factory work to dry up, and undereducated youth will be left with no options. But China now has the problem of many factory jobs being rejected by youth who see such careers as below them. According to Rozelle and Hell's data, Russia is the country with the highest average levels of educational attainment, but it is hardly an economic powerhouse. Ronald Dore (1997) proposed the problem of "diploma disease" to describe those countries where the education system developed more quickly than the economy. The result was schools filled with students who did nothing but memorize facts so they could succeed on exams and secure a diploma to continue on to the next level of education. As the education system but not the economy developed, academic credentials for certain jobs increased and students had no choice but to fight for educational success. Eric Wolf (1969) argued that the great peasant revolutions of the twentieth century were all organized by overeducated but underemployed youth. Nothing was more dangerous to "social stability" than a bunch of college graduates with no suitable jobs. As an academic, I value investment in education, but whether such investment directly leads to economic development is a matter of debate, and Rozelle and Hell only present one side of this debate.

Finally, Rozelle and Hell imply that rural children would be much happier if they only had the educational experiences that their urban counterparts receive. Again, this

picture is a bit too rosy for me. It reminds me of their view of the Chinese and American economies being interdependent instead of competitive. In economics, perhaps there can be both interdependence and competition, but in education, the competitive aspects dominate. In China, roughly 25 percent of students can win in the competition for university places. Of these, the great majority of winners come from urban backgrounds due to the problems the book discusses; but if all of these problems were solved, it would still only be 25 percent of students who made it to university. Indeed, in addition to a lack of social capital, the competitiveness of the education system itself is a factor that causes some students to drop out early. Enhancing the competitiveness of the education system by giving rural students support would only enhance this dynamic.

When I teach about educational dilemmas, I sometimes ask students to choose between two dystopias. The first is modeled after Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Humanity is divided into genetic castes: a few are bred smart with great credentials and intellectual jobs while the majority receive shorter education and work menial jobs. There is no class mobility, no competition, and, at least according to the ruling classes, all are relatively satisfied in their jobs. In the second society, anyone born with or who develops the slightest intellectual flaw is immediately given all of the medical care and supplementary tutoring they need to catch up. At age twelve all of these completely equal children are put into a six-year high school to compete for university places. The system is hyper-competitive with all studying to exhaustion nightly; slight differences in stamina and perhaps luck on test day make the difference in determining who wins entrance to the best universities. The children of professors are just as likely to end up in working-class jobs as the children of street cleaners. Students don't like either option, but many, including the majority of Chinese students, pick Huxley's dystopia.

Like many academics, I value education, equality of opportunity, and human rights. I support all of Rozelle and Hell's policy suggestions. However, I think that China's development is just as likely to harm American interests as it is to help them, that more rural educational opportunities might not affect China's development, and that increasing the ability of China's rural students to compete academically is not likely to increase their happiness.

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