Inside and Outside Views of China’s Migrant Children:
Migrants and Non-Migrants Who Viewed Photographs of Migrant Children Interpret Them According to Their Own Backgrounds

Perceptions of migrant workers as poor, dirty and uneducated are rooted in stereotypes, and their contributions to China’s prosperity are often ignored. I also had a stereotypical image of migrant workers. I knew that image probably would be changed if I immersed myself in their stories, but I was still worried that my photographs might be biased. I am Chinese, but to Chinese migrant workers, I am an outsider. Although I did research in advance and taught migrant children photography for three months, I wondered: Could my photographs provide a fair and well-rounded portrayal of China’s migrant children and their families? Would I interpret those photographs differently than they did due to my life experience and knowledge?

To examine these questions, I conducted research using photo elicitation -- the technique of inserting photographs into interviews. Using ten of my photographs of migrant children and their families that portrayed various aspects of life such as the community environment, housing conditions, the school and the classroom, I interviewed six migrant workers (insiders) and six non-migrant workers (outsiders). By comparing the insiders’ responses and the outsiders’ responses, I sought to learn whether my photographs fairly and accurately depicted the lives of migrant children.

The findings indicated that the insiders and the outsiders interpreted the photos according to their own backgrounds and knowledge. On one hand, the outsiders were
more likely to provide responses predominately focusing on the poor living conditions of
the migrant children’s families, which reflected the outsiders’ stereotypical impressions
of migrant workers as poor and dirty. On the other hand, the insiders seldom paid
attention to the modest conditions but considered the photos a typical portrayal of the
daily lives of migrant children, showing their families as family units that were no
different than other families in the society.

With the comparison, I was able to discover misunderstandings that I was not
previously aware of. I realized that “migrant workers” and “migrant children” were
oversimplified words, because every migrant worker and every migrant child has his or
her own character, emotions, and stories, just as everyone else does. Thus, with the help
of this photo-elicitation research, I was able to make my coverage more balanced. My
continued photographic work of migrant children focused more on the vitality of their
lives, instead of the poverty, with an attempt to present a more in-depth and well-rounded
portrayal of their lives.

In a broader sense, socially vulnerable groups, such as migrant workers, exist in
every country and every culture. Photojournalists often try to tell the stories of the
“other” group. This project could serve as an example for other photographers who plan
to work on similar topics. Moreover, photographers who intend to photograph subjects as
people, instead of as stereotypes, should not label the subject as belonging to one
category, such as “migrants” because the photographer’s stereotypical impression of the
subject would easily lead to biased coverage.

In this study, I defined migrant workers for the sake of acquiring responses from
both the insiders and the outsiders. To define a migrant worker, I used the concept of
“Hukou” -- the household registration principle in China, which identifies a person as a resident of the area. For this specific research, migrant respondents (insiders) did not have the Hukou of Wuhan whereas non-migrant respondents (outsiders) did. In addition, in an attempt to get a truly insider’s perspective, I only interviewed migrant workers living in the Hua’anli community because that is where all of the images used in the photo elicitation were photographed.

The interviews were conducted individually. Respondents were shown the same ten photographs in the same order. They were asked to look through the photos and respond to any one that stood out to them. After that, they were asked to review the photos again and make separate comments on each image. Last, when they were satisfied with their responses, I asked specific questions, such as “Which photo most accurately represents migrant children and their families?” In all the three steps, they could choose not to respond.

Half of the respondents in each group were male and half were female. They ranged in age from 25 to 64. The occupations of the insiders’ group varied from unemployed to a bistro owner to clothing factory workers, while those of the outsiders’ included a doctor, a university professor and a police department secretary. Most of the migrant respondents only went to primary schools, whereas the non-migrant respondents completed at least college.

The image that elicited the most commentary depicted a young girl, about 3, crying sadly, while her mother was feeding a baby and her sister was going to leave (Photo 9). Some respondents focused on why the little girl was crying, while others questioned why the family had three children. Those focusing on the crying gave a
similar reason to explain it: Because the mother was looking after the baby, the girl might feel left out. Two pointed out that children from cities would never cry like this. Once the children cry, their parents or other relatives would comfort them immediately. “City kids are spoiled because one family can only have one child,” a migrant worker concluded. Those questioning why the family had three children were mainly non-migrant workers.

The one-child policy in China restricts urban couples to only one child, but rural couples can have two if their first child is a girl. Seldom would a family, whether urban or rural, have more than two children. It is common sense among Chinese, and it may explain their question. Yet, a non-migrant worker indicated that, “It’s not about why they have three kids. It’s about why they want three kids when they all suffer from bad living conditions. They can’t afford it. They can’t provide the things the kids need. I have to say I don’t understand,” he said, verging on anger.

Another picture that elicited notable responses, but only from non-migrant workers, portrayed the tangle of electric, television, phone, and Internet lines (Photo 4). Respondents used words such as “dangerous” and “chaotic” to describe it. Furthermore, the university professor thought about a bigger story the image might tell: a metaphor for China.

“It’s like what happens in China now. There are lots of different types of problems and conflicts tangling and twisting with each other […] so you have no idea how to handle with them. You don’t know where to start. The thick lines are the main conflicts, and the thin lines are other secondary issues or problems,” she said.
In contrast, most migrant workers recognized the context in which the photo was taken. Only two considered the wires dangerous and said that they had seen one or two accidents happen there in the past.

Similarly, migrant workers were more likely to provide neutral reactions when viewing photos related to the school life of migrant children, such as a photo of the school’s flag-rising ceremony on the rooftop (Photo 1) and a photo of several students playing during class break (Photo 2). Most gave short and simple feedback such as “It was a school activity” and “The kids were playing”. Only a male clothing factory worker thought that “It was a shabby school without a playground,” and indicated that the school conditions presented in the photos were worse than those of the schools in his home village.

By contrast, all six of the non-migrant workers provided detailed responses to the school pictures. Most focused on the poor conditions of the school. The police department secretary indicated that it would be dangerous for the children to attend the ceremony on the rooftop. “What if someone falls down?” she wondered.

The doctor also thought the rooftop was dangerous, but she suggested that schools in rural areas may have much worse conditions than this one. “I heard that kids living in remote mountains had to walk two hours to the school. So these kids here […] are lucky,” she said.

While most non-migrant respondents were concerned about the modest conditions of the school, the university professor took her comments to a political level. She considered the flag-raising ceremony as a “China-model moral and national education.”
“It’s a kind of brainwashing and political indoctrination,” she said, “Even under horrible conditions like this, the school still didn’t forget to promote a sense of national identity, which naturally meant loving the Party.”

In general, non-migrant interviewees’ responses were more in-depth. Perhaps this was because many migrant workers lacked education. Some of them had only completed their studies at primary schools. These respondents shared only what was depicted explicitly in the pictures as well as their direct feelings and impressions. They sometimes also connected the picture with their personal experience. Non-migrant interviewees, however, were often able to take their feedback to another, more abstract level.

In addition, the familiarity with the community did affect migrant workers’ judgments of it. Only a few of them gave negative comments on the community, the school, and the modest conditions. This may be because the migrant respondents lived in the community, and some of their children studied at the school. They had acclimated to the environment. They probably would not consider a tangle of high-voltage electrical lines as dangerous because they walked under the wires every day. Insiders’ knowledge and daily experience enabled them to become more tolerant of the living conditions. So, compared to the outsiders, the insiders were more likely to give neutral responses.

Next, the photo representing most respondents’ choice of the most accurate portrayal of migrant children was of a girl doing her homework on a bed (Photo 7). Both migrant and non-migrant respondents thought the image reflected an important characteristic of children from rural areas. A female clothing factory worker connected the photo to her personal experience and explained, “I’m from the countryside as well. I know studying hard is the only way for kids from rural areas [to succeed]. Only in this
way, they may be able to change their lives, you know, to not end up as a migrant worker as we have.”

The photo representing the second most respondents’ choice of the most accurate portrayal was about a young boy jumping on a messy bed (Photo 6). Many Respondents considered the boy as miserable but mischievous. As the doctor pointed out, “He enjoyed playing with himself even under poor living conditions.”

However, a migrant worker who didn’t select this photo as the most accurate picture provided information behind it: “I knew the boy’s father. He even bought an apartment in his home village. They have money! Why do they still live in an apartment like this? It’s like a shanty house, and the boy looks like a homeless kid.”

This was an example reflecting another obvious difference between the insiders’ responses and the outsiders’ - the insiders sometimes would provide contextual information that was not presented in the photos; in contrast, the outsiders were more likely to provide stereotypical reactions and opinions, which in fact, often differed from reality.

One example was the doctor, who considered the migrant children in Wuhan “lucky”, because she thought schools in the countryside would have worse conditions than the one presented in the photos. However, a few migrant workers mentioned that schools in their home villages actually have better conditions than the one in Wuhan. “At least we have a large playground,” said the male clothing worker.

In addition, since captions were not presented during the interviews, some respondents were not sure exactly what was happening in the photos. Their feedback was limited due to a lack of knowledge of the context and content of the photos. For instance,
most respondents did not recognize the food in a picture of a girl eating (Photo 8), so their initial responses all concerned questions of what she was eating, which was not the issue that I intended to address in that picture.

Furthermore, I realized that photos could be misleading without captions. The picture of a girl crying while her mother was feeding another baby (Photo 9) was a good example. Many respondents thought that, because the mother was looking after the baby, the crying girl felt left out. In fact, the misbehaving girl wanted to do something that her mother and older sister would not allow her to do. Thus, her sister shouted at her, and she cried.

This example reflected that the respondents, whether migrants or non-migrants, tended to provide logical explanations based on their experience, knowledge and common sense, although these explanations often differed from reality. This reminded me that, as a photographer, I might sometimes be too close to the subject and the photo, and I might assume that viewers share similar background knowledge with me. In fact, however, they often do not share that knowledge, and they will react based on their own experiences and knowledge. Thus, captions indeed play a significant role in illustrating what the photographer intends to present.

Another finding was that respondents, regardless of insider or outsider status, preferred to connect the images with their personal stories. Their responses were greatly shaped by their past experience. All the interviewees recalled their personal life, such as their kids and their childhood, at least once during the research interview.

Lastly, I realized that the initial responses and impressions of the photos were simple and short, but as the interviews went on, the respondents looked at the photos
more carefully and provided more detailed information. Thus, warm-ups were needed in order to acquire more in-depth responses.

Conducting this photo-elicitation allowed me to see many nuances. For instance, the female clothing factory worker provided a different perspective to an image of a girl sitting backward in a chair (Photo 10).

She explained: “The way of the girl sitting on the chair is different than the way of city kids. When you visit the countryside, you always see people, especially kids, sitting on a chair like this, you know, sitting backwards in a chair. Country kids do whatever they want at home because their parents would not restrict them too much. In cities, however, no one would act like this.”

Overall, all 12 respondents thought that the ten photos accurately and fairly depicted the lives of China’s migrant children and their families. What was different was that the outsiders tended to focus on the poverty while the insiders focused on the normality in the pictures. Many of them saw the photos in a positive light: although the children have to “endure horrible living conditions”, they looked “happy”, “mischievous”, and “innocent”.

However, the university professor added another perspective, “There also are poor people who are not migrants but from cities, you know, like those unemployed and with low income. If you do not mention that these are migrant children and their family, I may think that they are just poor Wuhan citizens. So don’t label people as groups. For instance, I met a woman who was selling apples on the street, and she told me that she had bought three apartments in Wuhan. She was just selling fruit for fun because she was
retired and had nothing to do at home. So, don’t label people when you don’t know them. Life is complicated.”
PHOTOS:

PHOTO 1

PHOTO 2