

SEPARATE AND UNEQUAL

How Chinese schools discriminate against 65% of the population

Rural pupils are shut out of city schools and neglected in their villages. This is cruel and counterproductive



LAST year some images went viral on the internet in China. They showed children descending an 800-metre (2,600-foot) rock face on rickety ladders made of vines, wood and rusty metal. Their destination: school. The photographer was told by a local official that “seven or eight” people had died after losing their grip. Yet the children did this regularly—there is no school at the top of the mountain in Sichuan province where they live. The photographs conveyed two striking aspects of life in the Chinese countryside: a hunger for education so strong that children will risk their lives for it, and a callous lack of government attention to the needs of rural students.

In many ways, education in China is improving. Since 2000 the annual tally of students graduating from university has increased nearly eightfold, to more than 7.5m. But many rural students are neglected by China’s school system, and they are not the only ones. So, too, are the children of migrants who have moved to the cities from the countryside and poor students who want to go to senior high school.

This is not only unfair; it is also counterproductive. China faces a demographic crunch: its workforce is shrinking and it can no longer depend on cheap, low-skilled migrant labour to power its growth. Its young—especially those with rural roots—need to become more skilled. That calls for better education.

Conference interpreting entrance exam - Consecutive

GM FOOD

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Gene technology is a relatively new field of science that has gone through a rapid development in the past century. Its importance is unquestionable, but although it has a more than 100-year-long history, for most people genetics is still something terrifying, distant and mysterious. The thing we still know or rather hear most about is one of its applications, genetically modified or GM food.

The debates on whether GM food is desired or not have been going on ever since the first such product appeared on the market in the United States in 1994. It was GM tomatoes with a longer shelf life. Gene technology made it possible to slow the natural process of ripening without interrupting the development of desirable flavour and colour. So the genetically modified fruit was indistinguishable from the unmodified tomato.

Yet, in spite of all the advertised benefits of GM food, people still prefer the organic versions. Why? There are two main concerns about the effects of genetically modified plants. One is that they will transfer their new genes to wild relatives or similar crops growing nearby, and this would cause unforeseen effects. The other is that the new plants will become harmful to humans.

However, there are the unquestionable benefits as well. For example, such plants require a smaller amount of fertilizers and pesticides. Also, modified food can be easier to process and requires fewer additives. The consumer can benefit through the improved flavour or the healthier qualities of certain types (e.g. GM potatoes that absorb less fat on cooking).