Higher Education Inequalities of Access: A Case for Migrant Children

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Higher Education Inequality of Access: A Case of Rural-Urban Migrant Children

HS4008: Literature Review

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This article reviews policy changes of education in China, pertaining to transformation of China’s economic system towards modernization and the adoption of neo-liberal discourse of competition. These shifts however unintendedly exacerbate structural and systematic inequalities with regard to educational attainment. In recent years much literature about education during post-Mao era mainly centred on educational policy shifts and inequalities across various macro-levels such as regional disparity, rural-urban sectors, economic inequalities and disparities of government funding for various tiers of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Focusing on Higher Education (HE), issues highlighted were related to the inequalities of access to HE across the above mentioned variables and the problematization of the expanding gap between the privilege and underprivileged groups in China. Research often utilized quantitative data of correlation regression analysis based on national statistical data covering the intersections across various socio-economic groups and between regions reviewing the implications of policy shifts.

In light of growing inequalities in China, there is a vital need to examine the complex relationships and interacting mechanisms resulting from recent educational reforms of marketization and the expansion of HE intake by studying the impacts on marginalized groups such as rural-urban migrant children. Based on 2011 statistics, there were roughly 221 million migrant people in China in 2010 (National Bureau of Statistics 2011) amongst which, millions of migrant children often face additional challenges as the household registration system (Houkou) differentiates between local and migrant peoples. Migrants often receive lesser social welfare benefits and are ostracized from mainstream urban people (Liang and Ma 2004; Wu and Treiman 2004; Postiglione 2006). Migrant children face difficulties to access education in urban areas (Liang and Chen 2007) despite China’s mandatory nine-year education (Fleisher and Yang 2003). Even if they manage to attend public schools, they are...
usually required to pay higher educational fees for schools which have questionable educational quality. Compounding their problems, migrant families are usually involved in low-income work and hence their school enrolment rate is lower as compared to urban children (Liang and Chen 2007). Therefore, it is essential that migrant students be studied as a microcosm of wider implications of recent policy changes in relation to HE admissions as they and their families will most likely bear the fullest impact, considering that they are already facing unsurmountable structural difficulties based on their socio-economic status within Chinese society.

This literature review has three main aims; (1) review the background of China’s educational reforms; (2) examine existing literature based on existing structural inequalities of HE; (3) highlight the importance of further research into migrant population circumstance. The review of existing literature will look at the various aspects of structural inequalities examined in relation to government educational reforms of marketization and enrolment expansion of HE. Notably, HE in this paper refers to education beyond the Law of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) on Compulsory Education at the primary and secondary stages (Chinese Government Portal, 2005), including high schools. For the purposes of this paper, the focus would be on universities.

1. Reformulating Education in China

China’s reforms on education saw increased marketization and privatization of education across various levels, from basic education to HE. The adoption of open-door policy in 1970s, China’s economy shifted from centralized-planning towards a more market-orientated model, facilitating efficiency and mobility of resource allocation (Mok, Wong and Zhang, 2009). Economic spheres were affected in conjunction with the management of social welfare
policies including education, healthcare and housing. In comparison to Mao’s era, financial burdens now falls largely upon Chinese citizens as the economic reforms significantly reduced state’s role in the provision of financial services (Crabbs, 2010). Hence, Chinese citizens can no longer rely upon notions of “iron rice bowl” and “social security” (Cook, 2002). Limited state resources propelled non-state sectors and actors to finance and develop education which saw the process of privatization and marketization developing the education market (Mok, 2012). Privatisation has been particularly intensive in higher education (Mok, 2012) as the state had rapidly removed state funding and thus, public universities had to reform its administration and were privatized on a cost-recovery basis. Revenue of HEIs diversified and is not entirely reliant on state funds but also from external sources such as donations, tuition fees, and investments from companies (Mok, 2012). These HEIs became known as transformed or zhuanzhi institutions, while still essentially state-owned, the management is privatized and whilst being granted more autonomy, that are held to the sway of market fluctuations (Mok, 2012).

Next, China’s reforms for education saw the need for an increase in enrolment in HE to suit economic needs. “Centralized governance” within the new socialist market economy context was seen to be needing more flexibility and hence, the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) issued a Decision of the Central Committee of CCP a reform in the education system, where transference of power was provided to lower levels of government and the reduction of governmental control over education (CCCCP, 1985). The Outline for Reform and Development of Education in China revealed that the central government will only macro-manage policy guidelines and essential administration whereby local governments and non-state actors are to assume increased responsibilities in the provision of education. The focus of reformulating education to suit economic needs is apparent during post-Mao period with
both Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin’s slogans of “Education must face modernisation, face the world, and face the future” and “Invigorating China through Science and Education” respectively\(^1\) (Crabbs, 2010). In June 1999, the CCP began to expand college enrolment (Figure 1) which was touted as a watershed in education policies which (Qinghua Wang, 2014) aimed to encourage more ‘problem-based’ learning and the development of an independent and creative thinker. According to the Ministry of Education (MOE), the number of students enrolled in HEIs increased from one million in 1998 to six million in 2009, a six fold increase (Chan and Ngok, 2011). The proliferation saw a variety of differing types of schools such as state-owned schools that is privately contracted, government-subsidized schools, tuition-charging schools, public schools, private boarding schools and other varied sizes and quality; wherein these schools are known as minban or “people-run”.

\(^1\) Both of these slogans were taken by (Crabbs, 2010) from painted characters on the walls the school’s playground, which was seen as a common sight at many private and public schools the writer visited.
2. Existing Literature on Educational Inequalities

National discourse placed quality as part of national strength and the calibre of persons or human capital directly produced through schools and thus, it is essential for students in China hoping to gain entrance to college to do well in the national college examination known as *gaokao*, a differentiation from the past which depended on familial affiliates (Wang Houxiong, 2010). This examination will be the determinant for the student’s future prospects in terms of career choices, wealth, income and social status (WANG Houxiong. 2011). Privatization in China therefore forces individuals to choose and pursue a lifestyle that will reflect individuals as modern citizens, attributed to neo-liberal discourse of competition and self-determination(Crabbs, 2010).

Associations between education and social equity have often been observed together where education seemed to promote social mobility along with complementary notions of equality of opportunities. From a Confucian perspective, gaining education will provide students from disadvantaged families to alleviate their social and economic status within one’s society (Chan and Ngok, 2011). Despite these dominant discourses, not all Chinese experience the same notions of ‘equal opportunities’ and such discourses arguably reproduce and justify structural inequalities in light of Confucian philosophy. Hence, controversies today mainly focuses on the shifts in education policies that increased marketization and commodification of education amplifying hegemonic cultural model of meritocracy, naturalizing social inequality of inclusion versus exclusion within China (Crabbs, 2010) after Mao’s era.
2.1 HE Admission Inequality Related to Increased Marketization

Wang Li (2011) employed social exclusion theory as a diagnostic framework to study educational inequalities of HE. Various typologies of social exclusion (Table 1) can be seen to be applied to China as a tool to view the structure of educational inequalities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Feature</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inherence</td>
<td>Constitutive deprivation</td>
<td>Constitutive Importance; direct deprivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inherence Constitutive</td>
<td>Instrumental relevance; result in other deprivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intention</td>
<td>Active deprivation</td>
<td>Deliberate exclusion; usually a result of a particular policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Passive deprivation</td>
<td>Non-deliberate exclusion; usually a result of the overall situation</td>
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Table 1: Adapted from Sen (2000)

With reference to Table 1, Wang Li (2011) argues that three forms of deprivation, namely, constitutive, active and passive deprivation are corresponded to economic handicaps of financially-challenged qualified candidates, regional disparities and unequal admission systems and finally urban-rural disparities respectively. Chan and Ngok (2011) while similarly tackling the issue of socio-economic inequalities, they focused on the entrance disparities with elite universities and highlighted that access for students are unequal and dependent socio-economic background, arguing that the educational inequality in China has increased due to the structural issues pertaining to regional economic disparity between provinces and socio-economic groups. Notably, despite increasing students from rural backgrounds attaining admissions to HEs, Chan and Ngok (2011) illustrated that more than half of these rural students often end up in lower tiers of the HEI hierarchy. The relation as established by Chan and Ngok (2011) between HEIs admissions and socio-economic
background is further supported by Liu (2012) who contends that based on historical Confucian cultural influence of collectivism and utilitarianism these ideologies continually strengthens hierarchical structure of China’s HEIs and caused disparities in access of different applicants across social strata and to differing types of schools.

2.2 Unintended HE Admission Inequality Related to Increased Enrolment

The expansion of enrolment is seen to be positive where Wang (2011) showed that the enrolment expansion have improved ethnic minorities’ involvement, with an annual growth of 19.8% as compared to national average of 20.9% and hence, seemingly equitable access opportunities. In addition, Gou (2006) showed significant increase in the number of rural HE applicants is higher than their urban counterparts, due to strong middle schools and the school’s ability to compete for HE admissions. However, Wang (2011) contended that despite the increased HE enrolment, the aggregate growth of HE admissions has not been distributed fairly throughout the population and opportunities of gaining admissions into HEIs is varied across states, rural-urban sectors, social class and ethnicity. Wang (2011) also identifies that increasing social class polarization for secondary schools continues to develop gap in access for HE, highlighting opportunity gaps across regions by demonstrating regional disparity in HE opportunities by developing measurement indexes. Findings by Wang (2011) found regional disparities as rooted in the admissions quota which is orientated towards urban areas therefore neglecting provincial HE and despite national policies changes which aimed to increase regional HE placements. By utilizing quantitative opportunity indexes he found weak effectiveness of the increasing HE placements and recommended improving equal access or balancing the distribution of HE applicants.
3. Evaluative observations and contentions.

Based on the above section, much of these observations attribute the problems of unequal admissions based on existing social inequalities being reproduced in education. However, there are seemingly contradictory findings. Firstly, we can determine that marketization and deregulation of state financial support have brought about financial difficulties for those in the lower socio-economic classes. Secondly, the expansion of enrolment seems to be have competing thesis where on one hand, better secondary school education in poorer regions enabled students to compete for HE whilst at the same time, the gap of gaining admission between the social classes can be seen to be increasing due to financial restraints imposed by the marketization of HEIs.

Current researches have yet to tackle issues related to the interaction effects of increased enrolment alongside marketization. Hence, in light of recent policy changes, research on migrants; arguably the most vulnerable social group to both policies shifts and the effect on HE admissions could possibly provide vital information about the mechanisms of structural inequalities. Wei and Hou (2010) in the paper “The Household Registration System, Education System, and Inequalities in Education for Migrant Children” have examined impacts of recent reforms on elementary and junior secondary schools and it highlights the potency of carrying further research on the aspects of HE admission inequality and difficulties faced by migrant children.

Researches on migrant children have mostly reviewed the systemic constrains migrant students face in receiving compulsory education. Migrant children already face additional difficulties pertaining to the higher fees they are required to pay as they are unsubsidized under the hukou system. Secondly, migrant children face interrupted schooling even prior to
admission to HE because they often have to take HE entrance exams in their own regions. Research showed that between 86% to 93%\(^2\) of migrant children saw the *hukou* system as a main obstacle for not continuing studies in Beijing and are more likely to drop out of school (Liu and Jacob, 2013). However, research have yet to focus on HE admissions in light of recent educational reforms, and examination of this aspect will contribute to our understanding of systemic barriers migrant students face and how some migrant students managed to attend HEIs reviewing the ways in which they managed to overcome the structural and financial barriers for entry.

At the macro-level, questions that will arise in time to come will be issues pertaining to whether China will develop into a nation with binary social divisions due to educational inequalities. If education continues to receive marginal state support and moves towards greater liberalization operating on user-pays basis it will further develop differentiated and amplified impacts on marginalized populations such as the above mentioned rural-urban migrants. Based on possible the trajectories of Chinese social stratifications in education, and its contribution to the growing polarity of inequality, the CCP may face unsurmountable pressures to inhibit the education gap and hopefully before its socialist ideals are hauled into question.

\(^2\) These statistics were taken based on a case study of two junior high schools, gaining responses from teachers, parents and students from Grades 7 and 8, conducted by (Liu and Jacob, 2013).
Bibliography


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