Questioning Meritocracy: Inequality in China's Education System

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Literature Review

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Introduction

As China continuously grows as an economic behemoth, an unsurprising increase in attention has been given to its systems and organisation (Roberts, 2014). Over the past few decades, more studies on China’s various institutions have emerged, one reason being the very fact that globalisation and the development of Chinese higher education has allowed both ‘outsiders’ (people outside of China) to research on the countries systems from a close range and also for ‘insiders’ (Chinese academics) to organise and release information to the rest of the world (Kanbur and Zhang, 2004). One such category of information lies in the sociological research on the Chinese education system. Amongst this section of research is a popular issue that is continuously brought up; inequality.

The drastic political and economic changes that China has undergone since the post-mao era has forced various institutional characteristics to morph into things that academics are still trying to fully understand. What this paper will look at is the current understanding of inequality in the Chinese education system, through the analyses and comparison of existing literature on the topic. Within this category of research itself, there are a multitude of works that approach the topic in differing ways. Most works referred to can be put into two categories; firstly, studies on how unequal the education system in china is and secondly, how the
state has dealt with and deals with this inequality. These categories are definitely not mutually exclusive and the research of several works fall into both categories. This framework is hence brought up for the sake of comprehensibility regarding the direction of current research. The majority of works that mainly fall in the first category have approached the question of inequality through highly quantitative methods. Despite variations in scope and variables, the majority of quantitative research agree on the conclusion that although *Gaokao* scores and the entrance to universities prove more meritocratic than commonly assumed, there is an obvious correlation between parents’ educational levels and the performance of students. On top of this academics remind readers of further issues that quantitative data accumulations fall short of including, creating contributive yet unreliable conclusions on their hypotheses. What this also implies is the need for further qualitative research to complement such existing data in order to paint a more representative picture of the inequality in China’s education system. The topic of meritocracy is also constantly brought up in both measuring the equality in education systems and analysing it as a tool for political legitimacy. Works highlight the relationship between equality and meritocracy, measuring the former in terms of the latter.
Determining Levels of Meritocracy

The inequality in China’s education system is of no surprise to most. Not only have sociological studies of education revealed various ways in which education systems reflect and reproduce stratification, China’s inequalities in general have come to the attention of many (Hannum, 1999; Wang 2012). These inequalities are studied mainly on the basis of gender, socio-economic and socio-demographic characteristics. (Liu, 2013; Liu, 2015; Magnani and Zhu, 2015) Justifiably, Bourdieu’s study of various categories of capital is commonly cited in explaining what exactly creates an unlevelled playing field for China’s students. (Mok & Wu, 2015) Yet extensive research have taken this understanding further, specifically in the context of China’s educational institutions. A significant number of papers have emerged in the last five years, looking into ways to determine just how meritocratic China’s education system is, ultimately concluding on the system’s inequality as a whole. Ye Liu’s (2013) research on the meritocracy of higher education identifies two complementary aspects that the notion of educational meritocracy used with; “how social origin impacts on educational opportunities and achievement; and how merit measured by educational outcomes is related to social destination”. Yeung (2013) has adopted a more specific scope in measuring just how much China’s higher education expansion has impacted social stratification, through investigation of the influence of family background on
educational achievement. Liu Jingming (2015) echoes this idea in the statements, “Individual education performance is usually influenced jointly by ability and background (family background). The relative share of these two factors forms the basic grounds for judgments of educational equity.” All these works amongst others first approach the topic of educational meritocracy by citing the extensive use of the Maximally Maintained Inequality (MMI) and the Effectively Maintained Inequality (EMI) theories.

The MMI theory “provides one perspective on the implications of the expansion of educational opportunities for meritocratic selection in education” (Liu, 2013). In accordance to this theory, the influence of socioeconomic status on educational achievement should fall after a particular level of education develops to universality among the upper classes (Raftery and Hout, 1993). Yet as various authors point out, despite the expansion of China’s higher education system, the level of education is far from being ‘maximised’ for the upper classes. On top of this, academics also contest the MMI theory with the EMI theory which predicts that “the effects of social origin on educational attainment would not decrease, even if a given level of education became universal for advantaged social classes.” (Liu, 2013)
In terms of results, these works of research agree on two things. The first being the conclusion that despite results pointing towards a considerably meritocratic education system in terms socio-economic status, common limitations in the methodology lead to the neglect of several crucial factors. As Ye Liu (2013) points out, “it is well known that geographical disparities in resources and schools ensure that many rural children do not reach senior secondary level and therefore have no opportunity to take the Gaokao anyway.” Likewise, Liu Jingming (2015) notes the limitation that “(their) sample comes from students already admitted to higher educations”. The second commonality in conclusion is that family background and parents’ educational level prove to have the most significant influence on academic performance and ‘success’. (Liu, 2013; Liu, 2015; Magnani and Zhu, 2015)

**Political reforms and state intervention**

Another main aspect of research on educational inequality in China is political reforms and how they have influenced levels of stratification. Values of meritocracy and inequality are highly relevant to the Chinese context just because of its communist history and drastic reforms since the Mao era (Deng and Treiman, 1997). Li and Xiao (2013), discuss the ways in which the traditional value of meritocracy has found its way from the civil service examinations of the old dynasties to the *Gaokao* (National Higher Education Entrance Examination) and
other national examinations of China’s current education system. Their works and many others deal with the transition of state policies and effects of cultural and political reforms on both levels and perceptions of inequality. The majority, if not all, the works regarding inequality in contemporary Chinese education address the issues of higher education expansion and “marketization” (Hannum, 1999; Koo, 2015; Liu, 2013; Yeung, 2013). One main factor in inequality with regards to education remains the influence of family background and intergenerational families. China’s post-Mao era saw the country’s giving in to the pressure to “open up” and the egalitarian priorities given to those of “desirable classes” disappeared (Deng and Treiman, 1997). With the concentration of state resources into elite schools, strategies of expansion were only hindered by the further stratification of urban and rural classes (Hannum, 1999; Yeung, 2013).

Meritocracy as a political tool

As mentioned above, works of quantitative research have proven that there is still high inequality within the Chinese education system. On top of this, although expansionist tactics have succeeded in raising the overall number of students enrolled in higher education institutions, it has also exacerbated the problem of inequality (Yeung, 2013) These areas have garnered ample research that have made it clear that inequalities exist and in regards to political reforms and
institutional change, why it exists to this extent in the education system. What becomes important then is to investigate exactly how this inequality remains “acceptable” or “natural” to the very people who bear its brunt. This question elicits the need to further investigate the notion of meritocracy and how it is used as a tool to promote legitimacy within a highly stratified system. (Liu, 2013; Crabb). According to Crabb (2010), “Meritocracy works ... as a governing technology that is seen as neutral and fair, and is an example of what Wang Hui has ... called the ‘depoliticized political ideology’ of market reform in China”. This is in line with the notion that education is used as an ideological tool that promotes state legitimacy (Lall; Vickers 2009). In Crabb’s words, “The idea and practice of school choice among urban middle-class families is part of a naturalised consumerist dynamic in China wherein the transformation of education into a market-supplied commodity is legitimated and animated within a neo-liberal discourse of competition and self-determination.” This idea is further argued by Liu (2013) who posits, “with the Gaokao in particular, higher education selection became an ideal vehicle for the (Chinese Communist) Party to associate itself with the ideology of meritocracy”. What these authors also stress on is the fact the various transitions during the reform period proved the ideological of educational meritocracy to be a useful tool to justify obvious stratification. Yet further research has to be done on the topic of meritocracy in order to fully understand the ways in
which citizens internalise and reproduce such ideologies. Although much research have been done on identifying the kinds of inequalities present in the education system and the extents to which it is stratified, the more subjective ways in which people buy into such notions of meritocracy could be expanded on.

**Conclusion**

The limited scope of this paper has sought out literature regarding inequality in China’s education system. What it aims to understand is how educational meritocracy is being measured by academics, and understanding on the characteristics and “uses” of the ideology of meritocracy in contemporary China. What it has discovered are the highly quantitative ways in which levels of inequality have been measured, especially in regards to political reforms and ideological transitions. Furthermore, such inequalities are perpetuated under the ideology of meritocracy. While research on the hegemonic spread of meritocratic ideology has been widely studied (Talib and Fitzgerald, 2015; Souto-Oteri, 2010), China’s situation calls for a more extensive research on the citizens’ adoption of such ideologies in the specific context of China. Perhaps an in-depth research from a more emic perspective could offer a deeper understanding as to how such modes of thinking are socialised and ingrained in the minds of people.
References:


