

# The Influences of Reforms of Higher Education in China on Education Equality

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**Abstract.** Thanks to the rapid development of a knowledge-based economy, people rely more and more on higher education. Thus, they pay more attention to the equality of higher education. This essay discusses the influences of three significant higher education reforms, including reforms during the Cultural Revolution, resumption, expansion, and reforms of the National College Entrance Examination on education equality. Unlike traditional opinions that reforms during the Cultural Revolution were a disaster to higher education, the research finds that reforms during the Cultural Revolution helped reduce education inequality among social classes and narrow the gap in education resources between urban areas and rural areas. During the commencement of the National College Entrance Examination, students face a challenging and limited opportunity to pursue higher education. It increases education inequality across regions and ethnic groups and widens the gap of education resources and chances between rural migrants and local residents. The expansion and reforms of the National College Entrance Examination provide students more opportunities to acquire access to higher education and give students who need to improve at mandatory subjects but have talents in other fields a chance to enter universities without a high score in the National College Entrance Examination.

**Key Words:** Education Inequality; Higher Education; Ethnic Groups; Rural Migrants and Local Residents.

## 1. Introduction

Chinese policymakers have paid attention to higher education since China's establishment in 1949. They have adopted a series of methods, for instance, abolishing exam and transferring the power of admission to higher education to the revolutionary committee of their factory, commune, or other place of work and resumption, expansion, and reforms of the National College Entrance Examination, trying to offer relatively equal access for all people to receive higher education, especially after China accedes to world trade [1].

Most researchers on China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution agree that it is a disaster for the development of higher education. However, only some of them pay attention to its contribution to education equality as it reduces education inequality among social classes and narrows the education resources gap between urban and rural areas. Researchers regard the resumption, expansion, and reforms of the National College Entrance Examination as an advantage to the development of higher education despite its promotion to increase education inequality across regions, social classes, and ethnic groups. As a result, this essay aims to analyze the contribution of reforms during the Cultural Revolution and the influences of resumption, expansion, and reforms of the National College Entrance Examination to education equality of higher education.

## **2. Influences of Reforms of Higher Education during the Cultural Revolution on Education Equality**

### **2.1. Reduces Education Inequality between Social Classes by Offering Workers, Soldiers, and Peasants More chances to Receive Higher Education**

During China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the college enrollment system in China met a significant challenge due to the change in requirements for enrollment. According to the directive of Mao Zedong, who was China's chairman, three significant reforms occurred. Firstly, abolishing exams at all levels of schooling and the power of admission to higher education was held by the revolutionary committee of their factory, commune, or other place of work [1]. It means that subjective political recommendations and class background determined progression instead of objective exam scores. Intellectuals lose their advantages in exam taking. Secondly, only workers, peasants, and soldiers could access universities and colleges. This new enrollment policy provided social classes who are poor in accepting higher education accessibility entering universities, which is helpful to increasing education equality across social classes. Thirdly, the curriculum with theory and concepts was replaced by those related to work and having practical value [2]. Farmers and workers get the knowledge they need to manage production and receive political education [3]. The strong state commitment to promoting egalitarianism via education significantly reduced the correlation between social classes and educational attainment [3].

### **2.2. Narrow the Gap of Education Resources between Urban Areas and Rural Areas**

Apart from these reforms, many educated youths went to the mountains and countryside, responding to the call for national policy. Moreover, many professors and experienced teachers were sent to the countryside to do manual labor and learn from peasants. It brings massive high-quality teachers, a critical educational resource, to rural areas. The number of schools increased in rural areas, and many children got a chance to receive education. On the contrary, students in urban areas suffered from the Precarious political climate, which made it difficult to enjoy an excellent educational environment. Many urban students participated in the Red Guard Organization and focused on class struggle. The diminished incentive to study and the loss of good teachers are two main reasons for decreased education quality in urban areas. The policy of 'the Educated Youth Went to the Mountain and Countryside,' and the sharp class struggle in cities narrowed the gap between education resources such as teachers between urban and rural areas.

## **3. Influences of Resumption of National College Entrance Examination on Education Equality.**

### **3.1. Narrow Path to Higher Education**

The other significant policy on higher education is the National College Entrance Examination, known as Gaokao. It had been suspended for a decade because of the Cultural Revolution [4] and reactivated in 1977. The State Council announced that workers, peasants, educated youth, veterans, officials, and senior high school graduates were all allowed to take the examination if they met the requirements on October 12 [4]. It means that people from various social classes all have a chance to take the National College Entrance Examination. After that, the written examination, the fairest means, became the primary method for school progression again. Students gain relatively equal access to higher education, at least in theory, as score is the single criterion for admission. Students from different regions and social classes and with different genders have an equal opportunity to get into a top school. It is propitious to education equality. However, only 278,000 students eventually enrolled, regarding 5.7 million candidates participating in the college entrance exam in 1997. The enrollment rate is meager at 4.3 percent [5]. It represents that the path to higher education is narrow, and education resources are limited.

### **3.2. Increase the Education Inequality Across Regions**

Despite that, many professors and experienced teachers in rural areas were recalled to schools with the resumption of the National College Entrance Examination. Moreover, most educated youths tried their best to enter universities and returned to cities through the exams. In other words, the countryside lost magnanimous, high-quality teachers. It results in a decline in education resources in rural areas. In contrast, universities and a system of crucial point schools, mainly settled in urban areas, were revived, and experienced teachers returned to cities. The distribution of educational resources is unequal between big cities and remote regions, which is evident after the resumption of the National College Entrance Examination. Big cities acquire maximum educational resources as they obtain the best universities. For instance, China's two most prominent universities, Peking University and Tsinghua, are both in Beijing and the other major metropolis, Shanghai, obtains Fudan University. Worse, these universities offer disproportionate places to students with local hukou. According to state television, the acceptance rate of Peking University and Tsinghua University is about 1 percent for local applicants and just a tenth of that for those from outside the city. [6]. Even though the combined population of Guangdong and Shandong provinces is ten times more than Beijing's, the number of successful applicants admitted to Tsinghua from those two provinces each year is less than that of Beijing [6]. More than that, students from different regions take different papers and have different admission score lines for the same university [7]. For example, the enrollment mark of the science track for Peking University in Beijing in 1998 was 587, while it is up to 646 for students from Jiangsu Province. It means that students in big cities with more famous universities are more accessible to get better access to higher education.

### **3.3. Widening the Gap of Education Equality of High Education between Rural Migrants and Local Residents**

To benefit from excellent educational resources and rapid economic development in big cities, parents in rural areas migrate to big cities with their children. Nevertheless, rural migrant parents find it difficult for their children to attend urban state schools due to social and policy obstacles and limitations, such as the registration system called hukou, despite orders from the central government to require cities to give children of migrant access to equal schooling [3]. In order to enroll, they have to submit multiple credentials and pay additional costs. [3]. Children may have to stay in migrant schools run by private businesses and lack suitably spacious classrooms and facilities. In other words, migrant children from rural areas cannot share the outstanding educational resources of big cities and receive low-quality education. However, they stay in the same city with examinees of local residents.

What is worse, rural migrant children who also study in big cities cannot benefit from the local protectionism of Gaokao as they can only take the National College Entrance Examination in the province where they register hukou according to the Gaokao policy. In other words, children studying and living in Beijing must take the exam paper designed by Jiangsu Province and reach the admission score line required for students from Jiangsu Province if their hukou is registered in Jiangsu. Migrants have to suffer inadequate educational resources due to the registration system and Gaokao policy.

### **3.4. Increase Education Inequality between Ethnic Groups**

Moreover, members of an ethnic minority can get 10 to 50 extra points on the exam as the educational attainment of China's ethnic minorities has been much lower than that of the Han majority. [8]. However, students with one parent from the Han ethnic group can study in big cities and receive high-quality education while getting bonus points on the National College Entrance Examination because of their other parent, a national minority. They are easier to access prestigious universities and get better higher education. It is another educational inequality due to Gaokao.

## **4. Influence of Expansion and Reforms of National College Entrance Examination on Education Equality**

### **4.1. Giving Chinese Students More Opportunities to Receive Higher Education**

Due to the rapid economic development, the increasing number of high school graduate students, and the need to promote scientific research, Chinese policymakers published a national plan to expand higher education in 1998 [9]. The State Council takes a series of measures, including building more schools, hiring professors, setting up new institutions of higher learning, and offering scholarships to underprivileged students to increase college enrollment [10]. In 1999, the number of students admitted to colleges increased by over 47 percent compared to the previous year, resulting in a total of 1.59 million admissions. [10]. In 2023, the first year after COVID-19, the number of people attending Gaokao reached 12.91 million, according to the Ministry of Education [11]. The booming university attendance gives Chinese students more opportunities to receive higher education.

### **4.2. Providing Students with Poor Test-taking Ability but Various Talents Equal Chance to Get High Education**

However, the public has rumors of growing discontent with the National College Entrance Examination because the score is the single criterion for determination. It is unequal to students with lower test scores but exceptional performance in non-academic fields. Responding to this opinion, the Ministry of Education has tried to make several reforms to the enrollment policy of the National College Entrance Examination since 1999 [12]. The first reform is adopting Gaokao's "3+X" examination system [12]. "3" refers to compulsory subjects, including Chinese, Mathematics, and English. Students can choose two subjects from either Social Science (including Politics, History and Geography) or Natural Sciences (including Physics, Chemistry and Biology) according to their interests [12]. Thanks to the reform, students can choose subjects they are good at and achieve a better score on the exam.

The second reform is decentralizing the power of enrolling students to local governments and universities. Authorized by the Minister of Education, some areas, such as Beijing and Anhui Province, provided an extra chance for local students to take the National College Entrance Examination in 2000 [12]. Some universities were allowed to recruit students with unique talents, such as in sports and arts, in 2003. In the same year, the Independent Freshman Admission Program (IFAP), which allowed universities to directly recruit outstanding candidates who failed exams such as Gaokao through a comprehensive evaluation based on public standards, assessment methods, and interviews, was first instituted [13]. Compared with 2003, the first year of the policy, the number of colleges and universities practicing independent recruitment reached 76 in 2009, with 54 more colleges and universities taking part [12]. Although the reform offers Chinese students more choice to access higher education, it also increases education inequality. According to experts, the proportion of students from rural areas attending China's top colleges (the top 1%) has decreased following the expansion and reform of the National College Entrance Examination. [6]. The proportion of rural students with access to China's top colleges is only 0.3 percent, in contrast to 2.8 percent of metropolitan students [6]. Children from wealthy families can afford expensive after-school tutoring and extra-curricular activities, which make them talented in sports and arts and perform better in independent recruitment. It widens the gap among different regions and social classes in education equality.

The third reform is about vocational education. Secondary vocational school students can also be enrolled in universities instead of only in higher vocational schools after 2019 [11]. It provides students who fail the senior high school entrance examination one more chance to receive higher education.

## 5. Conclusion

Reforms during the Cultural Revolution, the resumption, the expansion, and the reform of the National College Entrance Examination were all methods taken by Chinese educational policymakers to try to achieve educational equality despite some disappointing results. Reforms in the Cultural Revolution reduced educational inequality between intellectual and manual laborers owing to the abolition of exams, offering more chances of receiving higher education to workers, soldiers, and peasants and replacing curriculum with practical value, which gave manual laborers more opportunities to get higher education. Moreover, they narrowed the gap in education resources between rural and urban areas due to the policy of 'the Educated Youth Went to the Mountain and Countryside' and sending teachers and professors down to the countryside to learn from peasants, despite their damage to the development of higher education. The National College Entrance Examination provides everyone with relatively equal access to higher education. However, urban settlers and wealthy families benefit more from gaokao reforms due to the unbalanced distribution of educational resources, the registration system called hukou, and the policy of Gaokao. Education inequality across regions, social classes, and ethnic groups increased after the resumption, expansion, and reforms of the National College Entrance Examination. However, more research needs to be done to analyze policies such as the Red Guard Activity and the hukou registration system and discuss their influences on education equality.

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