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Toward a More Equal Admission? Access in the Mass Higher Education Era

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The Chinese higher education sector has experienced unprecedented growth since the end of the 1990s. The number of students has increased from less than around 4 million in 1999 to more than 32 million in 2014 (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2014). With its increasing capacity to serve more students, one question that researchers keep asking is whether the system has become more equal. It is without doubt that the higher education sector has provided more places for students from different social backgrounds. However, this does not mean that the increasing chances are equally available to those traditionally underrepresented in higher education, including those from rural communities or with a lower socioeconomic status. Moreover, it does not mean that these students are equally competitive in gaining access to the more selective colleges and universities.

The question of access and equity in recent decades is important, yet by no means striking given that wealth and poverty have both been created during the past 30 years of rapid economic growth (Davis and Wang 2009; Xie and Postiglione 2015). Those from rural areas or of lower socioeconomic status have been left far behind by their counterparts from the urban areas and those with more advantaged social backgrounds in terms of income, access to welfare, and medical services (Davis and Wang 2009). Equal access to higher education is crucial in preventing them from being marginalized further.

As a system with a legacy of believing in equity in educational opportunities, China's higher education sector is more than ever shaped by social and educational reforms, in both radical and modest forms (Mok 1999; Duan 2003; Postiglione 2015). For example, the expansion of the Chinese higher education sector, to a large extent, has been achieved by introducing market forces into the provision of higher education. In a new discourse of the user-pays market, higher education costs are assumed to be the shared responsibility of the government, communities, and families. The financial burden of higher education has shifted partly from the state to the individual students and their families. Does this mean that family incomes will become an increasingly important factor in access to higher education for students from different social backgrounds? Recent decades have also seen independent recruitment by China's most selective institutions. They are allowed to recruit a small number of students who must pass a test set by the institution. Interviews are usually required. Students have to be more prepared if they want to succeed in these interviews. This requires investment in the early stages of their schooling. What are the possible effects of this reform? Will this disadvantage those students from rural and lower socioeconomic backgrounds?

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This special issue of *Chinese Education and Society* examines these questions by looking at the most recent research into access and equity in Chinese higher education.

The first selected article was written by Li Chunling from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Li is a very productive writer on access and inequality in Chinese education. One of the key findings of her most recent research is that access to higher education has become more unequal. For example, urban students constantly outperform their counterparts from rural areas in gaining admission to college and university. The great expansion of the Chinese higher education system, in fact, has increased the gap between urban and rural students in gaining access to college. Li wants to find an explanation for this. She proposes that rural students are less likely than their counterparts to gain access to senior secondary schools upon graduating from junior secondary schools. To test her hypothesis, Li used data from the 2006, 2008, and 2011 Chinese Social Surveys collected by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Using the transition model of Mare, she analyzed the transition rates at different stages of schooling for five cohorts of urban and rural residents who were born in different years from the 1940s to the 1980s. After controlling for gender, father's occupation, and father's level of education, the study suggests that the chances of rural students gaining access to college or university are similar to that of urban students. However, the study data suggest that the chances for rural students getting into primary school, junior secondary school, or senior secondary school are constantly lower than those of their peers in urban areas.

After comparing the transition rates for different cohorts of people, the study suggests that the chances for the cohorts of urban residents born in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s being admitted to a junior secondary are constantly higher than those of their counterparts from rural areas. The urban–rural gap in access to junior secondary schools for these four cohorts has not changed over time, with urban residents having chances 3.6 times more than those of their counterparts from rural areas. The gap in gaining access to senior secondary schools, however, has increased. For example, the data suggest that the transition rates for the cohorts of urban residents born in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s to senior secondary schools are 1.9, 2.5, and 3.9 times more than those of their counterparts from rural areas. With regards to access to higher education, the analysis of the chances for different cohorts shows that there is an urban–rural gap in gaining access to higher education for the cohort born in the 1980s. For those born in the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, the differences in college access are not statistically significant after controlling for the effects of gender, father's occupation, and father's level of education. Li, therefore, suggests that the barrier for rural students in gaining college access is the restricted access to senior school education.

Because Li does not have the data for people born in the 1990s, we have no idea whether what the study suggests is generalizable to those entering colleges and universities in the last 10 years. We do not know why the urban–rural gap in gaining admission to senior secondary school kept increasing from the 1960s to the 1990s. Li proposes several possible explanations. For example, rural students may be more likely to be attracted to the labor market upon graduating from junior secondary school. The poor quality of rural schools may lower the education expectation of rural students. All of these need to be tested with solid data, either in qualitative or quantitative forms.

The questions asked by Wang Weiyi, the author of the second chosen article, are quite similar to Li's. Has the expansion of higher education brought more equity? Have the gaps between different social groups in gaining access to college and university decreased?

Wang examines these questions from a different angle than Li, by looking at the gaps between different socioeconomic groups.

The data Wang collected are from 16 higher education institutions including seven key universities, five ordinary colleges and universities, and five associated higher education institutions (HEIs). A stratified sampling strategy was used to select more than 25,000 students who enrolled in these HEIs in 1982, 1990, 2000, and 2010. Their profiles were accessed and information on their parents' occupations and levels of education was collected. The occupations of their parents were categorized into seven groups: members of the cadre (the party and government organ leaders and enterprise managers), professional workers, office workers, commercial and service personnel (including sole proprietors), industrial workers, peasants, and other uncategorized personnel. The key concept that the author used to measure the chances of college access is mobility rate, the ratio of the proportion of college students in a given strata to the proportion of the strata in the whole employed population.

One of the key findings of Wang's research is that the gaps in access to higher education for students from different socioeconomic groups have been narrowing in the past 30 years. However, this does not mean that the system has become equal now. Students with parents in the cadre and the professional group still outperformed their counterparts from other backgrounds in gaining admission to colleges and universities. The other key finding of the research is that children from these two groups of families are the most advantaged in going to key colleges and universities (the more selective ones) in China. Their chances of success increased from 1982 to 2000 and decreased slightly from the beginning of the 2000s to 2010. The chances for students from the peasant families decreased from 1982 to 2000 and then increased from 2000 to 2010. Children from this group are also the most disadvantaged in gaining access to key HEIs in China. Their chances are surpassed by those of their counterparts from the families of the cadre, by a factor of more than 20, in 2010.

The children from the families of the cadre and the professional group also outperformed their counterparts (except those from families of office workers) from the other backgrounds in gaining access to ordinary HEIs and associated colleges. However, their advantages are not as strong when applying to key colleges and universities. The study also suggests that the advantages have reduced with the expansion of the higher education sector in China.

One of the flaws in the study is that the sample includes only those students who have already gained access to HEIs; the characteristics of those students who failed to gain a college place are still unknown. The findings of the research may be hard to generalize to the whole student population. Since the data are only for students who enrolled in HEIs in 1982, 1990, 2000, and 2010, the trends in access to higher education for different social groups may not be described accurately. This is understandable given most of the historical data for students are very difficult to access.

The third selected article is by Chen Xiaoyu from Peking University. He asks whether the Chinese higher education system has become more equal for people from different social groups, including those from the rural communities and the lower social class. For him, the increased chances for different social groups does not mean the system has become more equal because those from more disadvantaged backgrounds are still underrepresented in China's more selective colleges and universities. The data he uses are from a national longitudinal survey carried out by a research group from Peking University. Compared to the data used by Wang Weiyi, Chen's data are more recent and cover admissions to Project 985 universities, Project

211 universities, ordinary baccalaureate institutions, and higher vocational colleges and associated colleges (HVCACs) by students entering higher education in the late 2000s and the beginning of the 2010s. To understand the chances of gaining access to different types of HEI, Chen developed the structural mobility rate, which is defined as the ratio of the proportion of students from a given social background in the sample selected from a given type of institution to the proportion of students of this social background in the overall sample. By comparing the structural mobility rates for students from different social groups, Chen points out that students from big cities, the families of administrative managers and office workers, and with parents who have attained a higher level of education outperform their peers in gaining access to the most selective universities in China: Project 985 and Project 211 universities. Students from rural areas and those from families of workers, peasants, and migrant workers are more likely to go to ordinary HEIs and HVCACs.

One of the findings that should be noted is that students from villages outperformed their counterparts from large cities, county towns, and small towns in gaining admission to Project 985 universities after controlling for the effects of family income, parents' occupations, and parents' levels of education. Rural students also outperformed their counterparts from county-level cities and county towns in gaining access to Project 211 universities after controlling for the effects of family income, parents' occupations, and parents' levels of education. They also outperformed their counterparts from the county towns in going to ordinary HEIs.

Another finding that should be noted is that the data suggest that the influence of family income is complex. For example, the data imply that, after controlling for the effects of variables such as residence, parents' occupations, and parents' levels of education, those students from the highest income families are less likely than their counterparts from the other groups to go to university, including Project 985 universities, Project 211 universities, and ordinary HEIs. Students from the low-middle–income family group (annual per capita income of 5,000–10,000 yuan) have the greatest opportunities to enter the 985 universities. Students from the low-income family group (3,000–5,000 yuan) are also most likely to be accepted by Project 211 universities. This may suggest that family income cannot easily be translated into advantages for success at school. The roles of social capital and cultural capital are significant in understanding the differentiated chances of success in schooling.

The fourth article was written by Liu Zhiming and Gao Yao, who are searching for explanations for the differentiated chances of gaining access to higher education by students from different social groups. Similar to the other authors in this special issue, they argue that only when the more selective colleges and universities are equally accessible to students from all different social groups, can the higher education sector be considered to be more equal. They developed two indexes to evaluate the equality of higher education opportunities: the quantity of higher education opportunities and the quality of higher education opportunities. While the quantity indicates the absolute chances of gaining access to higher education, the quality indicates the access to HEIs of different types. Higher-quality higher education opportunities mean there is easier access to the more selective colleges and universities. Liu and Gao want to know how the quality and quantity of higher education opportunities are associated with family background. They conceptualize the influence of the family as family capital, including capital in economic, social, and political forms. The data used were from a survey carried out in Jiangsu, an economically developed region in the eastern part of China. Altogether 2,100 student samples from 14 universities were included in the survey.

The measurement of different variables is still questionable. However, the key findings are important in understanding access to higher education in China. For example, they suggest that economic capital, measured by family income, is important for families when sending their children to HEIs. However, it is not important in gaining access to the more selective colleges and universities. Family cultural capital, measured by the father's level of education, is not associated with the chances of gaining access either to HEIs or to the more selective colleges and universities. The data suggest that family political capital, measured by the father's membership of the Communist Party of China (CPC), is associated with both the quality and quantity of higher education opportunities. The father's party membership has a negative influence on access to higher education but a positive influence on access to the more selective colleges and universities. This suggests that children with fathers in the CPC are less represented in colleges and universities than they should be but have advantages in gaining access to the more selective colleges and universities. Liu and Gao also suggest that family social capital, measured by the father's occupation and the extensiveness of the family social network, is not associated with the overall chances of success in going to college or university. However, it is important for all families when sending their children to the more selective HEIs.

One of central arguments made by Liu and Gao is that the inequality in Chinese higher education has become more invisible. Those families from more advantaged backgrounds are focusing on the higher-quality higher education opportunities. The second argument made is that family capital matters. One of the noticeable facts about the finding is that economic capital and cultural capital do not matter for gaining access to the more selective colleges and universities. The impact of family political capital and social capital, however, is positive and significant.

The last selected article is from Huang Silin, Xin Ziqiang, and Hou Jiawei. The central question they ask is the following: Who has been accepted into key colleges and universities? Has the expansion of opportunities in higher education loosened the link between social origins and higher education opportunities? The data they collected are from a longitudinal study in a Project 211 university in Beijing. The study randomly selected around 300 freshmen each year (except for 2011, which had 561 participants) from the university and investigated their social backgrounds, including father's level of education, family income, household registration (*hukou*), and residence.

One of the key findings of the research is that the socioeconomic status of the children is highly associated with their chances of gaining access to that university. For example, the father's occupation, the father's level of education, and family income were found to be highly relevant to gaining access to the university. The association increased with time. A similar pattern was found for the impact of family residence and *hukou*. All of the findings suggest that the link between social origin and the chances of gaining access to the key university under study has not weakened with the expansion of the higher education system in China.

One of the other important angles the study touches on is the influence of the new Universities' Independent Recruitment policy, which was initiated in 2003. The data collected through 2010 and 2012 allowed the authors to analyze whether the policy has brought greater numbers of untraditional students into the university. In other words, has the policy increased the chances of students from lower socioeconomic groups and rural areas? The result, however, suggests that the majority of the students that the policy has brought to the university are those from upper- and middle-class families. Only around 5% of them are from the families of peasants,

workers, or the unemployed population. Nearly 60% of them are from the cadre and the professional group, which is much higher than their proportion in the traditional student body the university recruited (35.8% in 2007 and 40.5% in 2012). Another important fact that the finding suggests is that the policy has created advantages for students in cities or with urban *hukou*. Among those students recruited under the new policy, only around 1.3% of them are from rural areas.

These five articles present the most recent findings of research into access and equity in China's higher education system. One key theme that the research has revealed is that the expansion of the higher education sector in China has not loosened the link between social origins and higher education opportunities for people in China. This suggests that the system may have to more to create more chances for those students from rural communities and lower socioeconomic groups. Another theme that this body of literature has suggested is that the reasons for the differentiated patterns of college access are complex and need to be examined further. With regard to the role of family income, the study by Huang, Xin, and Hou suggests that the importance of family income has increased for some cohorts of students in gaining access to the key university they studied. Liu and Gao, however, suggest that family income is not important for gaining access to the more selective colleges and universities.

The findings for the impact of cultural capital, measured by the parents' level of education, are not constant either. Chen as well as Huang, Xin, and Hou, for example, suggest that the father's education is important for gaining access to higher education, the selective colleges and universities in particular. Liu and Gao, however, suggest that the father's education is not associated with higher education opportunities. Their arguments may be questionable because of the way they measured cultural capital. However, the findings are still intriguing, because, similar to the other four studies, they show the complexity of gaining access to higher education in transitional China.

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