

# ***The History of the National College Entrance Examination Reform and its Impact on Social Mobility***

**Weiwei Zhang<sup>1,a,\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*School of Environment, Education and Development, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, United Kingdom*

*a. weiwei.zhang-6@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** The National College Entrance Examination is an indispensable part of China's education system. There is also a lot of discussion about the college entrance examination. However, the summary of the reform process of the college entrance examination and the analysis of the impact of policies on social mobility in different periods often ignore the first 17 years and the stage of the Cultural Revolution. Therefore, this paper makes a complete policy summary of the college entrance examination, and analyzes the different attributes of social mobility under different policies. These analyses are based on a detailed dissection of the policy and relevant data as supporting material. Finally, the following conclusions are drawn. The dual-track system of education and district-based college entrance examinations from 1949 to 1967 contributed to low social mobility during this time period. During the Cultural Revolution, more rural students went to the cities. However, they often return to their hometowns after finishing their university studies, forming a special phenomenon of mobility. The subsequent single-track system, university enrollment expansion, and the new college entrance examination reform all took equity as the reform goal. However, these reforms often have the opposite effect due to the huge disparity between urban and rural areas. It is worth noting that these deficiencies have been noticed and relevant measures have been implemented.

**Keywords:** National college entrance examination, Reform, Social mobility

## **1. Introduction**

As one of the most significant issues in China's education system, the National College Entrance Examination and its reformation are always paid lots of attention to. It is the fact that most of Chinese students take the examination as the opportunity to change their fortune. Therefore, its impact on social mobility is directly related and should be appreciated. However, the exist researches on this topic are not that completed. The review of National College Entrance Examination usually starts from the resumption in 1977, while several years after China's founding and the 10 years during the Cultural Revolution are always ignored. The analysis of social mobility which is resulted by policy in those years are also few. Therefore, this paper will summarize the process of the reformation since the founding of China and analysis the impact on social mobility given by different policy in different period.

The whole paper will be divided according to time period. The first part is 1949-1966. The second part is 1966-1976. The third part is 1977-2000. The last part is from 2000 to the present.

## **2. 1949-1966: The Initial Exploration of the College Entrance Examination Policy**

Before the founding of China, there were basically two types of education in China, one was the education of the semi-feudal and semi-colonial areas in the Kuomintang-ruled areas, and the other was the education of the people in the liberated areas under the leadership of the Communist Party [1]. There are huge gaps in education levels between regions and between urban and rural areas. 41% of colleges and universities are located in six cities including Shanghai, Peiping, Tianjin, Nanjing, Wuhan and Guangzhou [2]. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, reforms of education drew on the Soviet Union's educational experience, and under the guidance of the "Common Program of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference", a new education system was established, and a preliminary attempt on the college entrance examination policy began.

### **2.1. Impact on Urban-rural Mobility**

After the founding of China, education implemented a policy of "walking on two legs". That is to say, urban and rural education are two completely different routes. This difference also makes the college entrance examination have completely different meanings for urban and rural students.

In terms of the school system, it guaranteed the right of workers and peasants to receive education at that time. The school system implements the "three-track system" of simultaneous development of full-time schools, part-time schools for workers and peasants, and spare-time schools. Theoretically speaking, the three are at the same level, but psychologically and practically, full-time formal education is still the main way to go to higher education [3]. The "guarantee" of education opportunities for workers and peasants and their children is mainly aimed at universal education below higher education. Taking the data from 1956 to 1958 as an example, the proportion of students from workers and peasants in ordinary junior high schools, secondary normal schools, and secondary technical schools all exceeded 50%. However, although the proportion of workers and peasants in ordinary colleges and universities has increased, it is still far lower than others, and has never exceeded 50% [4].

In the three-track system, full-time schools are mainly responsible for the improvement, while part-time schools for workers and peasants and various forms of spare-time schools are mainly responsible for popularization. Although there are also part-time and spare-time schools in cities, ordinary full-time schools account for the majority [2]. Therefore, for rural students, the purpose of their education is to eradicate illiteracy and directly serve local agriculture. On August 7, 1962, the Ministry of Education issued a special "Notice on the Enrollment of a Small Number of Outstanding Rural Students in Urban Middle Schools". It can be seen from the notice that secondary education in cities and rural areas is in completely different development directions. Although some outstanding rural students were selected to be sent to urban middle schools, they were "a small number" after all. For rural students graduating from secondary school, serving local agricultural development is the default path. On January 27, 1954, economist Qian Junrui even commented that the idea that rural students want to study in cities is wrong idea and needs to be corrected by education [5].

Therefore, rural students usually do not have the right to take part in the college entrance examination and higher education by default. Even if they did, their education was unlikely to make them competitive in exams. Therefore, the college entrance examination system at that time inhibited the mobility between urban and rural areas, resulting in a low level of social mobility between them.

## 2.2. Impact on Regional Mobility

At the first few years of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the source of students was small and the regional distribution was unbalanced. The "Regulations on the National Colleges and Universities Recruiting Freshmen in the Summer of 1953" emphasized that due to the imbalance between the enrollment quota and the source of students in colleges and universities in the major administrative regions, each area must be properly allocated [6]. The "Regulations on Recruiting Freshmen for the National Colleges and Universities in the Summer of 1956" clarified the basic principles for admission to colleges and universities in various regions. The "Regulations on Recruiting Freshmen in Colleges and Universities in 1958" clarifies that college admissions follow the principle of combining local students as a major and regional adjustment as assistance. The colleges and universities that train cadres for the province mainly recruit students from the province itself. Cooperative district colleges and universities enroll students in the local cooperative district or the original large administrative region. National colleges and universities and colleges with special professional settings recruit students nationwide. The admissions of colleges and universities basically follow the principle of territoriality. Only when the number of local admissions is insufficient can students be admitted to other regions [6]. Despite the existence of talent deployment between regions, the vast majority of college entrance examination admissions still follow the regional principle. Therefore, the level of regional social mobility brought by the college entrance examination is very low.

## 3. 1966-1976: During the Cultural Revolution

During the Cultural Revolution, the admissions policy for the college entrance examination changed with the direction of the political struggle. Such changes also affect urban-rural social mobility. The college entrance examination makes more rural students flow to cities to participate in higher education. The special political and economic environment makes rural students return to the countryside after receiving an education. Thus, forming a special urban-rural flow. This high level of social mobility is not permanent but flows to the countryside again after moving to the cities.

### 3.1. Changes in the Policy

In 1966, after the occurrence of the Cultural Revolution, the previous admissions policy was criticized. On July 24, 1966, the "Notice of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Reforming the Enrollment Work of Colleges and Universities" pointed out: "Although the entrance examination methods for colleges and universities have been continuously improved since liberation, they have basically not jumped out of the bourgeois examination system. It is not helpful to the enforcement of the educational policy put forward by the Party Central Committee and Chairman Mao, and it is not conducive to attracting revolutionary youth of workers, peasants and soldiers into colleges and universities. This approach to admissions must be overhauled [5]."

The first is the change in the format of the college entrance examination. Since 1966, the paper-pencil examination has been abolished in the admissions of colleges and universities, and a combination of recommendation and selection has been adopted. In addition, the content of the assessment is asked to adhere to the principle of politics first. Workers, poor and lower-middle peasants, revolutionary cadres, revolutionary soldiers, children of revolutionary martyrs and children of other workers are given priority to enter higher education institutions [5]. In January 1967, the Jinggangshan Corps of Tsinghua University published an article entitled "Suggestions on Reforming the Enrollment Work of Colleges and Universities" by its own "Enrollment Work Research Group".

The article pointed out that schools should recruit students according to a certain proportion of each class. Workers, poor and lower-middle peasants should account for more than 65%. He also pointed out that for university admissions, it is necessary to completely abolish the simple score test system [7]. From 1970 to 1976, a total of 940,000 workers, peasants and soldiers were recruited in seven sessions. This group of students is unprecedented in the history of world education, and it has enabled thousands of children of poor and lower-middle peasants to obtain higher education opportunities [1].

### **3.2. A Special Phenomenon of Social Mobility**

On July 21, 1978, “People’s Daily” published an article titled “Road of Cultivating Engineering Technicians Based on Shanghai Machine Tool Factory”. In the editor’s note, he quoted Mao Zedong’s comments: University still needs to be established. What’s more, the University of Science and Technology has to do it especially. But the school system should be reformed to be shorter, education revolutionary should not be ignored, and proletarian politics should be in command. All students should have some practical experience, and they should also come from workers and peasants family, and after a few years in school, they should return to production practice [5]. By this, it can be known that the policy and country environment hold the idea that students should return to a rural area after their higher education study.

In the middle school education before the college entrance examination, ordinary middle schools neither train students who are proficient in arts and sciences, nor train the technical labor needed by the society, but only teach students to “go to the mountains and countryside to work in agriculture” in the future. At the same time, the management of the school has also become a worker and peasant [8]. They not only take responsibility for the management of the school but also participate in the teaching tasks of the school. Such education also makes it difficult for students to choose to stay in the city after completing their university courses.

## **4. 1977-2000: The Rapid Change of College Entrance Examination Policy**

### **4.1. The Changes in College Entrance Examination Policy from 1977 to 2000**

After the end of the Cultural Revolution, China resumed the education policy of “walking on two legs”, and resumed the system of key schools and the admission examination system. As Deng Xiaoping said: “To run an education, we must walk on two legs. We must pay attention to both popularization and improvement. We must pass strict examinations and concentrate on the best people in key universities [2].” Like the analysis in the first part, this two-track system actually did harm the high-level social mobility.

Although the content of education in middle school had a negative influence on social mobility, the policy started to turn in the direction of benefiting rural students to move to cities. The first aspect was the standard of the examination. In the early days of the resumption of the college entrance examination in 1977, the admissions work of colleges and universities basically followed the principle of comprehensive evaluation and selection of the best. As pointed out in the “Opinions on the Enrollment of Colleges and Universities in 1977”, in order to ensure the quality of recruiting new students, colleges and universities should implement the mass line in recruiting students, based on the principle of a comprehensive evaluation of morality, intelligence and physique, and the principle of selecting the best [9].

### **4.2. Impact on Urban-rural Mobility**

In 1994, the double-track system turned into a single-track system, which means that rural students started to have the same position as urban students to participate examinations. Then in the late 1990s,

the large-scale expansion of enrollment in higher education rapidly moved from elite to popularization [6].

Like the analysis in the first part, restoring the two-track system actually did harm the high-level social mobility. But from a policy perspective, the convenience of urban-rural mobility is getting higher and higher. The change of education to a single-track system in 1994 and the expansion of higher education enrolment in the 1990s both removed barriers to mobility between urban and rural areas. However, due to the huge gap in economic and cultural development between urban and rural areas, although policies on the surface are equal to urban and rural students, in this context, compared with cities, education is more disadvantageous to rural areas in terms of economy and policy. Although there were more and more students who went to cities to have their university studies, the main part of students in college was still the urban students [10]. According to the enrollment data of Tsinghua University, Peking University and Beijing Normal University from 1990 to 2002, the proportion of rural students has not increased or decreased significantly. Among them, the proportion of rural students recruited by Tsinghua University and Peking University in the past 12 years has fluctuated around 20%. The proportion of rural students in Beijing Normal University is about 30%. From this, it is obvious that the policy change did not lead to higher rural-urban social mobility as expected. Also, the proportion of rural students is lower in higher universities [11].

### **4.3. Impact on Regional Mobility**

After the resumption of the college entrance examination in 1977, the allocation of admissions for ordinary colleges and universities was still carried out in accordance with the national plan. The national colleges and majors were recruited nationwide, and the regional colleges and majors were recruited within the region. After graduation, students were uniformly allocated by the state. The “Regulations on the Enrollment of Higher Education Institutions in 1981” pointed out that the quality of admission to key colleges and universities in some areas cannot be guaranteed according to the original plan, and it is allowed to adjust the admission to other provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities directly under the Central Government, and the adjustment range is not more than 20% [10]. Therefore, the regional mobility in this time period became higher than before.

## **5. 2000-present: Reform of the New College Entrance Examination Policy**

### **5.1. The Content and Characteristics of the New College Entrance Examination Policy Reform**

Since 2000, “fairness” has been regarded as the basic principle of college admissions work, and colleges and universities have gradually lifted the standard restrictions on candidates [6]. Beginning in 2004, college admissions were changed to “enrollment based on different provinces and different majors”. In the formulation of the plan, the requirements of regional development in both economic and social aspects, the distribution of higher education resources and the distribution of students are all factors to be considered. At the same time, colleges and universities can independently decide whether to divide a small number of seats which is reserved to accommodate for problems with unbalanced sources of candidates.

Universities and colleges can decide independently how to use the reserved seats. Therefore, In 2014 the New College Entrance Examination Policy was adopted, in which the exam formats are diversified. The final mark of the exam came from the combination of multiple exams, independent recruitment and comprehensive evaluation of enrollment [12].

In the new system, student selection still uses the province as a unit. Colleges and universities allocate their own enrollment quotas to different provinces, and the enrollment quotas in different provinces are different [13].



## 5.2. Social Solidification or Social Mobility: The Possible Impact of the New College Entrance Examination Policy

Independent recruitment needs students to contact tightly with colleges. The comprehensive evaluation of enrollment needs students to take part in more activities. However, rural areas have less information and social relationships about the college entrance examination, and may therefore have fewer advantages about colleges and college entrance examination policies, and are at a negative position in the examination. Therefore, these two types of exams can little be used by rural students.

Enrollment by the province has certain fairness, which avoids the disadvantaged position of less developed provinces in competition with developed provinces. But first-class colleges tend to assign the most places to their territories. And these universities are often in developed cities. For example, Beijing has 34 double-first-class universities, Shanghai has 15, and Nanjing has 13. Compared with them, many central and western provinces such as Henan have only one. This also makes it more difficult for students from underdeveloped areas and rural areas to flow to cities and developed areas.

In the investigation of the fairness of the system of college entrance examination, people with agricultural hukou feel less fairness than non-agricultural hukou [14]. And the feeling of fairness is in direct proportion to people's education level and socioeconomic status. Through this investigation, we can know that lower class like rural students usually encounter more barriers when participating in the competition in the college entrance examination.

## 6. Conclusions

The study concluded that the college entrance examination policy has been constantly changing and reforming since the founding of China. The whole process is divided into four different time periods by summarizing. Different policies at each stage create different level of social mobility. From 1949 to 1966, due to the double-track system of education, there was a huge difference between urban and rural areas. This makes for very little movement between urban and rural areas. At the same time, the college entrance examination is conducted on a regional basis, making it difficult to move between regions. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the college entrance examination was changed from a paper-based test to a recommendation for admission. At the same time, workers and peasants had a higher status at the time, so their children were more likely to go to university than in cities. As a result, the flow between urban and rural areas has become more frequent. However, due to changes in the teaching content and organizational structure of colleges and universities, students often return to the countryside to devote themselves to the construction of their hometowns after graduating from college. Therefore, the urban-rural mobility caused by the college entrance examination is often temporary rather than permanent. In 1994, the single-track education system began to operate. In the 1990s, colleges and universities began to expand enrollment. The changes were supposed to make the examination fairer and students from rural and underdeveloped areas more opportunities to study in cities. However, due to the huge urban-rural and geographical differences, the final result of social mobility is just the opposite. Besides, the relaxation of the geographical admissions policy has made mobility between regions higher than before. Since 2000, the reform of the new college entrance examination has begun continuous attempts. The diverse assessment methods in the new college entrance examination policy make it more difficult for social mobility to occur. Although these reforms are aimed at equity, students in different regions have different access to information. Rural students also more difficult to have favorable social relationships. However, these unfavorable factors have been noticed, and a series of measures are being taken to make up for these deficiencies. For example, colleges and universities conduct independent enrollment for rural students, provide more educational resources to narrow the gap, and make information transparent to avoid information gaps.

Through the study of the reform process of China's college entrance examination and its impact on social mobility, a deeper understanding of the system can be gained. At the same time, the conclusions drawn by this study can provide a certain direction for a further reformation in the future. Make the college entrance examination fairer and play its due role. At the same time, because the reform of the college entrance examination is still in progress, future research in this area is still very necessary.

## References

- [1] Xiulan, Yu. (2002) *Differences between urban and rural education in China*. Nanjing University.
- [2] *China Education Yearbook (1940-1981)*. (1984) China Encyclopedia Publishing House.
- [3] Zhenguo, Yuan. (1999) *On the Transformation of China ' s Educational Policy: A Case Study on Equality and Benefit of my country's Key Middle Schools*, Guangdong Education Press.
- [4] Yingjie, Liu. *Chinese Educational Events" (1949-1990)*. (1992) Zhejiang Education Press.
- [5] Dongchang, He. (1998) *Important Educational Documents of the People ' s Republic of China*. Hainan Publishing House.
- [6] Xinfeng, Wang. (2021) *The value change of my country's college entrance examination policy equity since the founding of New China*. *Journal of Education*, 17(01): 85-99.
- [7] Qian, Zheng. (1999) *Education by Revolution*. China Youth Press.
- [8] Huaquan, Zhou. (1999) *Educational Revolution in the Cultural Revolution*. Guangdong Education Press.
- [9] Xuewei, Yang. (2003) *College Entrance Examination Literature (I, II)*. Higher Education Press.
- [10] Jinan, Zhang., Siqi Liu. (2012) *The impact of college entrance examination reform on urban and rural education equity: an empirical analysis based on the college entrance examination data of a county-level city in Shandong Province*. *Scientific Decision*, 5, 60-78.
- [11] Dongping, Yang. (2006) *Access to Higher Education: Widening Social Class Disparities*. *Tsinghua Journal Education*, 1, 19-25.
- [12] Ziya, Tan. (2020) *The problems and solutions of educational equity under the background of the new college entrance examination reform*. *Teaching and Management*, 27, 121-124.
- [13] Xinfeng, Wang., Binglin, Zhong. (2019) *Research on the fairness of the new college entrance examination and countermeasures: based on the experience of Zhejiang and Shanghai*. *Journal of the National Institute of Education Administration*, 4, 38-46.
- [14] Wen, Liu. (2021) *The Reality and Future Enlightenment of Institutional Equity in the Deepening Period of College Entrance Examination Reform—Based on the Analysis of Comprehensive Survey Data on China's Social Conditions*. *University Education Science*, 5, 42-48+59.