

Education Equality in China: Economic, Geographical, Gender and Education Policies

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Abstract: As one of the largest developing countries in the world, education in China has made great achievements over the past decades and has contributed greatly to China's scientific and technological development, economic development and poverty reduction and social prosperity. However, it is inevitable that many problems have arisen in the development of education. Many studies have been done on this subject by Chinese scholars and many international scholars. Among the studies on the subject, equality in education is a major concern for many scholars. Based on existing international research, this paper discusses equality in education through the issues of economics, geography, gender and education policy. In this paper, it is found that economy and geography greatly influence educational equality, with regional economic development being positively associated with educational equality. Gender, although also influencing educational inequality to some extent, is not significant. Some of the policies that have been developed to promote equality in education have been less than satisfactory. Through the analysis and discussion of these issues, future research and development directions are proposed to further promote educational equality and enable the further development of education in China.

Keywords: educational equality, educational development, China

1. Introduction

Education is the primary means of spreading human culture. Throughout the history of the world, education has become a major force in the advancement of human civilization. Education takes on an important role in modern society and is regarded as a method of transmitting knowledge, transferring ideas, exchanging skills and stimulating creativity, essential to the development of individuals and society. Education has long been an important driving force for social development, playing a catalytic role in the economy and culture, and is an effective way for society to prosper and reduce poverty. For a country, the main purpose of education is to improve the overall quality of the nation, to provide a guarantee of human resources for national development and to promote the country's economic development. Education has also been a long-standing focus of researchers, policy makers and the public.

As education develops, problems inevitably arise. Many scholars have conducted extensive discussions and studies from different perspectives, and among the myriad of topics, the issue of equality in education is more prominent. It is generally accepted that the purpose of education is to

equip individuals with certain knowledge and skills so that they can find suitable jobs and improve their quality of life. Socially, education helps to maintain social order, improve the social environment and promote economic development. The role of education for individuals and society is very important, regardless of the country or region.

China is the world's largest developing country and one of the most populous countries in the world. The promotion of social prosperity and the decrease of poverty among the populace in China have benefited greatly from the promotion of education. China has achieved significant advancements in the development of education over the past few decades. A unique obligatory Education Law has been passed in China to ensure that every child and young person of school age can get obligatory education of equal quality and competency. Compulsory education is guaranteed by the Constitution of the country. However, Chinese education is also faced with educational inequality. In China, the large geographical area, the marked geographical differences between east and west, the uneven economic development and the high number of poor people have all become problems that hinder the development of equality in education. The main aim of this paper is to summaries and outlook on education research in China through economic, geographical, gender and policy aspects, and to suggest broad directions for future research and policy.

This document begins by summarizing the evolution of education in China before analyzing the variables that exacerbate educational disparities and advance educational equality through the consideration of gender, economic and geographic factors, and the growth of higher education.

2. Overview on Educational Equality in China

Educational equality is an important part of social equity and an important motivation for social equity. Chinese government has always attached importance to promoting equality in education, and in a country with a large population, it has fully realized the nine-year free education. With an increase in the number of years of education per person from 1.6 in 1949 to 10.6 in 2018, nine-year compulsory education was consolidated at 94.2%, gross enrolment ratios in preschool and upper secondary education had risen to 81.7% and 88.8%, respectively. Tertiary education would also enter the universalization phase [1].

After 1949, schools were opened to workers and peasants, education was made available to the masses, and the difficult journey to promote equity in education began. The general implementation of people's education, with workers and peasants as the mainstay, led to reform measures in five main areas of Chinese education: the organization of accelerated secondary schools for workers and peasants to improve knowledge education for workers and peasant cadres; the introduction of amateur remedial instruction for workers and farmers; the opening of all facilities to workers and peasants; the reform of the old school system and the promulgation of a new school system to implement universal primary education for children; and the introduction of literacy education on a national scale to gradually eradicate illiteracy. From 1954 to 1965, China eradicated 95,713,000 illiterates, and China's illiteracy rate dropped from 80% at the beginning of liberation to 52% [1].

At the outset of reform and openness, the development of education in China was lagging significantly, and there was a shortage of all sorts of intellectual talent, in particular of experts. Faced with the enormous divide that separates education, science and technology from the rest of the world, Deng Xiaoping stressed the vigorous development of science and technology and education, and took the restoration of the examination system for admission to higher education as a breakthrough, which led to a historic change in China's education. Revitalize and develop education as quickly as possible and train the many talents required on all fronts of society, in 1977, Deng Xiaoping stated unequivocally that "education should be run on two legs.", focusing on both progress and popularization. There should be established key preschools, key secondary schools, and major universities [1].

In 1990, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and other international organizations issued the World Declaration on Education for All at the World Conference on Education for All, making a joint commitment for members to halve the adult illiteracy rate among the population aged 15 and over between 1990 and 2000. At the time, alongside a priority literacy country designation, China was included alongside nine other nations with sizable populations, including India and Brazil, and had an illiteracy rate of 22.23 percent. As a member of UNESCO, the Chinese government has pledged to achieve universal access to education for all by "reducing illiteracy among young adults and attaining basic universal nine-year compulsory education by the year 2000 [1]."

With the development of society, China is placing increasing emphasis and importance on equity in education. In 2006, China proposed that, "On the basis of economic development, more attention should be paid to social equality [2]." However, equity in education has always been an issue that has been difficult to resolve and has not been able to be fully addressed. To this day, there are still many factors that contribute to educational inequality.

3. Factors Contributing to Education Inequality

3.1. Economic and Geographic Inequality in Education

Both the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) attach great importance to the issue of equality in education. Equality in education is important because it can contribute to equity in other social systems, such as social status and the economy. Conversely, inequality in education will exacerbate economic inequality and affect social stratification, to the detriment of long-term stable social development. After three decades of reform and opening, and the pursuit of equality in education, China has achieved some milestones. However, with rapid economic development, inequalities are also increasing. Economic inequalities between provinces have exacerbated the urban-rural divide, for example, the economic differences between the western region and the central region, and between the north-eastern region and the eastern coastal region are gradually widening. Regional imbalances in economic development will lead to inequalities in education.

Since the reform and opening in 1978, the economy of China has grown at a rapid pace. However, regional inequalities are increasing due to different rates of development, different development conditions and other factors. At the time, funding for education came from local government budget allocations and a small number of categorical expenditures from higher governmental levels. In this situation, schools can only raise teachers' income by charging school fees, starting private companies and accepting donations. The diversification of sources of educational resources and the importance of non-governmental funding have made educational services a commodity. When education is dictated by money, access to education is increasingly correlated with the consumer's level of spending. After the 1990s, the Chinese government implemented several initiatives to alleviate regional inequalities. During this period, 98.5% of cities and counties in China introduced the nine-year compulsory education. However, the distribution of regional educational resources during this period was directly related to regional economic development [3]. Diverse areas in China have diverse economic investments in education as a result of the uneven regional economic development. As a result, remote and poorer regions are more backward in basic education, while wealthier regions can improve education through economic investment. This situation also exacerbates the regional disparity in education.

The Compulsory Education Law of July 2006 provides for the exemption of school fees at the compulsory education level [4]. It is clear that the Chinese government has introduced steps to promote the balanced growth of regional education, streamline the allocation of educational resources,

and enhance educational circumstances in disadvantaged areas. China unified the funding for compulsory education in both urban and rural areas in 2015 when it established the National Education Planning Outline. This strategy makes it clear that the Chinese government is giving greater priority to achieving educational equality by defending the education of underprivileged groups or regions.

According to the 2018 National Report on Supervision and Evaluation of Balanced Development of Compulsory Education, 92.7 % of counties (districts) nationwide have passed the accreditation and achieved a state of basic balance in compulsory education development in terms of hardware and facility indicators such as teacher-student ratio and books per student [5]. In 2021, the total investment in education funding in China is RMB 578,736,367 million, an increase of 9.13% over 2020 [6]. Based on the growth in the average number of students enrolled in education at all levels of education, combined with the region, the growth is significantly higher in the northwest, especially in the remote provinces.

However, while urban and rural schools have reached a state of equilibrium in terms of hardware and equipment, the difference in the class composition of urban and rural schools is a major challenge to equity in urban and rural education. The mass exodus of people from the countryside to the cities over the decades of urbanization has made the cities a high point for talent and has led to urban schools gathering more students from families of higher socio-economic status. The outstanding academic achievements of these students have placed the schools of the city at the top of the education system and made it a quality school. The lack of access to these quality educational resources for rural students has a negative impact on their educational attainment. Some theories suggest that educational expansion reduces the link between family background and educational opportunity. However, even though the overall educational level of the Chinese population has been increasing year on year, urban-rural and class differences in educational attainment have shown a tendency to widen, with significant differences in higher education attainment. According to the China General Social Survey (CGSS) from 2010 to 2015, it was found that the younger the generation, the greater the gap between urban and rural residents in terms of the proportion of those with university and above [7]. The higher the socio-economic status of the household, the greater the advantage of the group with a university degree or above relative to other groups. According to several sociological studies conducted abroad, families' financial and time commitments are a significant element in the transmission of class position, with higher socioeconomic status families often devoting more resources to their children's education. Additionally, class gaps in the financial and time responsibilities of families grow as income disparity does. This is due to increased parental worry and rivalry for educational resources, which leads parents to invest more money and time than before, as well as increased income inequality, which implies that higher income groups of the population have more money to spend on education [8].

3.2. Gender Leads to Inequality in Education

The level of education around the world has rapidly increased in recent decades, and women's social status has also improved. In several nations, females are now spending longer in school than males for the first time, and the female advantage is particularly evident in access to higher education. Women from underprivileged backgrounds and disadvantaged locations still have comparatively poorer access to education in China, even though the subject of gender inequality is still hotly debated. Overall, however, female enrolment in compulsory education is getting close to 100%, the gender education gap in China is continuing to close [9]. Women only made up 39% of university applicants in China in 1999, but since 2007, they have steadily climbed to more than 50% of applicants [9]. According to the China Education Statistics 2021, women account for 50.23% of students enrolled in

higher education [10]. Of these, 51.54% of postgraduate students (including PhDs and Masters) and 53.25% of general undergraduate students are female [10].

In terms of educational success and access criteria, such as access to higher education, women in China still lag behind men. Such as dropout risk, educational quality, and labor market returns. Despite recent progress in closing the gender gap in education [11]. Gender equality in education cannot be ignored. Economic growth has been found to be significantly harmed by gender disparities in schooling [12].

China's reproductive policies and gender perceptions can also affect gender equality in education. Due to budget limitations and gender preferences, traditional Chinese households would prioritise giving boys educational opportunity, which led to a gender education gap and the generally low standing of women in society. However, female educational equality in China has improved in line with fertility policies and economic development, and the implementation of family planning from 1991 to 2011 limited Chinese families to a maximum of one child. This eliminated competition for family resources between boys and girls in one-child families and may have substantially increased the educational attainment of females born after the family planning policy.

3.3. Higher Education Expansion Leads to Inequality in Education

Since the 1950s, China, in line with the rest of the world, has seen a quick development in the scope of its higher education system. Higher education has increased significantly since the turn of the new century. In 2015, there were 7.38 million new undergraduate students enrolled, a huge increase from the 1.6 million in 1999 [13]. The Ministry of Education (MOE) published a research in 2012 that showed China's higher education enrollment had climbed by 17.8% annually [14]. China has entered a new era of universal higher education, as seen by the increase of its gross enrollment rate from 15% in 2002 to 25% in 2007 [15].

Expanding higher education and rising enrollment translate to more educational options. In China, higher education is expanding at a very rapid pace. In this situation, it is assumed by the public that underprivileged students will receive more access to higher education because of this rapid increase. This promotes educational opportunity equality. However, one person from Beijing, one of the best performers in the country in the High School Entrance Examination, argued that the High School Entrance Examination is a class-based examination. He believes that family background in a certain sense determines a student's GCE results, and that this influence is even crucial. So why, in the face of greater educational options, are disadvantaged groups finding it harder to enroll in higher education?

China's educational growth differs significantly from that of other nations. In China, there is a significant societal revolution going on while higher education is expanding. China transitioned from a planned economy to a socialist market economy in the 1990s. As the economy shifted, the cost of participating in a higher education program increased. In addition, university admissions have become increasingly institutionalized. Admission to university is mainly determined by the student's results in the entrance examinations and the selection system is therefore more rigorous than before. There are a few studies that suggest the expansion of higher education has contributed to educational equality. Education disparities between children from various social origins have been declining since 1999. Scholars have reached contrasting findings, though. An analysis of data from the 2005 China Population Abstraction Survey revealed that students from rural areas and socioeconomically disadvantaged families did not benefit from the development of higher education in terms of living equality [16]. Higher education environments exhibit more greater educational opportunity disparities than do primary and secondary schools. The family histories of students continue to be a major factor in their ability to obtain higher education, according to a review of CGSS data from 2008 [17]. Since the third higher education expansion, this mutually beneficial connection has remained constant. Greater disparities in educational prospects between pupils from different family origins have been

caused by the rising expense of education as a result of the expansion. In this situation, pupils are already categorized based on their socioeconomic standing at a young age, and a family's investment in education might have an impact on the education their children receive. According to surveys, the family's financial situation has less of an impact on a child's decision to enroll in higher education (post-secondary), but has a greater impact on their decision to enroll in high level universities (China's "211" and "985" key institutions) [18]. Yang Jin et al. used the National Survey on the Employment Status of College Graduates (2003–2013) to analyze the effect of higher education expansion on the distribution of access to higher education. They discovered that higher socioeconomic status students consistently had a relative advantage in accessing top universities, i.e. expansion did not reduce inequality of access to elite higher education [19].

4. Discussion

In a country with a large population, educational development remains the key to long-term social stability and prosperity. Since the economic reforms of 1978, the Chinese government has implemented many education-related policies to address educational inequalities. However, there are other factors that limit the development of equality in education.

Inequality in education is relative to equality in education. Scholars worldwide generally agree that equality in education is discussed in terms of three dimensions: educational opportunities, educational processes and educational outcomes. Equality of educational opportunity means that everyone has access to education regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, economic status, living environment, geography and other conditions. Equality in the educational process means treating all people on an equal footing, regardless of their ethnicity, gender or social status, in the educational process. Equality of educational outcomes means that the goal of education is to eliminate differences in the starting points of children of different social origins and to achieve essential educational equality. The term "educational inequality" describes a condition of inequality in the sphere of education, including both individual and organizational disparity. Corresponding to the meaning of educational equality, educational inequality should also include three aspects: inequity in educational outcomes, in educational processes, and in educational opportunities. Thus, the paper talks about the effects of economic, geographic, gender, and educational policies on educational equality.

4.1. Regions Aspects

Educational inequality between regions in China is manifested in three main areas. Firstly, there are differences in the opportunities for school-age Children and adolescents to access education in different regions. In regions with a higher level of economic and cultural development, school-age children and adolescents have more adequate access to education, and there are relatively few cases of school failure or dropout. In contrast, in areas where economic and cultural development is more backward and the income level of the population is lower, the government and families are not able to afford education, and the enrolment rate at all levels of education is generally low, and the phenomenon of school failure and dropout is more serious. Secondly, there are differences in the educational resources, educational funding and educational content invested in the education process in different regions. In economically and culturally developed areas, the level of teachers can even exceed the standards set by the state. The inequalities in education between urban and rural areas, as well as between regions, remain despite the Chinese government's implementation of a number of measures to aid poor and remote areas in the development of their education, such as university students tutoring and assisting the underprivileged. Although hardware facilities have made every effort to close the gap between rural and urban locations, the number of teachers and the quality of their instruction have a considerable impact on students' educational experiences and outcomes.

Thirdly, regional differences in educational opportunities and processes inevitably lead to differences in academic outcomes. People with certain family backgrounds and socio-economic status move to cities in search of a better education. Again, unlike population movements, a large proportion of China's population movements are migrant workers, i.e. people who move from the countryside to the cities in search of work. Migrant workers refer to people with rural household registration who enter nearby cities or towns to engage in non-agricultural work and continue to work for more than six months. This group usually brings their children into the city, but because of the household problem, they usually encounter difficulties in going to school. Children from rural areas usually face greater problems in seeking education.

4.2. Gender Aspects

Gender aspects can also influence educational inequity. There are no significant differences in the extent to which families invest money and time in supporting their children's education, but a large proportion of parents show a tendency to favor sons over daughters. Even though Chinese society is more obviously gender disadvantaged in many ways, such as the gender imbalance at birth, when girls become members of the family, they generally receive parental support in education that is not much different from that of boys. However, there is still the problem of women not being able to access education because of patriarchal attitudes. In Northwest China, the suppression of Muslims by state policy has denied women the opportunity to receive a secondary education as adults or after marriage [20]. The lack of education for women has led to a lack of a family educational environment. Influenced by this, women's perceptions are confined and additionally influenced by religious beliefs that men and women are different or a distrust of secular education, thus limiting girls' access to formal public schools for their studies. In the remote and poor mountainous areas of China, there are also cases where educational opportunities are given to boys because family conditions do not allow them to do so. These are all aspects of gender that affect unequal access to education.

4.3. Higher Education

A greater number of people now have access to education as a result of the expansion of higher education. Students' achievement on various entrance exams determines their access to lower secondary, upper secondary, and higher education. At a younger age than boys, females are more inclined to listen to their parents' and teachers' directions. Female students are therefore more likely than their male counterparts to perform better on selection exams and get into better colleges. Because they are educated in better schools, female students are more likely to score highly in entrance examinations. In addition, higher qualifications are more important for women in the labor market. Despite current initiatives to promote gender equality at work, men are still more likely to be hired when their skills are on par with or slightly below those of women. Getting a job after graduation is more difficult for women. In order to compete with men on the employment market, women today require higher education degrees. In addition to gender having an impact on access to higher education, economic position also plays a significant role. In the context of higher education, when a certain level of education becomes universal, higher-income groups use their advantages to ensure that their children receive that degree of education. The growth of higher education hasn't done much to advance educational equality.

On July 24, 2021, the General Offices of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council jointly released the Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Schoolwork and Off-Campus Training for Students in Compulsory Education (the "Double Reduction" policy), which is similar to the expansion of higher education. The Double Reduction Policy has greatly lowered the demands placed on primary and secondary school students, but it has also somewhat restricted some students' access

to education. As a result, education in China has undergone tremendous transformation. Although many studies have confirmed that academic performance is influenced by several factors. However, in general, the length of time spent studying with a class shows a positive correlation with improved performance [21]. This leads to parents feeling anxious about schooling. Anxiety arises when parents realize that other people's children are doing better in school than their own, and this mentality leads parents to put their children in extra-curricular education. A proportion of students who choose to attend extra-curricular education benefit from this as they gain more knowledge to cope with exams, which makes it unfair to students who do not attend shadow education. As the number of people participating in shadow education grows, school teachers are vulnerable to a decline in the standard of instruction and learning, and students who do not have the family conditions to participate in shadow education will suffer from educational inequality as a result. Therefore, although the double reduction policy has somewhat reduced access to education for some students, overall it has had a positive impact on equality in education.

5. Conclusions

Education has been an important means of spreading human culture throughout the history of the world. For all humanity, education is for all, regardless of race or gender. However, inequality in education is an inevitable problem in the process of educational development. It is essential for China's prosperity and stable growth that education become one of the tools to reduce poverty because the country is currently one of the most populous developing nations in the world, has a complicated population class, and has a significant number of impoverished people.

In terms of economy and geography, this paper argues that the uncoordinated regional development of the economy may have a direct impact on the degree of development of education between regions. Eastern and southern China are more economically developed and relatively advanced in education. The north-western region, on the other hand, is more backward in terms of educational development due to its remoteness and large population of poor people. The Chinese government should allocate educational resources to a certain extent to the backward regions to coordinate regional educational development. China is a vast country with large differences between regions. The eastern and southern regions are more economically developed, with abundant educational resources and good educational conditions. The western regions, however, are economically backward and have a wide distribution of mountainous areas, resulting in poor educational opportunities and conditions. One of the key factors influencing the growth of regional education continues to be the uncoordinated regional economic development. Education and the economy have a mutually beneficial relationship. The advancement of education is supported by the growth of the economy, and the advancement of the economy is supported by the advancement of education. Therefore, education is a means to develop the economy and the economy is a prerequisite for the development of education. The Chinese government should favor education resources more towards the poorer regions in the west, and the treasury should invest more in education in the poorer regions. The central government should favor these regions in its allocation of resources and increase educational assistance to these regions to improve the educational inequality between regions. Teachers are another element influencing schooling. To protect the rights and interests of teachers in rural areas, the distribution of teacher resources should be optimized and pertinent policies should be put in place, so that more highly educated students are willing to enter poor areas to teach in education. As the effect of household registration on access to education diminishes over time, special support schemes for children of farming families to attend university could be established and implemented on a long-term basis. For migrant workers, the government should ensure that youngsters of migrant laborers and other disadvantaged groups have equal access to education in the areas of inflow by

waiving loan and sponsorship fees and relaxing restrictions on the enrolment of children who move with them.

In terms of gender, this paper argues that although some regions of China still have a backward mindset that favors sons over daughters, compulsory education has made basic education accessible to all children of school age. In addition, because of family planning policies, the number of children allowed per family is limited and only children can benefit from the family's resources. This to some extent has led to improved access to education for females. While equality in education in China is less affected by gender, the patriarchal mindset remains unchanged in some mountainous areas of China, and girls are still unable to attend school in remote and poor areas. Although the Chinese government has made it clear that nine years of compulsory education is mandatory for all children of school age, some families prefer to provide for boys to attend school because of economic problems. The Chinese government should pay attention to the issue of girls' schooling in remote and poor mountainous areas and put the responsibility to the township government to officially supervise families so that men and women are equal in education gatherings. In addition, for higher education, it is important to discard stereotypes such as that women are only suited to written work and men to high-tech work. Although gender discrimination has been reduced in higher education schools, it still exists for employment. This can lead to different educational outcomes for different genders.

In terms of higher education expansion, this paper argues that while higher education expansion means increased access to education, it can, to some extent, make it harder for underprivileged groups to obtain high-quality education. Higher education expansion does not equalize access for socio-economically disadvantaged students and students from rural areas. Inequality of educational opportunity is more pronounced in the higher education setting than in basic education. Students with higher socio-economic status have always had a relative advantage in accessing high level universities, meaning that expansion has not reduced inequality of opportunity in elite higher education. The expansion of higher education has not reduced inequality in education to some extent. Regarding these issues, there is a need for the Chinese government to provide some regional support for education. While the state has certain educational preferences for ethnic, poor and disabled students, more detailed policies are needed to promote equality in education.

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