

The Impact of Meritocracy on Higher Education: A Perspective from College Admissions Policies in Mainland China

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Abstract: This study examines the impact of meritocracy on higher education in mainland China, focusing on university admission policies. Since the reform and opening-up period, China's economic and educational advancements have increasingly emphasized elitism, particularly in allocating university admission slots through mechanisms like the Gaokao. The analysis, conducted from historical and contemporary perspectives, reveals that while elitism has optimized the distribution of educational resources, it has also deepened social inequalities. Despite their intent to promote fairness, policies such as the provincial quota system and independent admissions have widened regional and urban-rural disparities in educational resources. Furthermore, government initiatives like targeted poverty alleviation and regional preferential policies have had limited success in addressing these disparities. The study concludes that while elitism has centralized high-quality educational resources, it has hindered upward social mobility, especially for students from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds, highlighting the need for comprehensive reforms to achieve educational equity and social justice.

Keywords: Meritocracy, Higher Education, Admission Policies, Distributive Justice, Equal Opportunities.

1. Introduction

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, higher education in China has achieved significant milestones, particularly during the 40 years following the reform and opening up, which marked a critical period in the evolution of Chinese higher education [1]. The Gaokao (China's national college entrance examination), a uniquely Chinese educational examination system, serves as both a transition between high school and university and a conduit linking universities to broader society [2]. For individuals, the Gaokao plays a decisive role in determining access to higher education, which in turn significantly influences one's future career paths, income levels, and social status [3]. As meritocracy has intensified elitism within higher education, the emphasis on merit has promoted the expansion of higher education and the advancement of universities. However, rather than acting as catalysts for social mobility, elite research universities have instead deepened social inequality and diminished social mobility. [4]

This paper adopts both historical and contemporary perspectives to review the foundations of meritocracy, using the admissions policies of mainland Chinese universities as a case study to explore meritocracy's impact on higher education. To gain a deeper understanding of its effects, it is essential to reassess the concept of meritocracy. This paper will examine the implications of meritocracy through the lenses of distributive justice, equal opportunity, and social mobility. Given the focus on the admissions policies of mainland Chinese universities, an initial brief overview of these policies will be provided.

2. Admissions Policies of Mainland Chinese Universities

Since the Gaokao was reinstated in 1977, the admissions system of mainland Chinese universities has evolved through three major phases [5]. The first phase (1977-1998) employed a model where students were assessed based on total scores in either liberal arts or science subjects. The second phase (1999-2013) introduced the '3+X' admissions system ('3' refers to the three mandatory subjects: Chinese, Mathematics, and a foreign language, while 'X' represents the subjects from which students can choose one or more to take exams, such as Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Politics, History, and Geography.), giving students more choices. The third phase (2014-present) allows provinces to set their exam subjects based on local conditions, but overall admissions are still determined by total scores. [4][6]

Currently, mainland Chinese universities utilize five main admissions methods: the National Unified Examination for General Higher Education, where students are admitted based on their scores; Independent Admissions Examinations, which consider students' academic records and special talents; comprehensive evaluations that factor in Gaokao scores, high school academic performance, and overall student assessments; direct admission for students exempted from the Gaokao; and special programs targeting students from impoverished regions. [4][5][6]

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, various forms of preferential admissions policies have been in place, targeting specific groups and circumstances. These include both merit-based preferences, such as those for students with exceptional talents in arts or sports and winners of academic competitions, and compensatory preferences, such as those under special programs aimed at promoting educational equity [7]. Over time, compensatory preferences have become predominant, reflecting the government's commitment to fairness in education. Admissions are influenced by both the allocation of higher education opportunities and the matching of student abilities. The initial allocation is shaped by the university's admissions capacity and provincial quotas, while secondary matching occurs based on students' scores and university requirements [8]. This dual process guides the government's intervention through two primary approaches: macro-level regulation aimed at achieving equitable educational opportunities across different groups, and micro-level score adjustments to enhance individual admission outcomes. Together, these measures create a complex and unique system of preferential admissions policies in mainland China.

In the following sections, this paper will examine the impact of meritocracy on higher education from the perspective of mainland Chinese university admissions policies, offering detailed analysis across multiple dimensions.

3. Definition of Meritocracy

The term 'meritocracy' was first coined in 1958 by British sociologist Michael Young in his work *The Rise of Meritocracy* [9]. Young [10] argued that under a meritocratic governance system, elites might become arrogant rulers, losing empathy and goodwill toward the public. In contrast, Bell, in *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, supported the concept of meritocracy, noting that in a post-industrial society, governance will be by those with technical skills and educational qualifications,

with status and income reflecting these attributes [11]. Broadly speaking, meritocracy dismantles the inherited privileges of the traditional aristocracy and fosters a belief in striving for excellence. Within a meritocratic system, rigorous training and bureaucratic rationality supplant social or familial background, democratic accountability replaces feudal autocracy, and human capital takes precedence over land. [4]

Meritocracy is defined as a system where political and economic resources are distributed based on individual ability and effort [4]. However, what precisely constitutes merit? In contemporary society, educational credentials are often used as indicators of talent [12], but Sandel [13] contends that academic qualifications are largely disconnected from practical wisdom or an instinct for the public good. Meritocracy also tends to rely on market mechanisms to define ‘merit’, yet Sandel [13] similarly argues that market value should not be the benchmark for contributions to the public good. Despite the absence of a precise definition, merit is generally associated with attributes such as talent, skills, intelligence, ability, and effort, and it is deemed just to reward individuals based on ‘talent’ and ‘desert’. [4]

Since the 1960s, scholars like Michael Young, Daniel Bell, Michael Sandel, Daniel Markovits, and Jianhua Wang have extensively discussed meritocracy and its relationship with higher education. In the context of higher education, colleges and universities face challenges in selecting top candidates and defining what constitutes merit. Ji [14] highlights that university admissions in mainland China still largely rely on a single examination score, a practice rooted in the ancient imperial examination system. According to Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, individuals possess eight distinct types of intelligence. However, the college entrance examination primarily evaluates linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence, while other forms of intelligence receive relatively less attention [15]. Since the Ministry of Education’s 2003 directive, some universities in mainland China have introduced independent admissions, marking a shift towards a more diversified talent selection model with varied criteria for excellence. For example, Zhang [16] notes that independent admissions mechanisms not only consider academic performance but also evaluate factors such as the learning process, character, and emotional intelligence, emphasizing the importance of comprehensive qualities and abilities. Consequently, how evaluators define and assess student achievement can significantly influence the composition of the student body.

Disagreements among scholars regarding the criteria for evaluating merit have complicated the formulation of university admissions standards. The evolving admissions policies in mainland China reflect the increasing complexity of the evaluation process, especially in terms of student diversity [4]. A central point of debate is the consideration of provincial quotas in the admissions process. The provincial quota admissions policy allocates a set number of university slots to different provinces based on specific criteria, aiming to address disparities in admissions caused by variations in educational attainment or exam performance [7][17]. Since its implementation in 1952, there has been a significant increase in the proportion of students from remote and underdeveloped regions, particularly in ethnic minority autonomous regions, who gain access to higher education [7]. This reflects a long-standing commitment to student diversity, supported by research highlighting its importance. The policy of admitting ethnic minority candidates to the college entrance examination was later enshrined in the Regulations on *the Implementation of the Law of the People’s Republic of China on Regional Ethnic Autonomy* by the State Council, ensuring legal guarantees, stability, and continuity. The proportion of ethnic minority students in universities rose from 0.93% in 1950 to 5.7% in 2000 [18]. As the case of the provincial quota admissions policy in mainland China illustrates, merit is not, and cannot be a static concept. It requires deliberate reflection and must evolve in response to contemporary challenges.

4. Distributive Justice

The second aspect to consider involves the principle of merit-based rewards. This concept dates back to the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, who categorized justice into distributive, corrective, and retributive forms [19]. According to Aristotle, distributive justice concerns the fair allocation of valuable resources, such as wealth, honor, and rights [20]. In this framework, justice is achieved by treating individuals differently based on their merits and consistently treating similar cases. The meritocratic perspective on distributive justice asserts that scarce economic goods (like jobs, income, and wealth) should be allocated according to merit [21]. In other words, when these resources are distributed, individuals with higher merit should be prioritized over those with lower merit. The goods in question can range widely but are commonly encountered, including access to universities or elite schools, funding for schools, opportunities for advanced courses, and various rewards. Wang [4] used the term ‘institutional goods’ to refer to items most likely distributed by educational institutions, rather than more intrinsic educational benefits like knowledge and skills development. In education, applying a merit-based approach to allocate educational opportunities can incentivize students to engage more deeply and benefit fully [4]. This approach also ensures that extra educational opportunities and resources are allocated to those best positioned to make the most of them. It is anticipated that, over time, this method of distribution will prove to be the most effective and will maximize overall benefit.

In China, the uneven development of economic and social conditions across regions has led to a disparity in the distribution of higher education resources, exacerbating regional inequalities. Before 1978, China’s strategy of regionally balanced development helped to reduce the gap in higher education levels across regions. However, after 1978, the uneven economic development across regions disrupted this balance, making the disparities in higher education increasingly pronounced and continually widening the gap between regions. [7]

A notable tension exists between the principles of meritocracy and distributive justice in the higher education admissions policies of Mainland China. While meritocracy is intended to select the most qualified students through competitive processes, the uneven distribution of educational resources can exacerbate regional disparities [4]. Data from 2023 reveals that, in China, students from economically developed eastern regions are more likely to be admitted to prestigious universities, which undermines the principle of distributive justice [22]. For example, admission rates for undergraduate programs in economically advanced areas such as Beijing and Shanghai are significantly higher than those in the central and western regions. This disparity is even more pronounced for top-tier universities. For instance, the admission rates for the 211 project universities (116 key universities selected by the Chinese government) in Beijing and Shanghai are 22% and 14%, respectively, while the rates for the 985 project universities (39 top universities selected by the Chinese government from the 211 Project universities) are 7.1% and 5.3%, far exceeding those in central and western regions. [22]

To address this inequality, the Chinese government has implemented regional preferential admissions policies, established targeted enrollment programs, and offered additional admission quotas to students from economically disadvantaged areas through the Poverty Alleviation Special Plan [7]. Over the past decade, this initiative has significantly increased the proportion of rural students gaining admission to prestigious universities [23]. However, Du [24] claimed that the program benefits only a small segment of students from a few top-tier schools and has not substantially improved the overall educational levels of rural students or reduced the educational disparity between rural and urban areas. Moreover, the program has, to some extent, contributed to the rise of ‘elite schools’, which has disrupted the regional education system and intensified disparities in resource distribution. [4]

Long-term educational equity requires addressing the fundamental issue of uneven resource distribution. This involves not only increasing investment in education in the central and western regions but also improving the quality of basic education, upgrading school infrastructure, offering more teacher training opportunities, and ensuring that high-quality educational resources are directed to underdeveloped areas. Additionally, admissions policies should aim for greater regional balance by employing flexible and diverse criteria to ensure equitable opportunities for students from all regions.

5. Equal Opportunity

Equality of opportunity is a fundamental requirement of a performance-based allocation system, meaning that individuals with equal talents should have equal chances in resource distribution. Rawls [25] asserts that equality of opportunity is achieved when people with similar endowments and aspirations have equal prospects for success in competition. Gordon [26] similarly states that positions should be open to all, and under such conditions, individuals with similar abilities have equal chances for public office. In mainland China, university admissions policies strive to ensure equality of opportunity through transparent and fair selection procedures. These include standardized exams, clear admission criteria, and special policies for disadvantaged groups. Yang [23] contends that educational equality of opportunity does not mean identical education for everyone, but rather that the state provides education suited to each person's abilities and needs most equitably.

Mainland China's undergraduate admissions policies are designed to promote equality of opportunity. Since the reinstatement of the college entrance examination, China has replaced the recommendation system with a unified national exam and standardized admission criteria, establishing a fair competition model centered on exam performance and student ability [7]. This approach embodies the principle of equality of opportunity, aiming for 'equality before scores' [8]. The reform has removed educational discrimination based on background, ensuring that all individuals can access higher education based on their abilities. [4][7][27]

However, the principle of merit-based equality has evolved into a score-centered value system, leading to issues related to 'score-based meritocracy' [27]. To address these issues, China has implemented a bonus points policy in the college entrance examination to offset the shortcomings of a purely score-based system [28]. In addition to preferential policies for ethnic minority students, children of overseas Chinese, veterans, and martyrs' children, there are bonus points for high-achieving students in academics, arts, and sports [7]. For instance, the 1986 National Education Commission regulations allowed students with a national second-level athlete title to receive a 20-point reduction in their admission score. The 1987 *Interim Regulations for the Admission of Ordinary Higher Education* detailed the eligible items and bonus points. However, intense competition has revealed flaws in the bonus points policy, such as poor design and insufficient supervision. [4]

In response, in 2010, the Ministry of Education and other departments issued *the Notice on Adjusting Some College Entrance Examination Bonus Projects and Further Strengthening Management*, which mandated local adjustments to bonus points for academic and sports achievements [4]. Since 2018, China has eliminated national college entrance examination bonus points for sports specialties, middle school academic Olympiads, science and technology competitions, provincial-level outstanding students, and notable achievements in ideological and political morality, to enhance equality of opportunity and ensure fairness, justice, and orderliness in higher education admissions. [29]

6. Social Mobility

A final critical aspect of meritocracy is how higher education serves as a mechanism to provide equal opportunities for social mobility. Since the 19th century, driven by the values of merit and virtue, higher education has rapidly expanded, establishing an elite educational system [4]. In contrast to past reliance on factors such as bloodline, social status, race, gender, and family background, today, ‘ability’ and ‘effort’ have become the fundamental principles guiding social mobility and stratification [30]. Higher education not only plays a key role in producing qualified members of society but also acts as a significant force in promoting individual upward mobility [31]. Bourdieu [32] noted that in the fluid world of status culture, an individual’s stock of cultural capital is only partially determined by their childhood experiences and family background. This suggests that for students from lower social strata, narrowing the cultural gap with the upper class through higher education is the primary path to upward mobility. However, as education has become more widespread, the meritocratic principle—where educational attainment is the benchmark for social status—has gradually lost its autonomy in the competition for socioeconomic status, with wealth or family background increasingly overshadowing merit [4][8]. The meritocratic principles, initially intended to promote social mobility and the elite higher education system based on them, have not only failed to facilitate upward mobility for disadvantaged groups but have also exacerbated social inequality. [7]

The higher education admissions system was designed to maintain social stability, promote social mobility, and ensure social order [7]. However, significant discrepancies exist in practice. The independent admissions system is a prime example within higher education admissions, with its unique characteristics evident. Zhang [16] argued that regional differences in students admitted through independent admissions have concentrated top higher education resources in urban areas, where prestigious universities are located, disadvantaging rural students in this competition. Nationally, the proportion of rural students in universities has decreased from about 30% in the 1980s to only 17.7% in 2009 [33]. Wen’s study [34] of over 2,800 undergraduates from various institutions in Jiangxi and Tianjin during the 2004–2005 academic years revealed that the proportion of rural students in key national universities and third-tier institutions was significantly lower, at 31.3% and 39.4%, respectively. Furthermore, research by Xun and Wang [27] from the Higher Education Research Center at Xiamen University found that the urban-to-rural household registration ratio among freshmen admitted through independent admissions in 2009 was 92.1% to 7.9%. Additionally, Bao [28] demonstrated through a multinomial logit regression analysis that rural students had a 52.4% lower probability of success in independent admissions compared to their urban counterparts. Similar conclusions were drawn by Wu and Li [35] using a multinomial logit model.

While the distribution of quality higher education resources is closely linked to the allocation of urban and rural basic education resources, it is also influenced by the higher education admissions examination system. Geographically, universities in mainland China authorized to conduct independent admissions are mainly concentrated in the economically developed eastern coastal provinces [29]. These universities show a clear regional bias in the allocation of independent admissions slots [7]. For example, in the 2009 and 2010 independent admissions exams in China, students from the economically developed Beijing–Tianjin–Shanghai region accounted for 37.2% and 34.7% of the national pre-admission numbers, respectively [22]. Moreover, the requirements set by independent admissions universities for high school sources disadvantage rural applicants. Research indicates that students from provincial capital cities are more likely to receive independent admission offers compared to those from economically underdeveloped rural areas [23]. Within the urban–rural dual structure, most rural junior high school students attend regular county or rural high schools, but

the majority of non-key high schools do not qualify to recommend students for independent admissions, further hindering social mobility. [17]

In examining the driving forces behind the development of higher education, it is crucial to deeply explore the impact of external factors such as politics and economics. The role of higher education in promoting social mobility is not without limitations; it is conditional and limited in scope [7]. Conditionality means that higher education's ability to promote social mobility depends on the support and cooperation of other social subsystems [36]. Without such support systems, higher education alone cannot effectively facilitate social mobility. Systemic disadvantages in social and economic terms can significantly impact individual achievement levels, making it unrealistic to solve educational inequality issues by focusing solely on education itself [37]. Limited scope refers to the fact that although access to higher education might ensure that everyone can receive education, and even equality of conditions at certain stages, the ultimate outcome is that higher education can only promote social mobility for a minority, and it cannot guarantee equal upward mobility for everyone [36]. Given the conditional and limited nature of higher education in promoting social mobility, relying solely on the development of higher education to achieve social equity and justice is impractical. Instead, achieving the goal of higher education promoting social mobility must be based on the premise of social equity and justice. [4]

Additionally, the trend of elitism in higher education has also impacted social mobility. As competition for prestigious schools intensifies, students who enter these institutions increasingly come from more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds [4]. This phenomenon, known as 'aristocratic education', refers to the gradual transformation of higher education into an exclusive domain for social elites, reducing the opportunities for children from ordinary families to enter prestigious schools, thereby hindering social mobility. [29]

To promote social mobility, the Chinese government has implemented various measures, such as educational poverty alleviation, regional preferential policies, and special admissions programs. For instance, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China issued the *Opinions on Implementing a Pilot Reform of Basic Subject Enrollment in Some Universities*, which abolished independent admissions from 2020 onwards [4]. According to the Ministry of Education's Department of Higher Education Student Affairs, the *Strong Foundation Plan* differs from the previous independent admissions process by combining applicants' college entrance examination scores, comprehensive university assessments, and evaluations of their overall quality into a composite score, and admitting students based on rank order [29]. This approach, to some extent, safeguards social mobility. However, these measures' effectiveness remains limited. For example, Wang [7] notes that some low-income families forgo the exams because they cannot afford the costs of transportation and accommodation associated with the independent admissions process. Therefore, improving social mobility will require long-term efforts and systemic reforms.

7. Conclusion

This study examines the impact of meritocracy on higher education, specifically focusing on the admissions policies of mainland Chinese universities. Conducted in the context of China's rapid economic and educational development since the reform and opening up, the central question of this research is how meritocratic principles, as applied through the Gaokao and other university admissions mechanisms, influence distributive justice, equal opportunity, and social mobility within China's higher education system.

The analysis reveals that while meritocracy has significantly advanced educational access and institutional excellence, it has also exacerbated social inequalities and limited social mobility. Merit-based admissions, particularly those reliant on standardized tests like the Gaokao, often overlook disparities in regional educational resources and socioeconomic backgrounds. Consequently, students

from economically advantaged regions and families are more likely to secure places in top universities, while those from less privileged backgrounds remain at a disadvantage, perpetuating cycles of inequality.

The research further underscores the tension between meritocracy and distributive justice in Chinese higher education. Although meritocracy aims to allocate educational opportunities based on individual ability and effort, the uneven distribution of resources undermines this goal, leading to regional and socioeconomic disparities in admissions outcomes. While the Chinese government has implemented targeted policies, such as special admissions programs for disadvantaged groups, these measures have only partially addressed the educational gap.

Evaluating the overall impact of meritocracy on higher education in China reveals that the system's benefits are unevenly distributed. The emphasis on academic achievement as the primary criterion for university admission overlooks other crucial factors, such as diverse forms of intelligence and the broader social and economic contexts in which students live. This narrow definition of merit limits the higher education system's ability to function as a true engine of social mobility.

Future research should explore more inclusive and holistic models of merit that consider a broader range of student abilities and backgrounds. Additionally, further investigation is needed into the long-term effectiveness of government interventions aimed at promoting educational equity. By broadening the concept of 'merit' and addressing systemic issues that perpetuate inequality, higher education in China can better fulfill its role in promoting social justice and mobility.

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