

Educational Inequalities Due to Regional Differences in China, Exemplified by Yunnan and Guangdong Provinces: An Analysis Based on Socio-economic, Cultural Context and Policy Factors

Xinmei Liang^{1,a,*}

¹*University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT, UK*

a. pt22xl@gmail.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: China's reform and opening up have led to remarkable advancements in education and the economy. However, regional inequality has become a prominent issue, particularly between border and coastal areas. Using as examples, This study examines the educational discrepancies between Yunnan Province and Guangdong Province as examples, aiming to identify the causes of such inequality. The study discovers that one primary cause of regional educational inequality is the disparity in socio-economic development. As a economically developed coastal region, Guangdong possesses greater economic capacity for rapid growth and can allocate more funding towards educational resources and infrastructural development. In contrast, less developed areas like Yunnan have made insufficient investments in this field. Furthermore, cultural differences significantly impact education levels: coastal regions such as Guangdong have higher expectations for higher education and value the role of the family in education; whereas frontier areas like Yunnan prioritize education less due to geographic and cultural constraints, resulting in lower levels of attention and investment. Each local government's policy stance and investment direction differ: economically developed locations tend to attract more qualified instructors and associated resources, while less developed regions lag behind, aggravating the unequal distribution of educational resources. This paper contends that regional economic disparities are the main driver of educational inequality, particularly in terms of investment and access to educational resources. Bridging the economic gap between different regions is crucial for achieving educational equity, which is closely linked to the country's overall prosperity and stability.

Keywords: Regional differences in China, educational inequality, ideology, poor population, ethnic minority education.

1. Introduction

China has made progress in terms of economy and education since its reform and opening up. However, regional disparities have exacerbated educational inequality, hindering social equity and economic growth. Factors such as the urban-rural divide in economic structure, imbalanced regional development, and inadequate distribution of educational resources contribute to this disparity. Additionally, there are issues with government policies and resource allocation in education. Yang

points out that although education is a basic state policy in China, public expenditure on education has not kept pace with GDP growth [1]. Yunnan province, located in southwest China, is home to 25 ethnic minorities comprising 34% of the province's population [2]. The concentration of ethnic minorities contributes to a diverse local culture; however, the underdevelopment of education in Yunnan contradicts the high demands for socio-economic progress. By the end of 2016, there were about 300 million people living below poverty line [3]. While Guangdong province places increasing emphasis on education under government guidance. The provincial party committee secretary stated their intention to establish an education highland in South China while highlighting investment importance [4]. Thus, this paper utilizes Yunnan and Guangdong province as examples to examine the effects of socio-economic, cultural, and political factors on educational inequality. To achieve social stability and peace, educational equity is a crucial component of social equity [5]. Examining educational equity can uncover disparities in educational opportunities and resources among various regions and groups, promoting policymakers to take practical steps to close these gaps and ensure equal access to high-quality education for all individuals.

2. Socio-economic Reasons

The socio-economic discrepancies between the two provinces result in disparities in local education development, as historical evidence shows that education is closely linked to economic growth, and no rich, industrialized country has achieved significant economic growth without universal primary education [6]. Yunnan province, located in western China, is known for its slow economic development and being one of the country's poorer areas. Financial issues faced by local families pose significant barriers to students' access to quality education. It is well known that there is a strong correlation between students' educational development and family income during the same period. In 2002, high-income families spent "3.66 times more on education than low-income families." This gap is projected to widen further in the future. Income disparities play a significant role in unequal education spending, which leads to inequality in educational progress [7]. Conversely, inequality in education inevitably leads to a gradual widening of the income gap among rural families. While in 2003, the per capita income of high-income rural families was 5.87 times that of low-income families. The change in income was characterised by bipolar growth. Unequal access to education can contribute to economic inequality and exacerbate it when income growth is unevenly distributed. Moreover, low-income families are more likely to experience poverty [7]. When combined with their limited ability to provide quality learning resources and environments for their children, this reduces opportunities for learning and hinders overall educational standards. Developing countries often witness poverty associated with lower levels of educational attainment and large gender gaps in education due to low incomes combined with imperfect credit markets hindering investment in education even when the returns exceed the costs [8]. However, studies on regional inequality within China have reached a consensus regarding the disparity between coastal provinces and inland provinces [9]. Conversely, Guangdong Province is situated on China's eastern coast. Thus, the natural environment and geographic position are crucial for the growth of the local economy and the spread of culture. In addition, Guangdong province is one of the most developed provinces in China ranking first among the 31 provinces in 2019. The province has quickly raised the degree of regional economic development by fully utilising its advantages. One of the key elements contributing to Guangdong's explosive economic growth is the province's investment in education. With a general public education budget of 252.255 billion yuan, Guangdong province led the country in this regard in 2017. The Party Secretary of Guangdong Province emphasized that education is an investment worth making since it would provide greater returns. Increasing educational opportunities can offer a range of instruction and training to advance fundamental abilities like literacy [4]. According to Guangdong Province's current economic status and educational progress, the province government's investments in

education during the previous ten or so years have undoubtedly contributed significantly to the sustained expansion of the local economy. The development of education is currently receiving increased attention from the Guangdong Provincial Government in terms of infrastructure, investments in education, and resources.

When comparing the amounts of education-related investments made between Guangdong and Yunnan provinces, it is evident that the latter has made more significant contributions. This is partially due to the area's high degree of economic development and quick social development. However, because of its maritime location, Guangdong province is more open to foreign influences and is more accepting of new ideas. Guangdong has been instrumental in the local government's significant investment in education by providing adequate financial support and a shift in perspective following exposure to the outside world. In conclusion, according to this article, the primary drivers of regional inequality are disparities in economic levels and the policies accompanying them. Effective achievement of local investments in education and development initiatives can only occur when a region's economic development reaches a particular threshold.

3. Cultural Background

The differences in ethnic culture, ideology, and language are also key factors influencing education levels.

Yunnan Province used to be a primary battleground for poverty reduction due to its unique blend of frontier, ethnic, impoverished, and mountainous features. It has the highest number of key counties for rural revitalization among the 10 provinces and municipalities identified by the present administration [10]. Moreover, inconvenient local transportation discourages cross-cultural interactions and local interaction with the outside world. The local information sources and culture are becoming more and more exclusive, which indirectly contributes to the issue of unequal distribution of educational resources in this particular social environment. Poor facilities and a shortage of teachers, particularly bilingual teachers, are common at distant schools. As "ethnic minorities make up a large proportion of the Chinese population," there are linguistic and cultural barriers that separate various ethnic groups [11]. These factors contribute to an uneven distribution of educational resources, make it difficult to transmit the curriculum in Yunnan Province, and make it impossible to unify instruction with that of other regions, exacerbating the local education system's falling standards. It can be seen that China is still failing to achieve inclusiveness for ethnic minorities with distinctive cultures and is largely responsible for the poor performance of ethnic minorities in terms of education and social mobility, i.e. cultural exclusion perpetuates ethnic minority inequality [11]. When combined with the parents' low level of educational attainment, there is unlikely to be much emphasis on schooling. They may also pass on poorer academic skills to their children or be less able to provide complementing learning inputs (for example, helping children with homework together). 'In particular, the lower educational attainment of one parent, combined with different preferences for education, may also reduce the ability to discuss education in the family and affect the family's educational decisions [8]. Due in part to certain cultural beliefs, women's educational attainment is typically lower than men's in many rural and isolated parts of China. 'In China's traditional concepts, especially in poor areas. There is a general preference for sons over daughters, which may explain why girls receive less education than boys. Families will also only place more importance on the welfare of their sons rather than their daughters [12]. In poor regions of the local community, this type of thinking is even more common (mainly in rural and mountainous areas). This ingrained mentality has also contributed significantly to the poverty and backwardness in the area.

On the other hand, Guangdong Province is more accepting and values it when it comes to cultural and educational ideas. First and foremost, Guangdong Province plays a significant role in the dissemination of Lingnan culture, which includes distinctive languages, customs, and habits, in

addition to a largely cohesive history, culture, and ethnicity. This is in addition to Guangdong culture's pragmatic mentality, which is especially apparent in education. Cantonese people are mainly concerned with practical issues and place a greater emphasis on practicality and employment prospects in education. As a result, vocational education and skill training are highly valued in Guangdong, and many families and students view obtaining practical skills as a critical aim. This has resulted in a Guangdong education system that prioritises not only theoretical knowledge but also the development of practical skills. Second, as a coastal province, Guangdong has long been affected by various cultures and ideas, resulting in an open and diverse cultural environment. Because of this openness, Guangdong education increasingly focuses on internationalisation and innovation. Parents and students generally place a higher value on foreign languages, science and technology, and new disciplines, and schools are more likely to incorporate international standards into their curricula to improve educational quality. Finally, the Guangdong culture's emphasis on educational investment has had a significant impact on how families and society allocate educational resources. The broad desire of Guangdong residents to invest more money in their children's education has not only facilitated the birth and development of high-quality educational institutions but has also kept Guangdong Province at the forefront of national education standards.

As a result, this study contends that ideological and cultural variances in perceptions are among the factors influencing regional disparities in educational growth. 'Because people's ideological characteristics have a guiding role in their behavioral choices. Only when people recognize the problem from their thoughts and take the initiative to play the subjective consciousness and change proactively can external help work. Therefore, the education and guidance on their thinking is the real meaning of help [13]. Variations should be considered in local languages while modifying the concept. Yunnan Province's distinct geographic position contributes to the problem of teaching problems, which impacts the regular learning of many minority pupils due to the local language and cultural variations. In order to help local students better understand and master these fundamental concepts, this paper makes the case that the state should concentrate on training teachers who speak minority languages, for which there are currently insufficient resources in China.

4. National Policies

The state's revision of associated policies is another factor contributing to the disparity in educational resources. "Issues of region and household registration have a serious impact on education. In China, access to primary and secondary education is related to hukou and place of residence. For example, when children are ready to go to primary school, their hukou address largely determines which school they can attend" [14]. Unlike other countries, when wanting their children to be able to go to a school with better educational resources, parents in the US, for example, are able to move and use other methods to get their children to a better education, which is often difficult for parents in China. This is often difficult for Chinese parents because the hukou issue (especially in rural and mountainous areas) is difficult to change. And these parents are rarely able to change their rural status to urban status and send their children to key (high-quality) public schools that are only available in urban areas [14]. And there is substantial regional variation in county-level educational resources in southwestern China, which is mainly influenced by average elevation population density, proportion of ethnic minorities, government revenue, rural household income, and urbanization [15]. And these differences are also true at the national level, so China is still a developing country with unbalanced regional development, especially in public services such as education. However, due to the dual structure of urban and rural areas and the unequal development strategy of educational resources in urban areas, most of the rural areas are located in the central and western regions. At the same time, many rural populations migrate to urban areas in the context of rapid urbanization [15]. This has resulted in the continued decline of rural communities. As a result of the dual structure of urban and

rural areas, as well as unequal development plans, the development of education in rural areas is skewed towards urban areas, and good educational resources are also favoring urban areas. In the instance of Yunnan Province and Guangdong Province, Yunnan Province is still at the basic education level, with traditional teaching methods used. Guangdong province's education paradigm is quite colorful, and professors teach pupils in a variety of ways (such as using AI, labs, museums, etc.). However, it will be extremely difficult for students from Yunnan Province to travel to Guangdong Province to attend school.

5. Possible Solutions

Minimizing regional educational inequality requires boosting the balanced distribution of educational resources. There is an apparent disparity between developed and developing countries in terms of educational spending, school infrastructure, and teaching equipment. The government should enhance its investment in education in remote and underprivileged areas, particularly in infrastructural development. It can ensure that schools in less economically developed regions have hardware facilities on par with those in wealthy areas by establishing special funds and encouraging corporate donations to schools. Furthermore, the government should promote the use of information-based teaching methods and Internet technology to bridge the gap between urban and rural educational resources, particularly in border and rural areas, and to connect students with high-quality educational resources via distance education. Second, boosting teacher strength in less developed countries is a crucial step toward alleviating educational inequity. Excellent teacher resources are concentrated in economically developed places. In contrast, instructors in distant areas are insufficient in quantity and have lower teaching standards. As a result, the government can implement a variety of policy actions. To entice a group of exceptional instructors to teach in undeveloped areas (for example, by giving financial subsidies, housing perks, and so on). Simultaneously, it should increase local teacher training in order to raise their teaching standards and professionalism. Teachers from undeveloped regions can learn from one another and advance alongside teachers from developed regions by organizing regular teacher exchanges, training courses, and study tours.

Furthermore, policy support is a guarantee for closing regional education disparities. The state should adopt long-term education support policies and provide additional policy benefits to economically deprived regions. (for example, establishing grants, offering scholarships, and so on) to alleviate the financial burden of low-income students and ensure the successful completion of their education. Simultaneously, the media and the government can urge businesses, non-governmental organizations, and individuals to participate in education donations through legislation and publicity, thus encouraging the entire population to pay attention to educational matters. Finally, a shift in social attitudes is necessary, but it takes time to happen. People in isolated and rural locations frequently place a lower value on education than those in cities. As a result, we must continue to enhance societal awareness of the value of education through publicity and educational initiatives. Only when society as a whole values education and recognizes its far-reaching impact on personal growth and national success can the core cause of educational disparity be addressed.

6. Conclusion

This research examines the educational disparities resulting from regional differences in China's Yunnan and Guangdong provinces, focusing on their economic, cultural, and policy characteristics. The study reveals that the primary factor contributing to differential regional educational growth is local economic development, followed by residents' perspectives and relevant governmental policies. Economically developed regions, such as Guangdong Province, may provide more financial support for education, establish better school facilities, hire higher-quality teachers, and encourage

educational popularisation and upgrading. However, economically impoverished areas like Yunnan Province lack of educational opportunities and resources due to higher levels of underinvestment in infrastructure, teacher strength, and education. Second, a significant aspect influencing educational disparity is the ideological concept. People in coastal and developed areas are often more inclined to value education and be willing to devote more time, money, and resources to their children's education. Contrarily, because of outdated views, families in rural and underdeveloped areas frequently place less value on education than families in developed areas. Ultimately, national initiatives are essential to eliminating the regional disparities in education. The paper contends that boosting economic development is the quickest approach to addressing educational disparity. Supporting economic development can not only enhance educational resource investment but also encourage exchanges and cooperation with developed regions, accept new ideas and concepts from the outside world, and eventually create a progressive shift in societal attitudes. In the following studies, the precise actions adopted by the government to address regional inequalities in education will be investigated further, and how these efforts have been tailored and implemented to the features of different regions. This will help us understand how to reduce regional gaps and attain educational equity.

References

- [1] Yang, J., Huang, X., & Liu, X. (2014). *An analysis of education inequality in China*. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 37, 2-10.
- [2] Zhang, J., & Verhoeven, J. C. (2010). *Access to higher education of 25 ethnic minorities in Yunnan Province, South Western China*. *Frontiers of Education in China*, 5(2), 290-308.
- [3] Zhang, G. (2018). *Study on the Problem of anti-poverty in rural education of Yunnan*. In *2018 8th international conference on social science and education research (SSER 2018)*, 448-451.
- [4] Liao, L., Du, M., Wang, B., & Yu, Y. (2019). *The impact of educational investment on sustainable economic growth in Guangdong, China: A cointegration and causality analysis*. *Sustainability*, 11(3), 766.
- [5] Wang Shanmai. (2008). *Analytical framework and evaluation indicators of educational equity*. *Journal of Beijing Normal University: Social Sciences Edition*, 3, 93-97.
- [6] Rong, X. L., & Shi, T. (2001). *Inequality in Chinese Education*. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 10(26), 107–124.
- [7] Wu, F., Zhang, D., & Zhang, J. (2008). *Unequal education, poverty and low growth—A theoretical framework for rural education of China*. *Economics of Education Review*, 27(3), 308-318.
- [8] Brown, P. H., & Park, A. (2002). *Education and poverty in rural China*. *Economics of education review*, 21(6), 523-541.
- [9] Liao, F. H., & Wei, Y. D. (2012). *Dynamics, space, and regional inequality in provincial China: A case study of Guangdong province*. *Applied Geography*, 35(1-2), 71-83.
- [10] Zhang, Y., Fang, J., & Fang, D. (2023). *The Regional Difference Measurement and Convergence of Educational Assistance Efficiency: An Example from the Data of Overcome Poverty Population in the Ethnic and Border Area of Yunnan*. *Journal of Yunnan Agricultural University*, 17(3), 55-61.
- [11] Yi, L. (2008). *Cultural exclusion in China: State education, social mobility and cultural difference*. (1st ed.) Routledge, 1-18.
- [12] Song, L., Appleton, S., & Knight, J. (2006). *Why do girls in rural China have lower school enrollment?*. *World Development*, 34(9), 1639-1653.
- [13] Lan, Lu, (2017) *A Study on the Ideological Problems and Educational Guidance of the Poverty*. *Population in Yunnan Minority Areas*, School of Marxism, Central China Normal University, 1-10.
- [14] Liu, A., Li, W., & Xie, Y. (2020). *Social inequality in child educational development in China*. *Chinese journal of sociology*, 6 (2), 219-238.
- [15] Guo YZ, Zhou Y, Liu YS (2020) *The inequality of educational resources and its countermeasures for rural revitalization in southwest China*. *Journal of Mountain Science* 17(2), 304-315