

TOWARDS MORE EQUITABLE ACCESS TO ELITE HIGHER EDUCATION IN CHINA: A HISTORICAL STUDY

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Key implications

- While students from non-working class families and from the urban areas are over-represented in the composition of the students admitted to Peking University and Suzhou University, this study has found a substantial proportion of students with a working class family background and rural background.
- There has been a steady increase of female students at both universities, and this trend continued after the Economic Reforms started in 1978.
- However, there is a clear pattern of unequal distribution of elite education among regions, which is closely related to the regional differences in socio-economic development.



Background

Access to and the implications of elite education are the subject of a growing literature in educational stratification; however, almost all of the published studies focus on elite institutions in Western societies. In this project, Prof. Ruan and her collaborators studied access to elite education in China since 1949 by examining trends and patterns in the social origins of undergraduate students at Peking University, one of the two most prestigious and selective universities in China, and at Suzhou University, a major regional university. Peking University and Suzhou University represent two types of elite universities. With distinguished history, Peking University is a prestigious national-level elite university that attracts the best students from the entire country, whereas Suzhou University was set up as a provincial-level elite university to admit the best students from Jiangsu Province. This is the first systematic study of trends and patterns in the social origins of students at these two types of elite universities in China.

Focus of study

It is a historical analysis of access to elite education in post-1949 China.

Research methods

This research project compiled a digital database for undergraduate students admitted into Peking University from 1952 to 1999 and undergraduate students admitted into Suzhou University from 1933 to 2002. The total number of student records in the database is 150,903, with 64,510 cases from Peking University, which has complete records for 1952–1955, 1972–1987 and 1989–1999,

and 86,393 cases from Suzhou University, which has complete records for 1933—1965, 1972--2002 (there were no admissions in 1966-1971). The information for each student includes date of birth, gender, home address, pre-university schooling, parental occupation, family class background, and student's major at the university. No other university in China has such a large scale and relatively complete digitalized student data set, which covers a time span of more than 50 years.

Key findings

This study has produced both expected and unexpected findings. First of all, while students from non-working class families and from the urban areas are over-represented in the composition of the students admitted to Peking University and Suzhou University, this study has found a substantial proportion of students with a working class family background and rural background, and this pattern has been remarkably stable over time, especially in light of the increasing economic inequality in China over the past four decades. Secondly, it found a steady increase of female students at both universities, and this trend continued after the Economic Reforms started in 1978. Third, the findings reveal a clear pattern of unequal distribution of elite education among regions, which is closely related to the regional differences in socio-economic development. Fourth, the findings show a clear pathway to a top university in China: key-point high school. A disproportionate number of undergraduate students at Peking University and Suzhou University came from a limited number of key-point high schools in China.

Significance of findings for practice and policy

All these findings speak to some major issues in the field of educational stratification, which are at the center of major current debates in China. This study explored the reasons behind the findings in terms of the State's role in promoting equality of educational opportunities in China. It argues that the egalitarian ideology and the government policies since 1949 have played a major role in producing a "silent revolution" in the field of education, with more opportunities for working class students and females. Even after 1978, students continued to benefit from the policies and institutional arrangements implemented in the pre-Reform years.

RELATED PUBLICATIONS

Chen Liang, Hao Zhang, Lan Li, Danching Ruan, Cameron Campbell, and James Lee. 2013. *Silent Revolution: the Social Origins of Peking University and Soochow University Undergraduates, 1949-2002*. Beijing: Joint Publishing.

梁晨、张浩、李兰、阮丹青、康文林、李中清。2013。《无声的革命：北京大学、苏州大学学生社会来源研究，1949-2002》。北京：生活·读书·新知三联书店。

REQUEST FOR MORE DETAILS

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