



Geographical stratification and the role of the state in access to higher education in contemporary China



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ABSTRACT

This article extends the geopolitical theory on geographical stratification to understand the persistent inequality in access to higher education in contemporary China. Drawing on empirical evidence on the geographical distribution of institutions, and differentiated admissions and recruitment processes, I examine how political and institutional arrangements shaped opportunity structures in access to higher education for students from different geographical origins. I conclude that the state's decentralised governance gave the eastern area more power and advantages while the students from the poor western and central regions suffered a lack of opportunities in achieving upward social mobility through higher education.

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1. Introduction

China's rapid rise over the past two decades has significance beyond the economy and geopolitics. As an emerging economic giant it is also becoming an increasingly important geo-political and cultural force in the world (Jacques, 2012). Many questions remain about whether it can sustain its extraordinary developmental momentum (Hutton, 2007) but if this is to be the 'Asian Century' (Arrighi, 2007) global interest in China's cultural traditions and institutions will undoubtedly increase. Already its higher education system is attracting widespread interest for its massive output of science and technology graduates (Brown et al., 2011). How did China progress from the chaotic Cultural Revolution period, when education experienced its darkest hour, to the current situation, when China's output of skills and talent presents a growing challenge to the West? What has been the role of education in China's economic ascent and in the re-shaping of the social structure? And how does education mediate the growing internal contradictions in China, not least those associated with increasing the level of inequality. To date there has been only limited empirical research on these questions, and we know very little about the changing role of education in shaping life chances in different regions. The latter constitutes the main focus of this research which aims to provide an in-depth investigation of

education opportunities by students from different geographical origins in contemporary China.

Geographical stratification in developing contexts has been under-researched and under-theorised in the studies of education and development and the sociology of education. Two lines of inquiry have shaped the debate on the relation between education and geographical stratification. One line of these focuses on changes in economic conditions since the 1970s and their implications for educational provision and outcomes for people from different geographical origins. Modernisation theory argues that geographical stratification is linked to the processes of economic modernisation and development (Treiman, 1970; Forsythe et al., 2000). Most developing contexts are characterised by sharp regional economic disparities and the uneven distribution of social infrastructures. In education, schooling systems are often better funded in urban or affluent regions than in rural or poor areas (Hannum and Wang, 2006). The uneven distribution of educational resources and infrastructures has had direct implications on educational attainment. Evidence from African countries, including Ghana and Mali, and from Brazil demonstrates dramatic regional differences in educational attainment, as measured by trends in attendance and completion rates since the expansion of educational opportunities (Rigotti and Fletcher, 2001; ORC/Macro, 2000).

A second type of research highlights the changes in politics and governance in education and the implications of these changes for geographical inequality. Literature in development studies argues that widening geographical inequality has been related to

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decentralised governance or devolution practices in economic and social policies (Rodríguez-Pose and Gill, 2004). Devolved fiscal policy in the public sector is argued to be the primary contributing factor to differentiated educational outcomes among regions. Decentralised funding policy in education delegates funding responsibilities for education to the regional or local levels; hence, initially developed areas have better financial capacity in educational provision than poor areas which will inevitably lead to greater regional differences. Evidence from China (Yao and Zhang, 2001), Brazil (Azzioni, 2001), the USA (Bernat, 2001) and some European countries (Loughlin, 2001; Petrakos, 2001) suggests that decentralised systems of governance have favoured rich regions in terms of resources, capacities and competitiveness and has disadvantaged poor areas, thus increasing geographical inequality.

These studies focus primarily on the geographical distribution of educational resources, infrastructures and funding, and the implications of this for educational attainment and skills outcomes. However, they do not provide a detailed account of the processes through which geographical unevenness reproduces inequality of opportunity. Nor do they explore the institutional arrangements which underpin the persistent patterns whereby rich regions continue to improve in educational attainment while poor regions stagnate or decline. Furthermore, these studies often contribute little to the theorisation of geography as an indicator of social stratification and how it interplays with other indicators such as class, ethnicity and gender, particularly in developing economies.

This article provides new evidence on geographical stratification in access to higher education in contemporary China. China's tremendous rise as an economic power has exacerbated inequality between different regions. Geographical stratification not only exists between rural and urban areas, but also evident in large regional differences. The state played an important role in producing this uneven pattern of economic development with its gradualist strategy of initiating market reforms first in the eastern and coastal areas, and only later extending them to the rest of China (Arrighi, 2007). This article seeks to shed light on how this geographical stratification impacts on the educational opportunity structures in China today and, in particular, how political and institutional arrangements have exacerbated geographical stratification in access to higher education.

The analysis uses theories of geographical stratification drawn from political economy to explain the persistence of regional inequality during China's transition to a market economy since the 1970s and to show how state policy has reproduced this geographical stratification in access to higher education, including in all types of post compulsory institutions in the China Statistical Yearbook, which are equivalent to the ISCED 4, 5 and 6. Specifically, it examines the impact of a set of institutional arrangements – including those for the national entrance examinations (the *Gaokao*) and the decentralised admissions and recruitment planning procedures – on shaping the opportunity structure. By tracing the patterns of educational progression by selected birth cohorts, I demonstrate how these institutional arrangements affected the chances of students from different geographical origins to get access to higher education, and particularly to the elite universities. I then use the evidence on the uneven distribution of higher education institutions and types of universities, the progression rates to higher education and differentiated admission and recruitment criteria across provinces to argue that political decentralisation policies in higher education result in a deep-seated contradiction between the state's national development strategy and the objective of reducing regional disparities.

2. Theoretical standpoints on geographical stratification

Geographical stratification has been an enduring interest in political economy. Political economists and economic geographers highlight the geographical dimension as an important aspect of stratification in capitalist economies (Harvey, 2011; Massey, 1987, 2005; Ohnmacht et al., 2009). Geographical stratification is explained by the interplay of regional differentiation and economic and political forces. Geographical inequality is understood as a consequence of differentiated proximity to natural resources, labour and consumer markets (Harvey, 2011; Smith, 1994). It is also affected by the availability of infrastructures, including the transport and communication systems (Harvey, 2011). Capitalist production in market economies demands geographical mobility (Lindgren and Lundahl, 2010; Urry, 2007) not only at the national level but also in the global market (Cresswell, 2006; Bauman, 1998). Therefore, the capacity of achieving geographical mobility at the national and international level is regarded as a stratifying factor alongside income, wealth, status, occupation, and social capital in the increasingly globalised world (Ohnmacht et al., 2009).

Moreover, geographical stratification is affected by institutional and administrative arrangements in relation to economic production, social relations, technological forms and localised life styles at the regional level (Morrow, 2006). The state plays an important role in these institutional and administrative arrangements, constantly adjusting its mode of governance at the national and regional level to guarantee the mobility of capital and to favour the conditions that yield economic growth and enhanced living standards (Harvey, 2011). Geographical stratification is thus shaped by inter-related economic and political factors, and has effects on opportunity structures. Education opportunities, in particular with higher education, are essential to understanding social mobility and stratification (Shavit et al., 2007). Access to higher education opportunities is shaped by stratifiers such as social class, gender and ethnicity (for example, Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2013; Boliver, 2015). Geographical origin is also highlighted as an important stratifying dimension in access to the opportunity structure.

There are many examples outside China of geographical inequality in access to higher education. A study by Metcalfe (2009), for instance, shows how the geographical distribution of higher education institutions reinforces regional inequality in British Columbia in Canada. Research on the USA shows persistent inequality in access to a selective public flagship university by students from different geo-spatial origins (Turner and Pusser, 2004). Similar research also shows that students from several cities have strong advantages in access to the University of California leading to an unequal pattern of participation by geographical origins (Martin et al., 2003). A case study in Sweden concludes that geographical stratification affects students' aspirations in higher education and careers, and that students from poor regions are least likely to achieve upward social mobility (Lindgren and Lundahl, 2010). These studies demonstrate that geographical origin is an important factor to understanding unequal access to higher education. Moreover, institutional arrangements such as the geographical distribution of universities also shape education opportunities differently for those from different geographical origins. The next section will extend these theoretical standpoints to the context of contemporary China and investigate access to higher education by students from different geographical origins.

3. Geographical stratification, economic development, social mobility and the state in China

China has several attractive attributes as a case through which to examine the dynamics of geographical differences, economic forces and political arrangements.

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