



Geography and educational inequality in China

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Abstract

Since the 1980s, educational reforms in China have decentralized administration and finance and privatized costs. These changes have emerged in the context of rapid economic growth and rising regional economic disparities. The reforms have mobilized new resources in support of education, but they have also exacerbated regional disparities in funding for schools. Analyses of trends in school finance and expenditures have emerged, but detailed studies of the shifting ties between geography and educational outcomes in the population have not.

Using 2000 census data on year and location of birth and educational attainment, we begin to address this gap. We compare the links between birth province and educational outcomes across 5-year birth cohorts to illuminate trends in region-based inequalities. Results show that the percent of variation in years of schooling explained by birth province declined for cohorts born through the early 1960s, and then increased thereafter.

Additional analyses use a dissimilarity index to characterize the strength of the link between geography and access to each level of schooling. This index indicates that the link between geography and access to primary school has greatly increased across cohorts, as the few without access to primary school are ever more concentrated in poor areas. The link between birth province and access to subsequent levels of schooling shows mixed trends through cohorts born in the early 1960s: stability for junior high school and a weakening trend for senior high school and college. Thereafter, the dissimilarity index increased, substantially for junior high school and slightly for senior high school and college.

Results attest to the enduring significance of geography as an educational stratifier in China. More broadly, results suggest the importance of regional inequalities in conditioning the relationship between development and educational stratification.

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Keywords: China; Education; Inequality; Regional inequality; Geography; Stratification; Industrialization hypothesis; Social inequality

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1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, education reforms in China have decentralized administration and finance and privatized costs. These changes have emerged in the context of rapid economic growth and rising regional economic disparities. The reforms have mobilized new resources in support of education, but have also exacerbated regional disparities in funding for schools. While analyses of trends in school finance and expenditures have emerged, there are no detailed studies of the shifting ties between geography and educational outcomes in the population.

Using micro-data from the 2000 census, we begin to address this gap by analyzing data on year and location of birth and educational attainment. We compare the link between birth province and educational outcomes across birth cohorts educated in different periods to illuminate trends in region-based inequalities.

The paper proceeds as follows: We first place our research in a broader context of research on development and educational stratification, and develop three specific research questions. We then discuss the significance of these questions in the China context. We provide a description of data and methods, and then proceed to a presentation of results. We close with a brief discussion of the implications of our findings for research on educational stratification, in China and in other settings.

2. Framework

A key question in the field of social stratification and mobility is whether the educational impact of ascribed characteristics, particularly social origins, gender and ethnicity, changes as a society develops. The often-cited “industrialization hypothesis” suggests that the impact of ascription should wither away with development and educational expansion, as meritocratic status attainment processes are thought to be the most efficient means to a well-functioning economy (Treiman, 1970).

The empirical basis for this hypothesis has been mixed (Treiman, Ganzeboom, & Rijken, 2003). While gender differences in education have narrowed with development in many countries, socio-economic and ethnic gaps have proven more resistant to the purported ameliorative effects of economic development (see Hannum & Buchmann, 2005 for a discussion). For example, evidence from many countries indicates a global, long-term trend of girls’ access to schooling catching up with boys’ (e.g., King & Hill, 1993; Knodel & Jones, 1996; Schultz, 1993; Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993). In contrast, research from many societies finds little change in educational opportunities between social strata over the course of educational expansion (e.g., Halsey, Heath, & Ridge, 1980; Mare, 1981; Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993; Smith & Cheung, 1986). Similarly, there is little evidence that educational expansion will necessarily allow disadvantaged minorities to catch up with initially advantaged ethnic groups, at least in the short run (Buchmann & Hannum, 2001). Despite the mixed performance of the industrialization framework, no lasting alternative approach for investigating links between development and educational stratification has emerged. We use this framework to guide our research questions.

However, this paper differs from earlier investigations of the industrialization framework in focusing on geographic origins. Many low and middle income countries are characterized by massive urban–rural and regional economic disparities, which tend to be much more pronounced than those in developed countries (Rodríguez-Pose & Gill, 2004). Economic disparities, in turn, tend to be reflected in disparities in social infrastructure, with more developed, more urbanized areas offering vastly better, and better-funded, education systems.

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