

Research Assessment Exercise 2020
Impact Case Study

University: Hong Kong Baptist University

Unit of Assessment (UoA): 27 Sociology & Anthropology

Title of case study: Towards more Equitable Access to Elite Higher Education in China

(1) Summary of the impact

The research project by Professor Danching Ruan and her team (Professor James Lee, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology; Professor Shanhua Yang, Peking University; and Professor Cameron Campbell, University of California at Los Angeles) on access to elite higher education for the period of 1949-2002 has impacted on Chinese higher education in three ways:

1. *Arousing extensive national attention to educational inequality in China.*

The total audience for Prof. Ruan's research across various print and electronic platforms is estimated to be in the tens of millions since the publication of the first major article in January 2012 [3.1].

2. *Shaping public discourse about educational inequity in China.*

Prof. Ruan's research stimulated extensive public discussion about the mechanisms underlying the growing socio-economic gap in access to elite higher education over the past four decades.

3. *Influencing policy makers and motivating policy change in China.*

Prof. Ruan's research was read by top political leaders in China. Induced by the extensive public discussion of issues foregrounded by the research, the Central Government implemented affirmative policies to enable more students from disadvantaged family backgrounds to receive higher education, particularly in elite universities.

(2) Underpinning research

Access to and the implications of elite education are the subject of a growing literature in educational stratification; however, almost all published studies focus on elite institutions in Western societies. With funding support from various research grants [3.5, 3.6, 3.7, 3.8], 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 different types of elite universities. 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. Prof. Ruan's research represents the first systematic study of trends and patterns in the social origins of students at these two types of elite universities in China.

This research project compiled a digital database of 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 and 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.

This study produced both expected and unexpected findings. First, 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 found a substantial proportion of students with a working class family background and a rural background, and this pattern was remarkably stable over time, despite the increasing economic inequality in China over

the past four decades. Second, 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 entry into elite education among regions, which is closely related to regional differences in socio-economic development. Fourth, the findings show a clear pathway to a top university in China: attending a 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 [3.1, 3.2].

This study has also collected qualitative data on the process of rural students' elite education attainment [3.3] and analysed qualitative data on how changes in the admission policy at Peking University in recent years has affected the social diversity of the students admitted [3.4].

All these findings illuminate major issues in the field of educational stratification, which are at the center of key current debates in China, particularly about the role of the State in promoting educational equality.

(3) References to the research

Publications

- [3.1] 梁晨、李中清、張浩、李蘭、阮丹青、康文林、楊善華。(2012)。“無聲的革命：北京大學與蘇州大學學生社會來源研究，1952-2002”，《中國社會科學》，第193卷（第1期）頁98-118。Liang, Chen, James Lee, Hao Zhang, Lan Li, Danching Ruan, Cameron Campbell, and Shanhua Yang. (2012). “A Silent Revolution: Research on Family Backgrounds of Students of Peking University and Soochow University (1952-2002).” *Social Sciences in China* 193 (1): 98-118. (*Social Sciences in China* is the house journal of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and the most prestigious academic journal in the fields of social sciences and humanities in China.)
- [3.2] 梁晨、張浩、李蘭、阮丹青、康文林、李中清。(2013)。《無聲的革命：北京大學、蘇州大學學生社會來源研究，1949-2002》。北京：三聯書店。Liang, Chen, 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. (Joint Publishing is the most prestigious publishing house in China.)
- [3.3] Fung, Ka Yi. (2015). “Network Diversity and Educational Attainment: A Case Study in China.” *Journal of Chinese Sociology* 2:12. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40711-015-0014-x>
- [3.4] 劉麗敏、阮丹青、楊善華。(2010)。“教育選拔與社會變遷 – 高校招生政策之世紀演變”，《華中科技大學學報》，第24卷（第1期）頁117-124。Liu, Limin, Danching Ruan, and Shanhua Yang. (2010). “Educational Selection and Social Change – The Evolution of College Admissions Policies of the Century.” *The Academic Journal of Huazhong University of Science and Technology* 24 (1):117-124.

Research grants

- [3.5] Ruan, Danching (PI), James Lee, and Yang Shanhua, “Educational Stratification in China: A View from the Top” (HKBU 2447/06H), competitive, 2006-2008, Research Grants Council, HKSAR, HK\$ 819,500.
- [3.6] Ruan, Danching (PI), James Lee, and Yang Shanhua, “Educational Stratification in China: A View from the Top” (FRG/05-06/I-21, FRG/05-06/II-15), competitive, 2005-2006, Hong Kong Baptist University, HK\$ 150,000.
- [3.7] Ruan, Danching (PI), James Lee, and Yang Shanhua, “Educational Stratification in China: A View from the Top” (SOX/05-06/CERAS-18), competitive, 2005-2006, Hong Kong Baptist University, HK\$68,120.
- [3.8] Ruan, Danching (PI), James Lee, and Yang Shanhua, “The Composition of Education Elite in China: The Case of Peking University” (FRG/02-03/I-10), competitive, 2002-2003, Hong Kong Baptist University, HK\$50,000.

(4) Details of the impact

The historical analysis of access to elite education in post-1949 China conducted by Professor Ruan and her research team, and the Chinese publications generated from it have resulted in three broad areas of impact at the national level, namely:

4.1 Arousing extensive national attention to educational inequality in China

Through dissemination of research findings via media reports and interviews, Professor Ruan's research has generated extensive public attention in China related to equity of access to higher education and the implications for social inequality. Within the first three months of the publication of the major paper in January 2012 [3.1], there were 90 original media articles and broadcasts, 26 print media, and 913 websites and news media that reprinted or rebroadcast these articles, representing a total of 1,029 separate incidents of media coverage. Media reports and public discussions continue to the present time. From 1 October 2013 to 5 July 2019, there were 387 media reports and 122 postings on major discussion forums in China with 3,138 replies, including two major online communication platforms in China, namely Baidu and Weibo. It is estimated that the total audience across these different media was in the tens of millions. Major Chinese newspapers with extensive national circulation, such as *Wen Wei Po* (文匯報) [5.1], *Guanming Daily* (光明日報) [5.2], *China Education Daily* (中國教育報) [5.3], and *Chinese Youth* (中國青年報) [5.4] also published in-depth discussion of the research findings.

4.2 Shaping public discourse about educational inequity in China

Prof. Ruan's research has shaped public discourse about the mechanisms underlying the growing socio-economic gap in access to elite higher education over the past decade. Much of the public discussion drew insights from Ruan's research and focused on the weaknesses of the educational system and college admission policy. Particularly, the key-point high school system, coupled with uneven regional economic development, has gradually drawn educational resources towards urban areas, leaving rural high school students with substandard school facilities and poorer-quality teachers. Further, the merit-based college admission policy relies heavily on students' performance in the National College Examination, which has led to intensive tutorials and drills by students and the tremendous growth of private tutoring services. Students from less well-off families and students from impoverished areas are less able to afford these services than their better off counterparts. The extensive public discussion generated a call for a review of the college admission policy and affirmative actions to eradicate educational inequality [5.2, 5.4, 5.5, 5.6].

4.3 Influencing policy makers and motivating policy change in China

The public discussion about educational inequity fueled by Prof. Ruan's research caught the attention of top Chinese political leaders and gave an impetus to the formulation of affirmative action policies for elite higher education. Ruan's research was discussed in an education symposium organized by the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) on 4 March 2014 [5.7]. CPPCC is a political advisory body in China and together with the National People's Congress, makes national-level political decisions. During the discussion, Mr. Yu Zhengsheng, a member of the Politburo Standing Committee (the highest body of political leadership in China) and the then Chairman of CPPCC, told the audience that he not only had read the book [3.2, 5.7] but had also recommended it to Ms. Liu Yandong, the Vice Premier of the State Council (the chief administrative authority of China). Ms. Liu was Head of the Committee on Educational Reform under the State Council from 2010 to March 2018.

Set against the background of extensive public discussion regarding educational inequity (Sections 4.1, 4.2), the Committee led by Ms. Liu implemented three special university enrollment programs to support students from disadvantaged family backgrounds to gain access to elite higher education [5.3, 5.8, 5.9]. Specifically, the National Special University Enrollment Program now sets annual admission quotas for students from Xinjiang and other impoverished regions to enter designated key-point universities directly managed by the Central Government. Under this program, 50,000 qualified students from impoverished regions were admitted to 111 key-point universities in 2015 and the student number was increased to 63,000 in 2017. The Provincial Special University Enrollment Program requires all key-point universities to allocate a specified percentage of university places to qualified rural students residing in the provinces or municipal cities where the universities

are located. The Special University Enrollment Program for Rural Students requires a specified percentage of the student populations of all colleges and universities to come from the rural areas or impoverished regions. In response to the public call for greater educational equity stimulated by Prof. Ruan's research, the affirmative policies enabled a total of 103,800 students from disadvantaged family backgrounds to enter higher education in 2018, of whom 90% went to elite universities [5.10].

(5) Sources to corroborate the impact

- [5.1] 李純一。(2013)。“促進社會流動的高考制度是中國的驕傲，”文匯報 11 月 11 日，第 009 版。<http://www.shss.ust.hk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/20131111WenHuiPo.pdf>. (Li, Chunyi. (2013). “China Prides in the National College Examination System that Promotes Social Mobility.” *Wen Hui Po*, November 11, p. 9.)
- [5.2] 秦春華。(2015)。“重點大學農村學生比例為何上不去”，光明日報 9 月 8 日，第 013 版。<http://theory.people.com.cn/BIG5/n/2015/0908/c40531-27554621.html>. (Qin, Chunhua. 2015. “Why has the Increasing Trend of Rural Students in Key-Point Universities Stalled?” *Guangming Daily*, September 8, p. 13.)
- [5.3] 楊三喜。(2017)。“高招‘扶貧’扶上馬還要送一程”，中國教育報 4 月 20 日，第 002 版。http://paper.jyb.cn/zgjyb/html/2017-04/20/content_476768.htm?div=-1. (Yang, Sanxi. 2017. “Strategies of Poverty Alleviation through University Education Need a Step-up.” *Zhongguo Xiaoyu Bao*, April 20, p. 2.)
- [5.4] 楊三喜。(2017)。“高考不是階層流動的唯一通道”，中國青年報 6 月 6 日，第 002 版。http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2017-06/06/nw.D110000zgqnb_20170606_3-02.htm. (Yang, Sanxi. 2017. “The National College Examination is not the Only Channel of Social Mobility.” *China Youth*, June 6, p. 2.)
- [5.5] 胡樂樂。(2012)。“優化大學的生源結構不是小事”，光明日報 3 月 27 日，第 02 版。http://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2012-03/27/nw.D110000gmrb_20120327_5-02.htm?div=-1. (Hu, Lele. 2012. “Improving the Structure of the University Student Population is not a Small Business.” *Guangming Daily*, March 27, p. 2.)
- [5.6] 嚴禹。(2014)。“教育公平問題亟需關注”，21 世紀經濟報導 12 月 23 日，第 004 版。[https://kns.cnki.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CCND&dbname=CCNDLAST2015&filename=SJBD201412230040&uid=WEEvREdxOWJmbC9oM1NjYkdwUUVZM3B0U1hRRHh3YVZha0NpNG9XS2NJREI=\\$R1yZ0H6jyaa0en3RxVUd8df-oHi7XMMDo7mtKT6mSmEvTuk1I12gFA!!&v=MjYwMTBkaG5qOThUbmpxcXhkRWVNT1VLcmlmWnU5dkh5am5VN3JNSkZ3V05pZkphckc0SDIYTnJZMUdaT3NMREJOS3Vo](https://kns.cnki.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CCND&dbname=CCNDLAST2015&filename=SJBD201412230040&uid=WEEvREdxOWJmbC9oM1NjYkdwUUVZM3B0U1hRRHh3YVZha0NpNG9XS2NJREI=$R1yZ0H6jyaa0en3RxVUd8df-oHi7XMMDo7mtKT6mSmEvTuk1I12gFA!!&v=MjYwMTBkaG5qOThUbmpxcXhkRWVNT1VLcmlmWnU5dkh5am5VN3JNSkZ3V05pZkphckc0SDIYTnJZMUdaT3NMREJOS3Vo). (Yan, Yu. 2014. “Educational Equity Needs Our Close Attention.” *21st Century Business Herald*, December 23, p. 4.)
- [5.7] 原春林、張國。(2014)。“政協委員向俞正聲推薦《無聲的革命》”，中國青年報 3 月 5 日。正文版。http://m.cyol.com/content/2014-03/05/content_9744448.htm. (Yuan, Chunlin and Guo Zhang. 2014. “CPPCC Member Recommending *Silent Revolution* to Yu Zhengsheng.” *China Youth*, March 5, front page.)
- [5.8] 教育部。(2016)。“教育部關於做好 2016 年重點高校招收農村及貧困地區學生工作的通知”，教學 6 號文件 3 月 29 日。http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A15/moe_776/s3258/201603/t20160331_236165.html Ministry of Education. 2016. “Notice of the Ministry of Education on Key-Point Universities Recruiting Students from Rural and Poverty-stricken Areas in 2016.” Education Document No. 6, March 29.
- [5.9] 周玉萍。(2016)。“為重點高校三大專項計劃點讚”，壹讀 4 月 5 日，教育版。<https://read01.com/Bynk6B.html#.Wj143lWWbct>. (Zhou, Yuping. 2016. “Giving the Thumbs up to Three Special University Enrollment Programs.” *Read 01*, April 5, the Education Section.)
- [5.10] 騰訊網。(2019)。“專項計劃累計招 37 萬人，寒門學子進清北容易了？” 2019-01-14。<https://new.qq.com/omn/20190114/20190114A09MEC.html>. (Tencent. 2019. “The Special Programs Have Admitted a Total of 370,000 Students. Is it getting Easier to Enter Peking University and Tsinghua University Now?” January 14, 2019.