

Research Assessment Exercise 2020
Impact Case Study

University: The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

Unit of Assessment: 34 - History

Title of Case Study: Social Origins of Students at Elite Universities in China

(1) Summary of the impact

Historian James Lee and his collaborators have provided for the first time an empirical basis for assessing how, over time, China's national college entrance examination (*gaokao*) made elite university education in the country accessible to children from modest origins through large-scale quantitative analysis of more than 150,000 student registration records at two major Chinese universities over more than 50 years. Via public debate that included over 60 response articles in the Chinese media, the research informed policymakers and the public. In 2014, State Councilor Yu Zhengsheng noted publicly that he had recommended Lee et al.'s work to Liu Yandong, then Minister of Education.

(2) Underpinning research

Lee (joined HKUST in 2009, now Yan Ai Foundation Professor of Social Science) is a major quantitative social historian who has published extensively on population, family, and inequality in China and in comparative perspective in the 19th and 20th centuries. He is a Guggenheim Fellow and Changjiang Scholar.

In the early 2000s, Lee initiated a project to study the social origins of students at Peking University, an elite national university in China, and Suzhou University, a major regional university, over the last half of the 20th century. The team of collaborators that he led included Danching Ruan at Hong Kong Baptist University, his long-time co-author Cameron Campbell (then at UCLA, joined HKUST in 2013), and faculty, postdocs, and graduate students at Peking University. With initial support from the Hong Kong Research Grants Council, Lee and his collaborators turned student registration records at both universities into a database that they used to study trends in the geographic origin, family backgrounds, and gender of students at the two universities. Records comprised over 64,000 cases from Peking University and more than 86,000 from Suzhou University. The resulting book and major journal article [R1, R2] were among the first studies of long-term trends of the social origins of students at elite universities in China. Lee went on to argue the case for the value of a quantitative approach for studying history, using big historical data, in a subsequent article [R3].

Lee and his collaborators found that as late as 2002 where the database ends – and well into the period of China's economic reform and opening – one-quarter to one-third of students at both universities came from farming or manual origins. While in the final years covered by the study, rising numbers of students were the offspring of professionals, managers, and other white collar-workers, it was clear that students from such privileged backgrounds had not monopolized places at the elite universities like their counterparts in the United States and United Kingdom. The analysis identified key point schools (*zhongdian xuexiao*) as playing an important role in maintaining access because at the time they were still widely accessible to talented students from less privileged backgrounds. The analysis also found geographic and social concentration in the backgrounds of the students were most pronounced in the least developed interior provinces because prosperous coastal provinces had good secondary schools even in their poorest, most rural, and least developed areas.

The focus by Lee and his team on two elite institutions sidestepped limitations associated with traditional data sources, such as nationally representative retrospective surveys, which typically include too few graduates of elite universities to support analysis. They organized the transcription and analysis of student registration cards from 1949 to 2002 held in the archives of Peking and Suzhou Universities. Production and analysis of the databases were complex because key information on parental occupation and other variables was open-ended and unstructured. University staff transcribed the records to databases according to standards specified by Lee and his

collaborators and then produced de-identified versions with student names removed. These were analyzed on-site in a secure data enclave by university staff working under the direction of Lee and his collaborators. Considerable work was required to categorize the parental occupations and other data in a way that allowed analysis because the data spanned several decades during which the economy developed, and the occupational structure changed dramatically. The work and follow-up studies on the social origins of educational elites from 1865 to 2014 were recognized by the Jiangsu Academy of Social Sciences, with awards in 2014 and 2017 respectively.

(3) References to the research

[R1] Liang Chen, Zhang Hao, Li Lan, Ruan Danqing, Cameron Campbell, James Z. Lee. 2013 《无声的革命：北京大学、苏州大学的学生社会来源 1949-2002》 (Silent Revolution: the social origins of Peking University and Soochow University undergraduates, 1949-2002). 三聯出版社 (Sanlian Press).

[R2] Liang Chen, James Z. Lee, et al. 2012. <无声的革命：北京大学与苏州大学学生社会来源研究，1952-2002> (Silent Revolution: the social origins of Peking University and Soochow University undergraduates, 1952-2002). 《中国社会科学》 (*Social Science in China*) Vol 1 (January): 98-118. Reprinted in 《中国社会科学创刊35周年1980-2014论文选》 中国社会学出版社, 2017(2):1026-1050.

[R3] Liang Chen, Hao Dong, and James Z. Lee. 2015. “量化数据库与历史研究” (The construction of big historical data and new directions in historical research) 《历史研究》 (Historical Research). Vol 2 (April).

(4) Details of the impact

As one of the first quantitative empirical studies of the social origins of students at elite universities in China, the work by James Lee and his collaborators became a source and reference for discussion among national leaders, the media, and online readers. The work appeared at a time when there was already heated public debate about college admissions at top universities in China and the role of the country's entrance examination (*gaokao*). There were proposals for alternatives, such as a more holistic approach that accounted for grades, school activities, or performance at interview. Lee's study accordingly filled a major gap by providing information on how, under the *gaokao* system, larger proportions of students from modest origins attended top universities in China than was the case in the United States or United Kingdom, feeding discussion on the role of education, and the examination, in supporting the social equity aims of the 1949 revolution in China.

Influence on policymakers

Lee's research achieved *impact on policy debate* by informing the thinking and deliberations of major leaders in the central government. Most notably, and rather unusually for China, a major leader publicly stated that he had recommended the work to another high government official in charge of educational policy.

At a 2014 side meeting of the Chinese People's Consultative Political Conference (CPPCC) focused on education and reported on by the Chinese media, Lee's book was discussed by a Peking University professor, Shi Dinguo, who recommended to State Councilor Yu Zhengsheng, also Chairman of the CPPCC (2013-18) and a Politburo Standing Committee member (2012-17), that he should read it. Yu responded he had done so and had already recommended it to Vice-Premier Liu Yandong. Liu was a member of the Politburo from 2007-17 and a State Council member from 2007-12. Most relevantly, her portfolio while Vice-Premier included health, education, and sports. The exchange and recommendation were reported in a news article [See Section 5, S1] in China Youth News Online (中青在线), the official online platform of the Communist Youth League, which at the time had approximately 100 million members. The article cites Shi as emphasizing in her speech the importance of ensuring children of workers and peasants and the children of the middle and lower classes have the equal chance to receive education, and then making reference to Lee's book: “‘I

recommend Chairman Yu to look at it.’ Yu Zhengsheng told her on the spot that he had read this book and had made recommendations to Vice Premier Liu Yandong.” [S1]

While in light of the opacity of the Chinese leadership’s decision-making processes, it is not possible to assess whether the attention given to the book by top leaders had a direct impact on college admissions policy, it is noteworthy that in the time since the publication of Lee’s work, experiments with alternatives to the *gaokao* have been curtailed. During the 1990s and 2000s, colleges could select some students independently (自主招生 and 点招学生) by means other than *gaokao* scores, but since the publication of the book, one of these processes (点招学生) has been abolished. A trend toward offering bonuses on the *gaokao* to students with outstanding extracurricular and sometimes non-academic achievements in athletic or other competitions has also been reversed.

Although these developments were a reaction to specific scandals and controversies involving independent admissions and *gaokao* bonuses, the above evidence does indicate that at the time when the leadership was making decisions about the *gaokao* and college admissions more generally, at least some were reading and taking note of Lee’s work.

Informing public debate

The work also generated impact on *society and culture*, becoming a touchstone for public debates about the college entrance examination system. It inspired numerous discussions, including critiques, that appeared in non-academic venues aimed at an educated lay audience. Over 60 pieces appeared in media outlets between 2012-18, encompassing summaries, critiques, and broader discussions of university admissions policy, including whether it remains equitable as the middle class expands, with Lee’s work taken as a starting point.

One example [S2] is an extended piece on policy regarding university admissions that begins with a reference to Lee’s work and the above referenced exchange about it at the CPPCC side meeting, on the well-known *Observer* (觀察者) online news site and aggregator, focused mainly on commentary.

Other pieces appeared on websites or in print versions of the most important media outlets in mainland China, including *People’s Daily* (人民網), *Guangming Daily* (光明網), *Caixin* (財新網), *Caijing* (財經網), *Xinhua* (新華網), *China News Weekly* (中國新聞周刊), *Southern Weekly* (南方周末), *The Paper* (澎湃新聞) and *China Youth Daily* (中國青年報). [S3] and [S4] are extended critiques of Lee’s work, with other discussions focused on Lee’s work evidenced in [S5 to S9].

The 2015 article in the *Paper*, for example, highlighted that Lee’s book, *The Silent Revolution*, had inspired a great deal of discussion because of its subject and its quantitative methodology. The article reflected on its relevance to key controversies in ensuring equity in Chinese education opportunities, and of the silent revolutionary power of education to transform class identity [S6].

Lee has calculated that 19 of the 60-plus pieces were reposted on other sites over 350 times. Five pieces were interviews with Lee about his results, including one [S10] that originally appeared in *Wen Wei Po* (文匯報), a major Hong Kong news outlet, and was republished elsewhere.

(5) Sources to corroborate the impact

[S1] 原春琳 (Yuan Chenglin) and 张国 (Zhang Guo). 政协委员向俞正声推荐《无声的革命》(CPPCC delegate recommends ‘Silent Revolution’ to Yu Zhengsheng). 中青在线 (China Youth News Online), March 5, 2014. http://m.cyol.com/content/2014-03/05/content_9744448.htm

[S2] 陆一 (Lu Yi) and 余潇潇 (Xu Xiaoxiao). 大学招考制度改革的愿景与方案. Vision and Plan for the Reform of the University Admissions System. 观察者 (Observer). March 12, 2014. https://www.guancha.cn/Luyi2/2014_03_12_212534.shtml

[S3] 应星 (Ying Xing)、刘云杉 (Liu Yun Shan). “无声的革命”，被夸大的修辞——与梁晨、李中清等的商榷. (Silent Revolution is exaggerated rhetoric - discussion of Liang Chen and James Lee) 观察者 (Observer). May 17, 2015.

https://www.guancha.cn/YingXing/2015_05_17_319800.shtml

[S4] 吴肃然 (Wu Suran). 高考真的带来“无声的革命”了吗？ (Does college entrance exam really bring about Silent Revolution?). 澎湃新闻 (The Paper). June 7, 2014.

https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1249579_1

[S5] 林耀国 (Lin Yaoguo). 高考改革目标应是促进社会公平 (The goal of reforming the college entrance exam should be improvement of social equity). 南方周末 (Southern Weekly). May 31, 2018.

<http://m.fx361.com/news/2018/0531/3612097.html>

[S6] 周哲 (Zhou Zhe). 建国后中国的教育公平 (Educational equity since the founding of the country). 澎湃新闻 (The Paper). May 18, 2015.

https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1332254

[S7] 袁征 (Yuan Zheng). 无声的革命：事实与解释 (Silent Revolution: facts and explanations). 东方早报 (Oriental Morning Post). April 22, 2014.

<http://money.163.com/14/0422/09/9QE5189K00253B0H.html>

[S8] 大转型中的“80后”(The big transformation of the “post-80s”). 第一财经日报 (China Business News). March 19, 2014.

<https://www.yicai.com/news/3601005.html>

[S9] 范海江 (Fan Haijiang), 中国教改，走在创新的路上 (Chinese educational reform, on the road to innovation), 中国产经新闻报 (China Industrial Economy News), July 25, 2014. [On file]

[S10] 原春琳 (Yuan Chenglin). “10%”拉农村孩子一把” (“10%” helps rural children) (China Youth News Online), March 5, 2014.

http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2014-03/06/nw.D110000zgqnb_20140306_6-T02.htm