

China's Education Gap

By HELEN GAO
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BEIJING — EVERY September, the campuses of Peking and Tsinghua Universities, often called the Harvard and M.I.T. of China, brim with eager new students, the winners of China's cutthroat education system. These young men and women possess the outlook of cosmopolitan youth worldwide: sporting designer clothes and wielding high-end smartphones, they share experiences of foreign travel and bond over common fondness for Western television shows like "The Big Bang Theory" and "Sherlock."

They are destined for bright futures: In a few decades, they will fill high-powered positions in government and become executives in state banks and multinational companies. But their ever-expanding career possibilities belie the increasingly narrow slice of society they represent. The percentage of students at Peking University from rural origins, for example, has fallen to about 10 percent in the past decade, down from around 30 percent in the 1990s. An admissions officer at Tsinghua University told a reporter last year that the typical undergraduate was "someone who grew up in cities, whose parents are civil servants and teachers, go on family trips at least once a year, and have studied abroad in high school."

China's state education system, which offers nine years of compulsory schooling and admits students to colleges strictly through exam scores, is often hailed abroad as a paradigm for educational equity. The impression is reinforced by Chinese students' consistently stellar performance in international standardized tests. But this reputation is built on a myth.

While China has phenomenally expanded basic education for its people, quadrupling its output of college graduates in the past decade, it has also created a system that discriminates against its less wealthy and well-connected citizens, thwarting social mobility at every step with bureaucratic and financial barriers.

A huge gap in educational opportunities between students from rural areas and those from cities is one of the main culprits. Some 60 million students in rural schools are “left-behind” children, cared for by their grandparents as their parents seek work in faraway cities. While many of their urban peers attend schools equipped with state-of-the-art facilities and well-trained teachers, rural students often huddle in decrepit school buildings and struggle to grasp advanced subjects such as English and chemistry amid a dearth of qualified instructors.

“Rural students stand virtually no chance when competing academically with their urban counterparts,” Jiang Nengjie, a friend and independent filmmaker who made a documentary on the left-behind children, told me. As a result, he said, most young people from his hometown village in central China head directly to factories in Guangdong Province, on the southern coast, after finishing middle school, because “the return is larger than going to a third-rate college.”

For migrant children who follow their parents to cities, the opportunity for a decent education is similarly limited, as various government policies foil their attempts at full integration. The hukou system — a residency status that ties access to subsidized social services to one’s hometown — denies rural children the right to enter urban public schools. Many migrant children are relegated to private schools that charge higher tuition and offer subpar education. Recent reforms in cities like Guangzhou and Shanghai have had only a tangential impact on leveling the playing field.

In Beijing, home to eight million migrant workers, preconditions for admission seem intended less to promote educational equity than to exacerbate the discrimination. Some parents have switched jobs, sued the government and even engineered divorces to get around onerous documentation requirements, which often vary from district to district. Many urban migrants ultimately have no choice but to send their children back to their rural hometowns for inferior schooling.

China requires a vast majority of students to take the national college entrance examination in their home province, and elite universities allocate higher admission quotas to first-tier cities like Beijing and Shanghai. One researcher showed that an

applicant from Beijing was 41 times more likely to be admitted to Peking University than a comparable student from the poor and largely rural province of Anhui.

Even an urban residency status doesn't ensure educational equity among city dwellers. The quality of urban schools varies widely, and the competition to enter top schools has spawned rampant corruption. Parents fork out tens of thousands of dollars under the guise of "voluntary donations" to secure a slot for their children in elite schools. At top-ranked high schools, such as the one I attended in Beijing, these charges can reach \$130,000. Further advantage can be purchased by parents who can pay handsomely to hire teachers to offer extra tutoring to their children, a practice discouraged by the authorities but widespread in reality.

To curb the culture of graft, Beijing has implemented policies this year that require students to attend elementary schools in their home districts. But the new rules, instead of stopping parents from gaming the system, simply channeled the cash to another market. Property in well-regarded school districts became Beijing's hottest commodity this spring. Families have been tripping over one another to trade spacious homes in posh compounds for dilapidated flats next to prestigious elementary schools. In a sought-after neighborhood in the Xicheng district, for example, a 107-square-foot flat was listed for \$550,000.

CHINESE education, having always placed enormous emphasis on test scores, is now becoming a game of another set of numbers. When graduating high school students walk into test centers to take the most important exam in their lives, their chances are determined not only by a decade of assiduous study, but also by the costs of their cramming lessons, the years their parents have toiled in cities in exchange for an urban residency permit, and the admission quotas universities allot to the provinces. For poor students, it's harder than ever to overcome the odds.

My mother, who attended Peking University in the late 1970s, remembered being surrounded by classmates of all walks of life — from the heirs of party officials and the scions of intellectuals, to workers fresh out of factories and peasants hailing from far-flung provinces. In the decades that followed, the economic opening that has led to vast wealth, along with

extreme income inequality, has all but obliterated such diversity in the top tier of Chinese education.

In China, which pioneered the use of merit-based examinations to fill official positions, an educational system that was once a great equalizer now reinforces inequality.

Chang Qing, a friend and mother of a 16-year-old girl, has been preparing her daughter, Xiaoshuang, for America since the girl was a toddler. She played her tapes of English lessons made from Disney movies, and later hosted a steady stream of exchange students from America to hone her child's accent. Now, her daughter speaks impeccable English and attends a private academy in Beijing where annual tuition is around \$24,000. Ms. Chang believes that nothing short of an Ivy League education will suffice.

On a trip to the countryside in Hunan Province (the home of Mao Zedong), I met Jiang Heng, a skinny 11-year-old whose parents work in a handbag factory in neighboring Guangdong. The boy attends a local elementary school that takes him an hour and half to walk to and, together with his younger brother, is looked after by his grandparents. I asked him what he wanted to do after high school. He looked confused, as if the answer was too obvious. "I want to be a migrant worker," he told me, without blinking.

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