

Paper Abstract

Paper Title: School Expansion, Educational Inequality, and Social Mobility in Reforming China

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Abstract

Research Questions

Educational expansion is one of the most visible, durable and influential features of modern society. In many countries, there is a widespread tendency of increasing school enrollment across time. Such a process has provided not only more educational opportunity to students, but also more skilled labor force in the labor market. What are the consequences of educational expansion with regard to education-based inequality and mobility? Particularly, does educational expansion weaken the effects of family background on educational and occupational attainment?

Conventional wisdom might suggest yes in these aspects. With long-term growth of school enrollments, it was once believed that education becomes an increasingly important mechanism for the transmission of social status. That is, along the process of technological advance and economic development, there tends to be greater equality of opportunity with respect to both educational and occupational attainment. In other words, people's educational achievement would gradually become independent of their family background; when controlling for education, the association between family background and occupational status would also decline over time.

Empirical findings, nonetheless, do not support such claims. On the association between family background and educational attainment, scholars report a general pattern of "persistent inequality" of educational attainment in most industrial societies. With few exceptions such as Sweden, the Netherlands and Germany in which declining educational inequality is found, the impact of family background on schooling is highly stable across time in many industrial countries. Similarly, on the association between family background and occupational attainment, again, research shows that there is a high degree of temporal stability and broad cross-national commonality in a variety of industrial societies. Although significant deviations from these general patterns do appear, changes tend to be slow over time in these industrial societies.

In other societies where dramatic social and political changes take place, however, the results are different from the general patterns observed mainly in industrial societies. For instance, in Soviet-era Russia where the state policy played a strong role there was strengthening effect of family background on access to university. Likewise, in the

tumultuous late-Soviet and post-Soviet years when the political chaos and economic crisis in Russia quickly changed the school enrollment, the magnitude of family background differentials in access to academic secondary schools was increasing. Furthermore, during Russia's market transition, the effects of family background on occupational attainment were enlarging, and a pattern of tightening-up social mobility is documented. In China, recent observations suggest that the role of family background on educational attainment is growing in certain ways.

By comparing the different results, it is then interesting to ask: why is there a pattern of largely persistent associations between family background and educational/occupational attainment in most industrial societies, whereas in societies like Russia and China, strengthening associations are found in these aspects? In my paper, I address this empirical puzzle by investigating how educational expansion affects the patterns of education-based inequality and mobility in the China's last three decades.

Empirical Strategies

The data I'm going to use include both longitudinal and cross-sectional nation-wide data. The China Health and Nutrition Survey data present a panel dataset with eight waves (1989-2009). They contain detailed information on education and occupation. I will mainly employ this dataset for the analyses of educational and occupational attainments. In the meanwhile, I will use a variety of available datasets to check the robustness of the results. For example, the 2003, 2005, and 2006 China General Social Survey data are all cross-sectional, and they all also have measures on education, occupation, *hukou* status, work unit status, income, and so on. Results based on these data will provide a good opportunity to test how strong the findings can stand.

Following the standard measure in the literature, education is coded into five categories: primary school or below, lower secondary education (junior high school), higher secondary education (senior high school, vocational school), lower tertiary education (technical college, *dazhuan*), and higher tertiary education (college and universities). It is also measured by years of schooling. Occupation is captured by social class origin and social class destination, which are usually measured by father's class status at the age of 14 and son's class status, respectively. For the purpose of international comparison, I adopt the widely used EGP class schema to code the classes. Similar to the existing studies on socialist/post-socialist societies, I will make a distinction between managers/cadres and professionals in the first two categories (I & II).

Family background information mainly refers to social class origin, parental education and household income. Again, social class origin is usually captured by father's class status at the age of 14. Parental education is measured by the highest level of education of the parents. Household income indicates the annual income from all sources of the household. I will use control variables like gender, age, number of sibling, and region.

The methods I use will include traditional statistical techniques in the field like the Mares model and log-linear/log-multiplicative modeling. I will also use causal inference analysis and panel data analysis when suitable.

Preliminary Findings

My empirical analyses suggest that in many cases China presents a different set of patterns that can shed light for comparative studies. First, I find that urban-rural differentials and class differentials in access senior high school increased in the 1990s; after 1999 when expansion of senior high school education occurred, such differentials decreased. I also find that after 1999 when higher education was radically expanded and largely marketized, urban-rural inequality in the transition to college increased, and father's class status began to play a more significant role in determining one's likelihood of entering college. As a result, the rapid expansion of higher education in China since 1999 mainly helped urban children and children from better-off families. In contrast, in spite of the overall increasing college opportunity, children from rural families actually experienced a drop in the transition rate in access to higher education. For them, it was not that they "benefited less" from the dramatic expansion of college opportunities, but they did not benefit much at all.

Second, I find that compared to the 1980s, father's occupation was a more important determinant for son's occupational attainment in the 1990s, controlling for education. The parameter of intergenerational class *immobility* is highest since the late 1990s, suggesting even less social mobility under the rapid educational expansion starting from 1999. Rural children, again, were worse-off in recent years. Compared to their urban counterparts, their chances of using education for social upward mobility were limited most since the late 1990s. Empirical analysis shows that the association parameter between education and current occupation for the rural people is the highest in the 1980s, but the smallest during 1999-2006. It is therefore evident that China's recent educational reforms have ironically restricted the upward mobility channel for the disadvantaged groups (rural people in particular) through college education.

These findings suggest that the Chinese pattern is different from the general patterns observed in many industrial societies. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the differences, I initiate a theoretical framework to integrate the existing theoretical accounts and results. The framework has three components. The first component is the mobility strategies adopted by different classes. This part sets up the foundation for a micro-based behavioral model in which we can observe whether different classes' strategies tend to converge or diverge under educational expansion. The second component is the structural and institutional features in the educational system. They represent the scope conditions that restrict class mobility strategy and behavior. The third component is the sociopolitical institutional context, which is particularly about how the state affects the organization of the education system and class structure. In my view, analyzing the interactions between the three components provides a way to interpret how educational expansion affects educational and occupational attainment. In my paper, I will use simulation to formally modeling the process of education-based social stratification to

integrate the existing theoretical accounts and results in the field of social stratification and mobility.