

The influence of cultural capital and educational milestones in Gaokao

Tsz Ching LU^{1,*}

¹Science, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, 999077, China

Abstract. Following the global economic downturn triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, China's economy also experienced significant repercussions. In light of this economic context, an imperative need arises for research to comprehensively assess the employment landscape. Given that the youth population constitutes a pivotal demographic in the labor market, a meticulous examination of their job-seeking dynamics assumes paramount importance, as it holds the potential to catalyze China's economic development. A pivotal determinant in securing desirable employment opportunities is the possession of credential certificates, elevating the significance of gaining admission to prestigious universities. Central to this endeavor is the performance in the Gaokao, the final examination that serves as the gateway to higher education. Furthermore, the quality of education received by students can significantly impact their ability to excel in the job market. Drawing upon existing literature on the Gaokao, as well as government data concerning youth unemployment rates and high school attendance, this study establishes a compelling connection between city type and cultural capital levels on student behavior during the Gaokao. Moreover, it underscores the critical role played by this milestone examination in contributing to the persistently high youth unemployment rates. These findings shed light on the intricate interplay between education, societal factors, and employment outcomes, which is essential for policymakers and stakeholders aiming to bolster China's economic resilience in a post-pandemic era.

1 Introduction

In China, June is a particular month. Millions of students attend the Gaokao, a national college entrance examination, to get a ticket to the university. This is an exam-orientation task, so to enter a good university, students just need to get a good grade on the exam. For most families, Gaokao is the only way to change their lives as they believe that a good university guarantees a well-paid job, whether poor or rich. However, the situation has changed in the last ten years. The number of graduates is way more than the need from the market. It is hard for a graduate to find a job after finishing university [1]. Apart from that, there are some criticisms of the exam, saying that the difference in the level of cultural capital could create inequality in the education for Gaokao [2,3]. Students from Gaokao have been criticized for lacking critical thinking and creativity [4]. On top of that, there are more than 10 million graduates from the universities each year. Not to mention that the global economic status is not as good as that before the pandemic; it is hard for many companies to survive. Therefore, many youths find it hard to get a job. Credential inflation starts to make students think about the meaning of having a high level of education. There is much research studying the inequality of Gaokao caused by the cultural capital and the types of the city. These article shows that the high levels of cultural capital and

the flourish cities tend to help the students to be outstanding from the exam [3]. However, after the pandemic, there are some policies banning the after-class tutorials announced by the government. Also, there is few research on the influence of economic status of the city on the students' behaviour on the exam. Therefore, more research needs to be conducted to understand the dilemma for students under the inequality of education and credential inflation. Besides, after the pandemic, it is not clear in its effect on the students, mainly graduates in China. Thus, this article will also examine the effect of the poor economy on the youths. With the literature review, this paper aims to demonstrate the perpetuation of inequality in the Chinese Gaokao system by cultural capital. Additionally, an exploration of students' perceptions regarding attaining a high-level educational diploma will be presented. The paper will commence with a concise introduction to the Gaokao examination. Subsequently, it will delve into the influence of cultural capital on educational equity. Finally, a discussion will ensue concerning political measures to mitigate this circumstance. At the end of the article, it will talk about the future of Gaokao because the educational milestone among students has become a problem in China.

2 The history of Gaokao

* Corresponding author: chinglu@connect.hku.hk

China has a long history in the imperial examination system. Since the Sui dynasty, the Chinese authority started to select talent to contribute to the country through this system. After the new founding of China in 1949, China started to develop a modern examination system to select talents to enter high-level colleges, which is called Gaokao. However, because of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Gaokao was banned until 1977. At that time, the per capita GDP was about 185\$, which is nearly ten per cent of the world's per capita GDP (1744\$) (from the World Bank) [5]. Therefore, Gaokao is a straightforward way for them to get educated and have a well-paid job, even though they are poor. After more than forty years of development, China has become the second largest economy and her per capita GDP is 12.5k\$, nearly four times the world's per capita [6]. The government has conducted a nine-year compulsory education to ensure everyone can be educated. However, the unbalanced development gradually shows up after the restoration of Gaokao. Data from the Chinese Bureau of Education shows that only 58.3% of students can go to high school to finish their studies after nine years of education, and only 54.4% of students enter the high level of college in 2020 [7]. To enter the universities, parents work hard to pay for the after-class tutorials for their children to learn some skills to be outstanding from the exam. Students spent day and night for years to have good grades to get a ticket to the universities. Students who are poor and cannot pay for the tutorials can only expect they will study hard enough to catch up with others. Apart from the difficulty of getting educated, there is a trend that it is getting harder for youth to find jobs. Data from the Chinese Bureau of Statistics shows that the youth unemployment rate was 17.3% in January 2023, 18.1% in February and 19.6% in March [8]. Scholars doubt that the youth unemployment rate is higher than these following the stop of the announcement [9]. In contrast, the average unemployment rate in the first season of 2023 was 5.5% in China, the youth unemployment rate in Europe was 13.9% in April 2023 and 7.9% in the U.S. [9-11]. Even though the authority decided not to announce the data after that, it is clear that there is difficulty for the youth to find a job after graduation.

Three questions will be discussed to study the cause of unbalanced education and the high unemployment rate.

2.1 The unbalanced education between rural and urban cities

First and foremost, there is unbalanced education between urban and rural cities. Since the reform and opening, urban-rural integration has been conducted. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, until 2022, the urbanization rate was 65.22%, and more than 30% of the population lived in rural cities [12]. However, there are more teachers in urban cities than in rural cities. Data indicate that the teacher-class ratio is 1.88 in primary school and 4.52 in junior school [13]. Not to mention that there are still some students from rural

cities cannot meet the need to go to school in urban cities [14]. Also, compared with rural cities, most teachers prefer to choose urban cities to continue their careers. Ma indicates that the number of university-graduated teachers in urban cities is 2% higher than that in rural cities in 2020, and the comprehensive quality score of the teachers in urban cities is 0.49 higher than the rural ones (3.02 and 2.53) [15]. Apart from that, Ma shows a trend in the gap in scores increasing since 2016. This can affect the teaching quality of the students and cause a loss of study for rural students [15]. It is believed that urban cities tend to have more resources and capital to develop education [2,15]. This could result in urban areas having superior educational facilities, a higher calibre of educators, and more specialized counselling services for students' mental well-being than their rural counterparts. Consequently, students in urban areas may benefit from an environment conducive to enhancing their academic performance. As a result, students from urban cities tend to behave better in Gaokao than in rural ones [7]. The statistics also show that the enrolment rate at high-level colleges in urban cities is nearly four times higher than in rural cities (55.8% and 14.6%) [7]. So, living in rural cities means those students may fall behind others at the beginning of education. With limited resources, the students may fall behind during their studies and eventually get lower grades than urban students.

2.2 The influence of cultural capital on getting education

Secondly, the cultural capital of students' families can also be a factor. In Bourdieu's perspective, cultural capital could help individuals or groups gain advantages and success more easily than others. In this article, cultural capital could be the educational background of parents, the family understanding and support for students' study. In Gaokao, students from a high level of cultural capital will have more resources to get educated [3,16]. For example, students from high-income families may find it easy to pay for the private after-class tutorial fee to learn more skills for better behaviour in the exam. Also, students whose parents have a high level of education can be taught by their parents for their homework, and they may be better educated in the proper way to develop their interests in study, helping them to build confidence in exams [17,18].

In contrast, students from low levels of cultural capital families may not have access to the resources and opportunities to be trained. As a result, they may find it hard to catch up with others, not to say behave well in the exam. Under the gap in educational background, students from the high levels of cultural capital families tend to get good grades on the exam with a ticket to top-elite universities [3].

Under the stressful and competitive learning environment for the preparation for Gaokao, there is a gradual increase in the suicide rate among students [19]. In this case, the government has implemented policies to reduce the pressure on students since 2021. For instance,

the education bureau decided to ask for the shutdown of all the after-class tutorial schools. However, the situation remained the same after this politics had been executed. Moreover, the worst thing happened: as the need for tuition from the students increased, the private tutorial classes grew, and the tutorial fee became higher than the previous. College students prefer to spend their free time being a tutor as a part-time job. Nevertheless, because of the lack of supervision, the quality of tutorial classes cannot be guaranteed [20]. This year, the tutorial school that used to be closed has become the market, meaning the failure of the shutdown of tutorial classes.

2.3 The cause of youth unemployment

Finally, this paragraph will focus on the cause of the high youth unemployment rate. The youth is including 15-24 year-olds. As mentioned above, the youth unemployment rate in the first season of 2023 was 18.3% [8]. Many youths find it hard to get a job whether they are graduates or not [1]. Research shows that there are three factors to explain this phenomenon. First, the poor economic situation is the main factor. After the pandemic, China did not recover as expected. The growth of GDP has become slower and harder. In 2022, the growth of GDP was 3%, which is less than that in 2021(8.4%) [21]. In this case, many factories and companies broke down. As for the rest, they also laid off some of the employees to keep the companies living. This shrinks the working position and makes it harder for people, especially graduates who do not have a job before that. On top of that, the devaluation of academic qualifications is blamed for the cause of unemployment. In 2023, more than 10 million students graduate from universities, and the number keeps growing each year [22]. However, the job market seems to fall to show that it can absorb all this 'talent'. To enhance competitiveness, graduates choose to continue their studies. Eventually, a master's degree becomes a receptionist in the government after graduation. Facing the competitive job market, the youth also start thinking about the meaning of their life, jobs, and careers. As said at the beginning of this paper, many families want their children to enter universities to guarantee they can find a job to earn their life. Therefore, when students decide to pick up a major in college, they tend to think about those major that is well-paid and easy to find a job instead of finding what they really want to learn. However, now, regardless of which major the graduates have, they find it hard to find a job. So, it seems fair to think about their interests and career plans during the economic depression. To conclude, in the high level of the degree-oriented job market, the youth prefer to escape from the educational milestones set by society and plan their own life.

3 Problems and suggestions

In addressing these critical challenges within the realm of education, several strategic interventions can be explored. Firstly, to rectify the disparities between rural and urban education, a substantial infusion of financial

resources into teacher recruitment is paramount. As previously underscored, both the quantity and quality of educators in rural areas do not match their urban counterparts. The government has undertaken commendable efforts in this regard over the years, notably through the implementation of poverty alleviation initiatives aimed at attracting teachers to remote villages by offering higher salaries and investing in school infrastructure. Consequently, there has been a steady rise in the number of educators, many of whom hail from esteemed universities. However, even as the student population in rural areas dwindles, it is unequivocally clear that capital remains the linchpin for augmenting the cadre of instructors and elevating the standard of instruction.

Second, when it comes to the gap among the cultural capital, the problem is more complex. It seems there is no way to solve it. The gap in cultural capital can affect the family's economic and educational support. Until the number of candidates decrease or the way to exams changes, it is hard to change the competitive study environment. So, students still need to work hard to stand out. However, what the government can do is enhance the teaching quality of teachers and relocate the teachers to different schools. Unbalanced education resources exist not only between urban and rural cities but also among the schools. Relocating the teaching resources can guarantee that students get the same level of quality education. Therefore, it will be less meaningful to attend the tutorials.

Third, to lower the youth unemployment rate, the solution should be set at the beginning of education, helping the youth to find what they want to learn. As mentioned before, people would like to find a well-paid job. In fact, there are work positions for the youth to choose from, but they may not have a high salary. However, things may change if the students can develop their preferred subject and decide to build up their career in it beyond the expectation of society and the family.

To sum up, the multifaceted issues encompassing education inequalities, cultural capital gaps, and youth unemployment are complex and deeply intertwined. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, including increased investment in teacher recruitment, equitable distribution of educational resources, and fostering a sense of purpose and passion among the youth from the outset of their educational journey. Only through comprehensive and sustained efforts can we hope to bring about transformative change in the educational landscape and create opportunities for a brighter future for all.

4 Conclusion

This article deeply examines how different levels of cultural capital affect people's education and students' performance in Gaokao. It shows that urban cities have more resources and money for education than rural cities, making students in urban cities get a better quality of education and a more comfortable study environment. On top of that, illiterate students with higher levels of

cultural capital background can have more support in education from having parents help with the homework to getting economic support for the after-class tutorial to train for the exam skills. Both the cities' location and cultural capital levels result in different performances in the exam and, eventually, make the students with high levels of cultural capital in urban cities behave better in Gaokao. Apart from the various performance in Gaokao, the cultural capital also affects the youth unemployment rate. Under the poor economic status, most people find it hard to find a job. Meanwhile, the youth is expected to find a stable and well-paid job in the family. As a result, they fail to find the job they want after graduation.

This article tries to find out how cultural capital and social expectations affect how youth enter universities and find a job. It helps to understand the condition of youth getting an education and planning for their career under the poor economic status starting from COVID-19 and under the circumstance that most youths get educated. The credential certificate does not help much to find a job.

In the end, there are few statistics found to support the findings. Also, China stopped announcing the youth unemployment rate, which means more research needs to be conducted to study youth employment.

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