

# A Comparison of Educational Equality and Equity in Gaokao and Admission System between China and the United States

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## Abstract:

This article focuses on the issues of educational equality and equity as reflected in the Chinese Gaokao and the American college admissions system. China and the United States use completely different strategies in selecting students for higher education. Gaokao, a unified national standardized test, is the name of the college entrance exam in China. A student's eligibility to enroll in college is determined by their test result. The admissions process in the United States is more comprehensive, taking into account a student's extracurricular activities, personal statements, and scores on standardized tests. To guarantee fair entrance, the Gaokao gives pupils a single set of test questions and answers; the admissions process takes into account the socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds of various students in order to address the issue of equality. However, both countries face the challenge of whether they can truly achieve educational equity due to socioeconomic inequality and unequal access to educational resources. By comparing the two systems, this article explores some similarities and differences in the challenges faced by the two countries.

**Keywords:** Educational Equality; Educational Equity; Gaokao; Admissions System.

## 1. Introduction

In China, the main way for students to enter college is the Gaokao (National College Entrance Examination), a highly standardized national exam that millions of high school students take every year. Teachers, parents, and students agree that the Gaokao is a crucial test that will determine whether or not they will be able to enroll in college. Every candi-

date takes the same exam at the same time, and the Gaokao exam questions are the same throughout the nation. This gives every student an equal chance to participate. Instead of using a single test to determine admission, the U.S. college admission system employs a holistic assessment approach that takes into account a variety of factors, including students' extracurricular activities, personal statements, reference letters, and community service or internship, in

addition to standardized test scores (like SAT or ACT). The application system comprehensively evaluates students' potential by considering their strengths in various areas, so that students can better showcase themselves and win more opportunities to enter college by showing their strengths in various areas, rather than relying solely on the single criterion of test scores.

## 2. Gaokao (College Entrance Examination) in China

### 2.1 Educational Equality in Gaokao

As a national unified college entrance examination, the Gaokao is designed to provide equal opportunities for all students in China. In the Gaokao, pupils are treated equally regardless of their origins or the school they attend. All students must experience the same test questions, time, and conditions as part of the educational equity that the Gaokao system aims to accomplish. Because they think that everyone can get an equal chance on this test as long as they put in the necessary study time, many parents and teachers view this as the foundation of justice. As Jiang mentioned, "Teacher Fang said that, 'even if your dad was a high-ranking official', there were no privileges when it came to the traditional gaokao-assessed subjects. The gaokao - excluding athletes and artists - was, thus, 'absolutely fair'" [1].

This "formal equality" in the college entrance examination is particularly reflected in the following two aspects:

a) Uniform examination content and scoring standards: As a nationwide standardized test, the college admission exam presents identical questions to every applicant at the same time. Without the impact of regional or school-specific variations, this uniformity guarantees that the test's content and level of difficulty are the same for every student. Because of this, the standardized and uniform test format represents "equality" and guarantees that all students, regardless of background, begin the test at the same point.

b) Strict invigilation and examination environment: The examination environment of the college entrance examination is very strict, and all candidates complete the examination under surveillance to prevent cheating. For example, the examination site is equipped with "360-degree surveillance cameras" and strict security checks [1]. These measures ensure the fairness of the exam so that every student can take the exam under equal conditions.

### 2.2 Educational Equity in Gaokao

Although the Gaokao is intended to be a standardized

and equal measure of students' abilities, differences in the availability of resources and educational support significantly affect the competitiveness of students from different backgrounds, thereby affecting the realization of educational equity. Cultural capital has a direct impact on students' readiness for the Gaokao, which in turn has an indirect impact on their ability to succeed in college. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu coined the term "cultural capital" to describe the "non-economic resources" that people acquire by education, knowledge, skills, and cultural practices that can aid in their success and social standing. Because they have access to greater resources, parental support, and a positive learning environment, students from households with more cultural capital are more likely to succeed. Lu talked about how cultural capital gives people or groups a leg up when trying to succeed and gain a competitive edge. Students with greater cultural capital in Gaokao typically have access to more learning materials, which could help them do better on tests [2]. This means that students from wealthy families or families with highly educated parents will receive more academic support. Wealthy families can pay for tutoring fees, attend after-school tutoring classes, get a wider range of learning materials, etc., and highly educated parents can also provide students with academic help, such as explaining question answers, thus increasing their likelihood of getting good grades in Gaokao.

On the contrary, students from families with limited cultural capital may not be able to obtain additional educational resources, private tutoring, or even parental guidance during the college entrance examination preparation process, because their parents may not have sufficient financial support and educational background to effectively help them. This gap will undermine the fairness of the college entrance examination system to a certain extent. Students from low-cultural-capital families often find it difficult to keep up with their peers from high-cultural-capital families, which affects their chances of entering key universities.

On the other hand, geographical differences can also exacerbate the unfairness of the Gaokao system. The unequal distribution of educational resources between urban and rural areas will lead to differences in the quality of education received by students. Additionally, Lu noted that compared to rural areas, urban areas typically have better educational facilities, better professors, and more professional student mental health counseling services [2]. Urban children are better prepared for the Gaokao because of their well-funded schools, skilled instructors, cutting-edge teaching strategies, and many extracurricular activities. However, rural pupils must contend with largely underfunded schools, a shortage of trained educators, and

a dearth of extracurricular activities. Due to these disparities, rural children are less able to succeed in the Gaokao than their urban counterparts since they do not receive the same level of instruction and assistance. Based on information from the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, Lu concluded that urban students usually have higher Gaokao scores than rural students [2]. Therefore, regional differences make it difficult for the Gaokao system to achieve true fairness because rural students are not provided with the same opportunities to succeed as urban students.

### **3. Application System in the US**

#### **3.1 Educational Equality in Application System**

The equality of the US college application system aims to address the unequal educational opportunities for students from different social, cultural, and economic backgrounds. In an effort to create a more equitable and inclusive admissions process, the US admissions system adopts a more comprehensive approach than China's standardized test system, taking into account not only test scores (SAT, ACT, AP, or IB), but also high school GPA, extracurricular activities, personal essays, and letters of recommendation. California started the "Eligibility in the Local Context" (ELC) initiative to advance educational equity. All California high school students who take part in the program and place in the top 4% of their class grades are assured admission to at least one California university, according to this policy [3]. The ELC program seeks to address unequal access to higher education by providing some students from low-resourced high schools or economically disadvantaged families with an equal opportunity to pursue higher education on a UC campus. The ELC policy has greatly increased the chances of disadvantaged students entering college to receive higher education. These kinds of policies help narrow the gap in opportunities for students from different backgrounds to receive higher education.

#### **3.2 Educational Equity in Application System**

In the United States, college admissions are primarily comprehensive, considering multiple aspects of a student's profile, including extracurricular activities, essays, letters of recommendation, etc., rather than just standardized test scores (such as the SAT or ACT). The purpose of this approach is to allow students from disadvantaged backgrounds to demonstrate their unique strengths and experiences that may not be fully reflected in their academic performance. USC admissions counselors have said

that they need to understand the context in which students achieve their academic success, such as whether students have received test preparation and whether the school offers college preparatory courses. Hence, the student's socioeconomic status, race, and cultural background must be considered when reviewing the entire application [4]. Additionally, the United States has a federal TRIO program to encourage equity in admissions. From high school through undergraduate and beyond, TRIO's eight programs are designed to serve individuals with impairments, first-generation college students, and those with low incomes [5]. The goal of these and other initiatives is to level the playing field for students who encounter major obstacles prior to pursuing higher education and to alleviate disparities in students' access to resources. In order to guarantee that all students have the chance to attend university, the university admissions system primarily focuses on resolving the disparities that students from various socioeconomic backgrounds experience prior to obtaining higher education.

On the other hand, students from wealthy families generally choose to attend private schools, and private school teachers can understand the situation of each student and provide them with more detailed help due to having fewer students than public schools. Additionally, because private schools frequently have more resources, children have more chances to participate in extracurricular activities like sports teams and art exhibits, which can strengthen their resumes for college applications. Low-income pupils, on the other hand, typically attend public schools. The sheer volume of pupils in public schools makes it impossible for teachers to evaluate each one and create strategies specifically for them. Furthermore, public schools frequently lack funding and resources, which means that pupils won't have many opportunities to practice sports and the arts in order to get ready for college. Overall, achieving true equity in college admissions also requires addressing some of the broader and underlying social and economic factors that may limit opportunities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

### **4. A Comparison of Educational Equality and Equity in China and the United States**

#### **4.1 Educational Equality: Standardization vs. Holistic Review**

In China, the Gaokao is often used to symbolize how hard students work on their academics, as students are evaluated by taking the same standardized test, using the same

questions, scoring criteria, and answers, regardless of their socioeconomic background or geographic location. The Gaokao creates a sense of fairness, during which the uniform test content and strict proctoring are used to eliminate bias and provide equal conditions for all students, thus all participants face the same challenges.

However, in the United States, the admissions process pays more attention to the development of students beyond standardized test scores, so students' personal experiences and other activities are also considered to determine whether they meet the standards of the type of students that the college wants. Because of this, the U.S. admissions policy holds that students cannot be admitted based only on their performance on tests like the SAT or ACT. Instead, they are assessed in a variety of ways to determine their suitability for college before being admitted. Therefore, the admissions system's objective is to guarantee that students who do well on other subjects but poorly on standardized tests still have the chance to enroll in college. This strategy protects students' access to higher education in a more inclusive manner. As a result, the goal of the admissions system is to ensure that students who do not perform well in standardized tests but excel in other areas still have the opportunity to enter college. This approach is more inclusive in protecting students' opportunities to enter higher education.

#### **4.2 Educational Equity: Access to Resources and Opportunities**

While both countries pursue equality to ensure that all students have the opportunity to successfully enter college, the equity issue behind admissions remains a challenge. China's Gaokao is the main opportunity for all students to enter higher education and future employment. This crucial exam almost determines the future direction of Chinese candidates' future lives, so both parents and students are under great pressure. Due to exam pressure, families often make significant sacrifices in order to help their children study for the test. This implies that families with more financial means can more readily offer their children test-taking materials, after-school tutoring, and other academic support. Additionally, pupils who excel in athletics, the arts, and the sciences might receive bonus points on the college entrance exam. However, this strategy was abolished in 2018 due to public opposition, mostly benefiting children from wealthier families who can pay the high training fees [6]. In contrast, students from rural areas often lack these resources, and despite taking a unified exam, their results are unequal. This results in a gaokao system that is equal but fails to take into account the unequal starting points of candidates.

In the United States, there is also the problem of inequity due to wealth disparity. From preschool to college, black, and Latino students and children from low-income families still face unequal opportunities throughout their education. They frequently attend underfunded schools, which limits their access to advanced learning opportunities and STEM courses. However, because schools lack rich resources, students at both ends of the educational spectrum also frequently lack proper academic, social, emotional, and mental health care. These kids rarely have access to teachers and personnel with similar backgrounds to meet their requirements, and they are more likely to face teachers with inadequate teaching expertise. All of this is a result of the long-standing systematic racism in the US as well as the racial disparity in wealth and income. Many students of color and their families find it difficult to afford college tuition and often need to borrow more loans, so they face greater pressure when repaying and cannot access better educational opportunities. [7]. However, the application system of educational equity in the United States is being addressed more directly through policies and programs that support disadvantaged students. Programs such as the federal Triple Project and California's Local Eligibility (ELC) Program are examples of efforts to promote equity by targeting low-income, first-generation college students, and students from underrepresented backgrounds. These programs provide students with additional support, including tutoring, financial aid, and mentoring, to help them succeed in the college application process.

### **5 Conclusion**

In comparing China's Gaokao and the American admission system, it can be found that both countries are trying to provide students with equal opportunities to enter higher education with different policies. In order to guarantee score fairness, China's Gaokao offers students a national unified exam and a single standard response; in contrast, the American university admissions process is more thorough, taking into account students' overall development in addition to standardized test results. The question of whether education equity is actually attained is raised by the fact that both China and the United States are struggling with the unequal distribution of resources brought on by socioeconomic disparities in their pursuit of equal chances for higher education. Therefore, both nations must continue to advance and reform in order to strike a balance between educational justice and equality. This is not only a problem of the admission process and system, but also a problem of educational inequality caused by social factors that needs to pay attention to.

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