

# **To What Extent has the Gaokao “Changed My Destiny”? A Qualitative Longitudinal Study of the Impact of the Gaokao on Social Mobility in China**

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## **Abstract**

Is the Gaokao an engine for social mobility in China? Despite extensive studies on higher education expansion and social mobility in China, limited research has adopted a qualitative longitudinal approach to trace the travels from social origin to destinations via higher education. Using longitudinal interviews with individual research participants, 14 years apart from their university to labour market transitions, this study argues social mobility is highly complex and should be examined from the lens of individual agency and positionality. Findings reveal the limitations of quantitative approaches in explaining absolute and relative social mobility. A qualitative longitudinal approach offers an opportunity for scholars to examine the complexity of social mobility across socioeconomic and geographical hierarchies as well as assess the effect of higher education on different life trajectories in the context of China.

**Keywords:** China Higher Education; Social Mobility; Meritocracy; Socioeconomic Stratification; Geographical Inequality

## **1. Introduction**

Is the Gaokao<sup>1</sup> an engine for social mobility in China? There is a growing volume of research on the massification of higher education and its effects on social mobility (Liu, 2016; Marginson, 2016; Shavit et al., 2007). We know that higher education in Mainland China has expanded immensely since the Reform and Opening up, with gross enrolment ratios of tertiary education rising from 0.99 in 1979 to 62.4 per cent in 2018 (World Bank, 2016). We also know that as higher education becomes massified, it tends to become increasingly diversified and differentiated (Carnoy et al., 2013; Marginson, 2016). Research in global north societies, for instance, shows an increasing hierarchical differentiation of pathways by types of institution and fields of study (Shavit et al., 2007). Theories of ‘Maximally Maintained Inequality’ (MMI) (Raftery & Hout, 1993), and ‘Effectively Maintained Inequality’ (EMI) (Lucas, 2001), have been developed to capture the impact of this increasing diversification of higher education on social mobility. The greater heterogeneity in quality across institutions is already reflected in the global north contexts in the ever-increasing differentiation in the

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<sup>1</sup> The Gaokao refers to the National College Entrance Examinations in China. It was re-established in 1977 as the main selection criterion to higher education after the ten-year Cultural Revolution.



labour market value of degrees from different institutions and in different subjects (Green & Zhu, 2010; Reimer et al, 2008).

However, there remain many unanswered questions in the research on the impact of higher education on social mobility in the Chinese context. We know that access to higher education varies for people from different social and geographical origins (Liu, 2015) and that the wage premium for graduates from elite universities is significantly higher than that for graduates from non-elite universities (Li et al., 2012; Hartog et al., 2010). However, much less is known, in detail, about how higher education qualifications are translated into different destinations in varying socioeconomic structures. In other words, how have higher education opportunities affected social mobility? Equally important, how to measure social mobility in the Chinese context?

Literature in global north contexts on social mobility analyses differences in educational levels, occupational status, and mid-career incomes of children and their parents and has been assisted by the availability of longitudinal and panel datasets on the life course of these generations (Torche, 2013; Mitnik et al., 2013). By comparison, existing research on social mobility in Mainland China recognizes rapid change in social mobility both in absolute and relative terms but lacks consistent and reliable longitudinal datasets with which to measure (Hao, 2013). Previous research on social mobility in these contexts has been innovative in exploring limited and fragmented datasets to examine patterns of social mobility during changing socio-political circumstances (Liu, 2016). The surname and its related kinship are used to measure historical trends of elite mobility from the Late Imperial China to the Republican era and to Communist China (Hao, 2013). Moreover, measures of income, educational level, Chinese Communist Party membership, and household registration status (the Hukou) are also used to examine patterns of intergenerational social mobility (Chen et al., 2010; Wu & Zhang, 2010; Wu, 2017). However, these studies are subject to various limitations. They often use pseudo cohorts which are unable to capture the life course of the parental generation and their children in the same families. The measures of occupational status are often inconsistent and tend to elide political status and socioeconomic status. Most importantly, there is a lack of in-depth analysis of individual agency and positionality in the travels between social origin and social destinations via higher education.

This article, therefore, addresses these gaps by proposing a qualitative longitudinal approach using the data from the survey study and interviews with university students conducted between 2007 and 2008 and follow-up interviews in 2021 with three representatives from different Gaokao outcomes. This article asks; 1) How has the Gaokao affected individuals' life chances? 2) What are the characteristics of social mobility from social origin to life destinies via university attendance? 3) How do individuals perceive social mobility through their own journeys?

## **2. The Chinese context**

My previous project investigated the extent to which the Gaokao selection was based on meritocracy by drawing from first-hand data collection between 2007 and 2008 in Anhui and Zhejiang – two provinces in East China (Liu, 2016). Since my previous project, higher

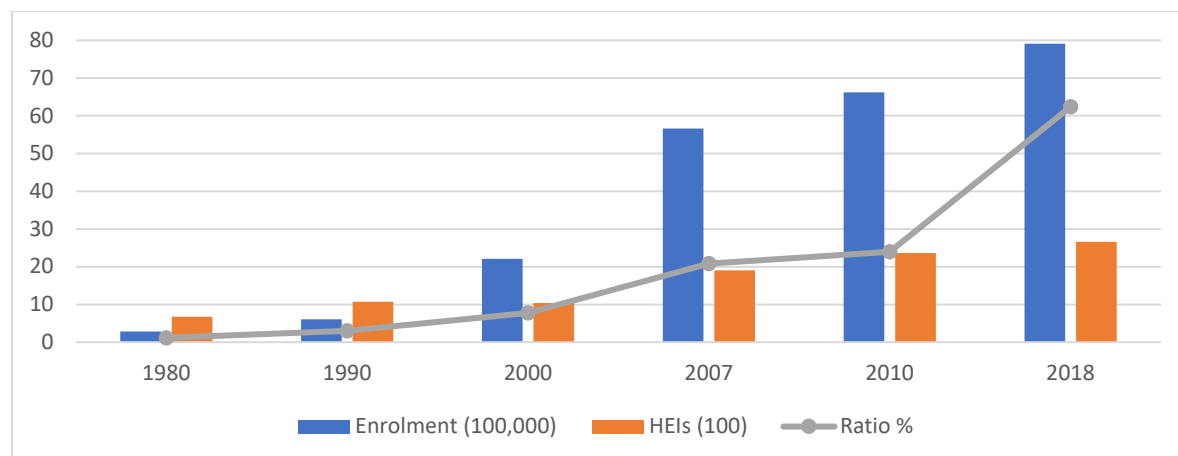


education has continued to expand at an unprecedented scale. The whole system has become more stratified with the government's new flagship programmes of establishing world-leading universities with the 985 universities<sup>2</sup> at the top of the pyramided system and massive recruitments into less prestigious institutions at the provincial level (Shen, 2018; Liu, 2018). To capture the dramatic changes that have occurred in the last decade, I shall first use overtime data to document the expansion of higher education in terms of a few selected measures including, the total number of new entrants to all higher education institutions (HEIs), the total number of public HEIs, and the gross enrolment ratios to higher education in Figure 1.

Figure 1 shows the dramatic increase in enrolment numbers between 2000 and 2018. This massive expansion of student recruitments was a response to the government's binggui policy<sup>3</sup> which ended the era of free education and introduced the tuition fees in the late 1990s (Liu, 2016). Since the 2000s, the recruitment to higher education still rose steadily between 2007 and 2018. To accommodate the growing demand of higher education during this period, the supply of public HEIs also grew from 1,908 in 2007 to 2,663 in 2018. Yet, the most dramatic change is the enrolment ratio increase from 20.84 per cent in 2007 to 62.4 per cent in 2018. It means that two-thirds of eligible population, mostly secondary school graduates, entered higher education in 2018.

**Figure 1**

*The Expansion of Higher Education in China in Terms of Total Number of Enrolments, the Number of HEIs and the Gross Enrolment Ratios between 1980 and 2018*



<sup>2</sup> The 985 Universities refer to elite universities selected to be part of the project of building world-class universities by the Chinese government. By identifying these elite universities, the government prioritised the provision of funding and resources to these selected institutions.

<sup>3</sup> The binggui policy was a substantial reform concerning the recruitment, fee charges, and job assignment in higher education in China. This policy was initially introduced as a pilot reform in around 40 higher education institutions in 1994, and then it was extended to around 100 universities in 1995. The essence of the binggui policy was to end the era of free higher education and job security for university graduates. It marked a new era of fee-charging and free mobility in the labour market after higher education. By 1997, the binggui policy was implemented in majority of higher education institutions, which is detailed in *Achievements of Reforming Higher Education in the Past 30 years* by the Ministry of Education.



Sources: Data on the number of enrolments and HEIs are from China Statistical Year Book 2019: <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2019/indexeh.htm>; Data on enrolment ratios between 1980 and 2010 for tertiary education are from Our World in Data: <https://ourworldindata.org/tertiary-education>; Data on enrolment ratio for 2018 are from China Statistical year book 2019: <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2019/indexeh.htm>

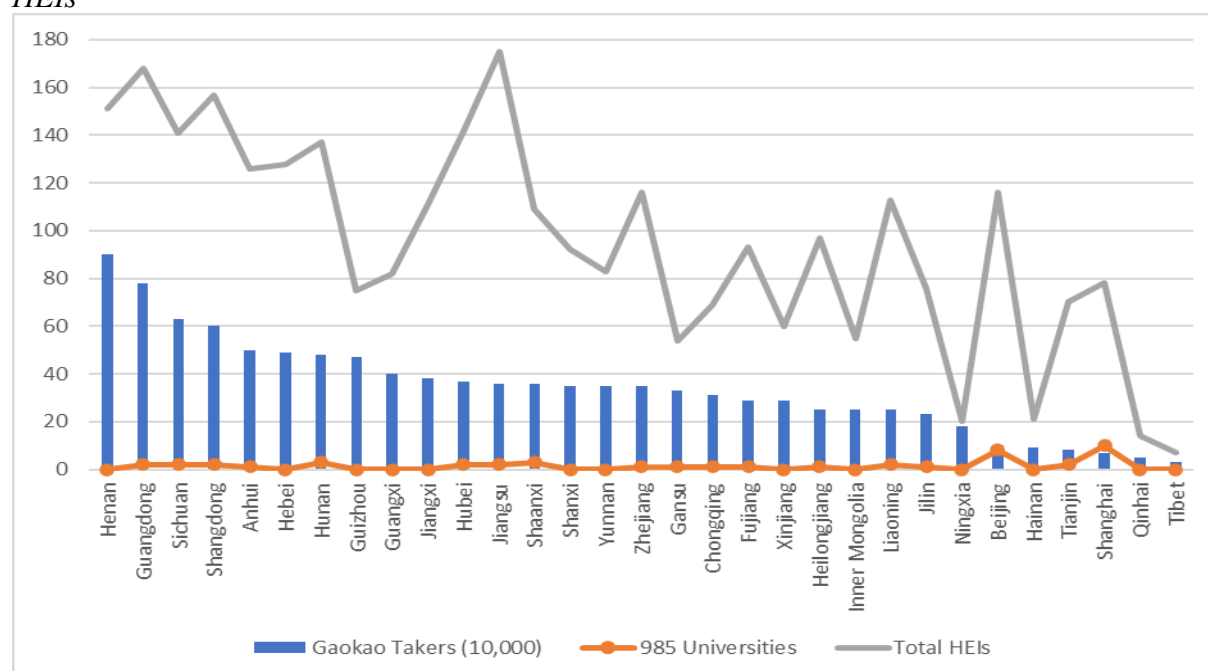
This dramatic increase in enrolment ratios raises two important questions. First, despite all the changes, what remains constant is the Gaokao as the main channel of access to higher education. To what extent has the Gaokao facilitated upward social mobility? To answer this question, I shall focus on two key stratifiers-geographical origin and socioeconomic status identified from my previous project (Liu 2016; 2018), in addition to assessing the nature of the Gaokao selection. Figure 2 provides a snapshot of geographical stratification of higher education selection through the Gaokao. It shows a geographic landscape of unevenness in terms of the Gaokao takers and the number of HEIs as well as that of elite universities. In Figure 2, majority of elite universities are concentrated in Beijing, Shanghai, and other eastern provinces. Twenty-five percent of all elite universities are in Beijing and another 13 percent in Shanghai. In contrast, only 3 elite universities are located in Western provinces: two in Sichuan province and one in the municipality of Chongqing. As far as the total number of higher education institutions is concerned, more than 77 percent of universities are concentrated in eastern provinces. Even economically, more developed areas in western China such as Chongqing, Sichuan, and Shaanxi only account for 7 percent of a total number of higher education institutions. As far as the distribution of all higher education institutions is concerned, eastern provinces such as Liaoning, Jiangsu, Shandong, and one province and one municipality in the West – Shaanxi, and Chongqing – have more higher education institutions than all other provinces, except for Beijing and Shanghai.

Yet, the distribution of HEIs and elite universities do not correspond to the student population. For instance, Henan has the highest number of the Gaokao takers but there is no university granted 985 statuses in the province although the total number of HEIs is relatively high compared to the majority of the provinces. Similarly, Guizhou in the western region has one of the highest numbers of Gaokao takers but there is no 985 universities, and it also has only 75 HEIs in total. By contrast, there are 167 and 116 HEIs in Shanghai and Beijing respectively but the Gaokao takers are the lowest among all provinces.



**Figure 2**

*Geographical Landscape of the Gaokao Takers, the Elite Universities and the Total Number of HEIs*



Source: The data on the Gaokao takers are dated in 2018 from the NBSC 2019. The data on the number of 985s and the total HEIs are from the list of higher education institutions with four-year undergraduate programmes (Ministry of Education 2011).

Apart from geographical inequality, I shall present data on the socioeconomic and demographic picture of HE student population and that of elite universities over fixed periods. Table 1 demonstrates the pattern of socioeconomic participation in my original survey study between 2007 and 2008, the Beijing College Students Panel Survey (BCSPS) 2009 and from the Peking University Survey in 2017 and to that of the general population. It shows a persistent socioeconomic selectivity particularly into elite universities like PKU and universities based in Beijing. In my original survey, around 5.5 percent of surveyed students came from elite social statuses such as leading cadres and senior executives but the proportion increased to 18.5 percent in the BCSPS survey and to around 43 percent in the PKU survey.

Similarly, around 20 percent of surveyed students from my original survey were from professional backgrounds but the proportion increased to a third in the BCSPS students survey and nearly a third among surveyed PKU students. By contrast, only 11 percent and 7 percent of the surveyed PKU students are from urban working-class families and agricultural families, respectively. There were around a third and 18.4 percent from these two backgrounds in the BCSPS survey. This representation of students from working-class and agricultural backgrounds contrasts with around 40 percent of each social group in the total population. In my original survey, students from working-class and agricultural families counted for 36 percent and 39 percent, respectively. This difference in representation by working class and agricultural origin between my survey and the surveys in Beijing may suggest that students from privileged backgrounds are more likely to go to elite universities and/or universities in



Beijing. These statistical data provide a picture of socioeconomic and geographical patterns of participation in higher education. But we still do not know how higher education experiences and qualifications affect students' lives. Qualitative longitudinal data is used in the next section. to illuminate the complexity of social mobility through higher education in China.

**Table 1:**

*Overtime Changes in Socioeconomic Patterns from My Original Survey, to the BCSPS (2009) and to the Peking University Survey (2018)*

The Lu Xueyi's SES	The Survey Study by the author conducted between 2007 and 2008 (N=960) **	Beijing College Students Panel Survey 2009 (N=4,749)	PKU Survey 2017 (N=1,367)	Percentage in population
01-02 Leading cadres, governmental officials in managerial roles, and executive personnel	5.5	18.5	42.8	6.2
03. Professionals	18.4	32.2	26.9	15.8
04 Urban working class	36.7	32.4	11.6	31.8
05 Agricultural workers	39.2	18.4	7	40.3
06 Unspecified	0.2	0	11.7	5.9

Sources: the data on the composition of the corresponding population come from Lu Xueyi (2010).

Note: \* The first two socioeconomic groups are combined together, that is, the leading cadres/governmental officials and executive personnel.

\*\* The data is from Liu 2016.

### 3. Data and methods: A qualitative longitudinal approach

To investigate the long-term impact of the Gaokao on people's life potentialities, I traced my research respondents over the course of 14 years from universities to the labour market. In the original research project, I conducted a survey study involving around 960 first-year undergraduate students in eight different types of universities in two provinces (Anhui and Zhejiang) between 2007 and 2008. Following up the survey study, I further conducted 63 in-depth individual interviews from the survey sample. The respondents were born between 1986 and 1989. There were three different "identities" associated with different types of outcomes of the Gaokao examinations which were discussed by my research participants in the original sample. These include Gaokao champions, Gaokao losers, and Gaokao mediocres.



In 2021, I conducted follow-up interviews with three respondents matching each category in my original sample. The main challenge of a longitudinal method is attrition management. During the 14 year gap, there have been significant changes in communication modes and further development in social media in China. My original contacts were kept in QQ records and QQ email accounts. Yet, WeChat has been a dominant mode of communication replacing QQ since my original fieldwork. I experienced difficulties in converting the original QQ contacts into WeChat accounts. Instead, I used QQ emails to reach out to my respondents. Unsurprisingly, the respondent rate was low at only 11 per cent. A total number of 7 original participants responded to my requests to be re-interviewed. Among these, I selected 3 matching each category of Gaokao champions, losers, and mediocres.

Interviews in the original project and in 2021 were semi-structured and lasted approximately one and two half hours each. The original interviews were conducted in person at public places such as university canteens, sports centres, and empty lecture rooms. The follow-up interviews in 2011 were conducted remotely online. All interviewees provided informed consent to be digitally recorded and all were transcribed in Chinese. The original study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the Institute of Education, University of London in 2006. The follow-up interviews were conducted in full compliance with research ethics codes and practices established in King's College London Research Ethics Policy (Ethics Clearance No.: MRA-20/21-26171).

Personal identifiable characteristics were removed, and the data were anonymised through pseudonyms and number codes. Three stages of coding were used in this study. First, open coding was applied to identify the three outcomes of the Gaokao in relation to meritocracy from the original interview transcripts. The second round of coding mapped their original perceptions on the Gaokao with their subsequent university experiences and labour market transitions to provide a full picture of the travels from social origin to university to social destinations. In the third round of coding, I assessed the different patterns of travels among these respondents and analysed what social mobility means to each individual.

#### **4. Findings**

In the first section, I revisited original interview transcripts dated between 2007 and 2008, as noted. The Gaokao champion passed the competitive examination and achieved her dream to study in an elite university despite her unprivileged rural family background. The Gaokao loser failed to be accepted by her first choice of university in the Gaokao and settled at a lower-tier university in Anhui. The Gaokao mediocre had poor academic performance in the Gaokao but managed to go to university by navigating the complex quota systems with the assistance of his family's extended networks. In the second section, I detailed my follow-up interviews with participants when they were in their early 30s. In the following segment, I mapped out the trajectories of the interviewees, from different Gaokao outcomes to their current labour market destinations, socioeconomic status, and reflections on the extent to which the Gaokao has changed their 'destiny'.

##### *4.1 The destiny children birthed by the Gaokao-the champion, the loser, and the mediocre*



#### *4.1.1 The Gaokao champion*

Huang was a Gaokao champion by all standards; she received the top 10 highest Gaokao scores in the whole province of Anhui in the year 2007 and an offer from one of the most prestigious universities – Peking University. She was living proof of meritocracy. Her parents were agricultural workers from a deprived rural area in central Anhui, who moved to a nearby county and supported themselves as street vendors. Despite her humble origin, she had always been a straight-A student at PKU. At the age of 11, Huang received 3 different offers to study in elite middle schools in neighbouring cities and counties. All headmasters predicted that she would be a Tsing Hua or PKU material. Huang was the best example of meritocracy and featured in the headmaster's monthly motivational speeches regularly. By her own account, she spent most of her time in high school studying and revising. She was a perfect meritocratic model. All her hard work paid off when she received the offer letter from Peking University, one of the best universities in China. Hardly a surprise, she was the toast of the county. The headmaster used Huang as a perfect example of rural kids changing their destiny by working hard. The Gaokao changed Huang's destiny as a peasant's daughter, in that typically her destiny might be one of either spending the rest of her life working in the fields like her parents and grandparents or being one of the millions of migrant workers flooding into the cities for low-skilled and low-paid jobs without entitlements or security. Yet, the Gaokao changed her destiny with many promises at Peking University. She swore by the codes of meritocracy. Hard work warranted success.

#### *4.1.2 The Gaokao loser*

The term loser might sound harsh, but it was used frequently by my research participants. The term captured the deep emotional and psychological impact of the Gaokao on individuals. There were primarily two types of the Gaokao losers. The obvious meaning refers to poor Gaokao performance and the subsequent failure to be enrolled in any public university. The second type of loser refers to those who are accepted by a public university but not by their preferred choice. My sample did not include the first category of 'losers' since my respondents were all enrolled in universities, but I had many respondents call themselves a "Gaokao losers", which meant they failed to go to their chosen universities. Interviewees from this category were prone to interpret the "Gaokao failures" either as a lack of merit or as a victim of the wider structural constraints, more specifically, the discriminatory nature of the cut-off policy and the quota system.

Cheng, a soft-speaking girl of 19, was born in a small city in Anhui. Both her parents worked in one of the largest agriculture manufacturers in the local area. She found it difficult to describe her family's backgrounds. Although both parents did manual work in the factory from the 1980s to the 1990s, her mother then got promoted to the accounting department while her father was leading a team of apprentices. As a single child, Cheng is the "pearl on the palms" of her parents. Her father believed "daughters can have as much strength and independence as sons". By investing in her education and extra-curriculum tutors, Cheng's parents provided unconditional support for her to go to university and leave Anhui. Cheng's story, as an empowered sibling-less daughter, is representational in the well-documented



research on the one-child generation (Kim et al., 2017; Wang & Fong, 2009; Fong, 2004). “Home-leaving for university” was a dream for many kids in Anhui at that time. A province, which experienced chronic poverty since the country’s Reform and Opening-up in 1978, massively lagged in the modernisation that transformed coastal provinces and big cities (Arrighi, 2007).

Going to a university outside Anhui means much better learning opportunities, better job opportunities after graduation, and better quality of life. Life in a small post-Communist county in Anhui can be stifling, there was one large manufacturer and nothing else, and there was no cultural life except a barely functional Anhui traditional opera group underfunded by the state. A lack of job opportunities and cultural life made Cheng dream about a life in a vibrant city: “My dream is to work in an international company where I can meet people from different places. I would love to be able go to a concert or an exhibition for which only big cities could offer”. Cheng dreamed big but when it came to university choices, she was realistic about her chances. Instead of choosing highly competitive places in Beijing, Shanghai, or Guangzhou, she aimed for a foreign language degree in a prestigious university in the neighbouring province Jiangsu.

Cheng was highly aware of the rules of the Gaokao game and how they were determined by the quota and the cut-off point systems. Why can we not talk about the Gaokao without discussing the two selection systems? How can we make sense of these in relation to students’ merits? The National Gaokao results are valid across all provinces in China; however, each province sets a minimal level of points (or “cut-off” points) for entry to different types of universities after the Gaokao within that province. Moreover, each institution then adjusts its own cut-off points against the provincial guideline for entry to different fields of study. This quota policy is calculated and published annually by each university prior to the Gaokao, in each province. In theory, the quota represents the total number of new places available each year in a university, and these places are open to all students. However, the evil twin of the quota and cut-off points is local protectionism and geographical discrimination.

For instance, Cheng’s dream university in Jiangsu published a total quota of 25 new recruits to the foreign languages department in 2007. Of the 25 new enrolments, only one was assigned to Anhui and other provinces but there were 5 given to the Jiangsu native candidates. Similarly, according to a media report on the representation of new recruits from different provinces to the 9 most elite universities in 2013, Peking University provided 408 quotas to a total number of 72,736 Beijing candidates whilst only assigned 124 quotas to a total number of 685,000 candidates who sat in the Gaokao in Henan Province (Li, 2013). Li reported that the chances of going to Peking University for a native candidate are 31 times more than that of a student from Henan (2013).

For Cheng, the quota did not favour her. The only way possible to her was to work very hard to achieve high Gaokao performance to make her more competitive. She certainly did not disappoint in the 2007 Gaokao, presenting a stunning performance with an overall score of 620 out of 750 and English at 145 out of 150. According to a published booklet a year later,



this university recruited a total number of 47 students from Anhui to the Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences. Among them, the highest score was 620, the lowest score was 605 and the mean score was 606. The published data suggested that a student from Anhui with a Gaokao result of 606 could be enrolled in this university. For any new recruits to Foreign Languages, the higher the English score, the more likely the candidate could be accepted. Cheng seemed to tick all the boxes for her dream university.

However, Cheng was rejected by her first choice of field of study and her first choice of university despite having achieved the highest score among enrolled students from Anhui in 2007. It was a mystery about her rejection by her dream university. Like millions of other Gaokao candidates every year, there was no way to find out the truth due to a lack of transparency during the recruitment procedures. Cheng was a Gaokao “loser” despite her stunning academic performance in the Gaokao. She consented to be assigned to any field of study and any university where there is an available place. Thus, she was picked by the English Department in a comprehensive university in the capital city of Anhui. The promise of the Gaokao to allow her to leave Anhui was broken.

Reflecting on her “failures” in attending her dream university and the dream of a life outside Anhui, Cheng believed it was all her fault. She blamed herself for being too ambitious and for being too unrealistic about the game of the Gaokao: “I was blind by my academic records in my school. But I was only small fish in a big pond. There were many more brilliant and hard-working students in Anhui.” What was worse for her was to let down her parents: “my parents took it very hard for my Gaokao rejection. They were used to me being an outstanding student. I was their hope. I was their pride. But I disappointed them in the most crucial time.” Without much power and money, Cheng’s parents, like many other parents in China, believed in upward social mobility through higher education by investing their time and savings in their only daughter.

Upward social mobility has different meanings in the context of China, with the influence of geographic mobility being key. For rural kids, upward social mobility means leaving the poverty-stricken countryside. Even working in a manual job in a small county meant some advances in income and quality of life. For kids like Cheng, it is about a secure professional job in a big city preferably outside Anhui. Cheng internalised her failure as a lack of merits, but she seldom questioned the flaws in the evil twin system of the quotas and the cut-off points. How could she blame the ‘system’? She was aware of the rules of the quota game all along. “When you entered the Gaokao game”, as she calmly told me, “you accepted the rules. Only sad losers would blame the system.” Meritocracy is so hard-wired in Chinese culture that Cheng accepted the rules of the game.

#### *4.1.3 The Gaokao mediocre*

The word mediocre was used by my respondents to describe the scale of academic performance in the 2007 Gaokao. By no means did I imply their personalities or individual attributes. Xiong was from Hangzhou, the capital city of Zhejiang. He self-assessed as “not academically talented”, nor were they “working hard” during his schooling years but both confessed to be the ‘lucky ones through the Gaokao nets’. Xiong, a native Hangzhouer, is a



single child from a well-off family. He lived in a ‘bubble’ with kids like him, spending his allowances for a new iPhone and a cool Nike trainer, and going to various trendy bars and restaurants. When asked about this schooling years and his journey to university, he told me about “all the crazy classmates working for more than 12 hours a day”, “long school days with only an afternoon off per week”, and “his skipping lessons for basketball games.” He confessed that he was never a good student, academically, since his primary school years. Like many middle-class parents in China, his parents tried to push him to work harder and hired private tutors for almost all subjects for extracurricular support. But private tutoring did not seem to help him. He was always at the bottom of the class.

Going to university was part of Xiong’s coming of age and figuring out what he wanted to do in the future rather than a cut-throat competition. Recognising his academic mediocracy, his parents were in discussions with his schoolteachers about which university to choose, or to be more accurate, about how to go to a university with his academic record. There was a clear line between choosing a university and attending a university. The former implies outstanding academic performance which guarantees freedom of choices of universities and fields of study, whilst the latter means you can only go to the university which accepts your grades. However, this notion is a sham. The previous stories on the Gaokao losers illustrated the lack of freedoms provided by the quota policy along with the cut-off points which prevented students from less privileged backgrounds or from less desirable regions from utilizing the elite opportunities offered by prestigious universities.

Xiong’s parents clearly planned some “strategies” to choose a university for him even before the Gaokao. They were realistic about his poor track record of academic performance. This acknowledgement made them narrow their search for universities only in Zhejiang, preferably in Hangzhou where they had vast networks and social capital. Given the enormous investments in their son’s education, Xiong’s parents did not just want a bachelor’s degree from him, but they were also concerned with the prestige associated with his degree. After carefully vetting a handful of key institutions in Hangzhou, his parents found a key university which would be suitable for their family’s social status, and which also offered a variety of fields of study including some regarded as “vanity ones” such as philosophy and arts. But the key issue was whether his academic performance in the pending Gaokao would meet the lowest thresholds for this university. Their strategy was “to get in any field first”.

During the Gaokao, Xiong’s performance was predictably mediocre. He chose history as his field of study in his first-choice university. The History Department was one of the least competitive fields of study in this university, therefore the entry to this department was consistently low over years and one of the comparatively lowest among all entrants across different disciplines. But his parents’ strategy worked. He got into a key university. Given his academic record, it was almost an impossible dream. Was it just luck? Not really. His parents had been investigating the university’s recruitment plan for months. They even found a family friend who acted as a “middleman” to set up a social gathering with someone from the senior management team of this key university. They had a lot of inside information about the university’s recruitment and quotas across different disciplines.



Xiong did not feel anything unethical about his parents' networking strategy. Instead, he justified his parents' intervention as common practices in China: "everyone uses their Guanxi. It's not like they bribed our way into university. It's not possible. Everyone has to pass the Gaokao." He laughed it off as a minor offence of "zouhoumen" (走后门), which literally means backdoor practices. The "zouhoumen" is a colloquial term which describes using contacts to get favours behind the scenes. The "zouhoumen" is a vague but comprehensive phrase. It could mean someone using monetary resources to gain access to an important contact, which could be considered bribery; it could also mean someone using his/her personal contacts to get access to certain information which is not publicly available. Xiong was right about the "zouhoumen". His parents did not use bribery as no money exchanged hands. But he was wrong about 'everyone using their guanxis' and 'a minor offence' since this kind of practices are not available for those students whose families had no contact to access important information such as the recruitment quotas for different disciplines. This information was crucial for decision making about university and fields of study. The "zouhoumen" gave him unfair advantages in the competitions for limited places in this key university.

#### **4.2 To What Extent Has the Gaokao Changed Their "Destiny"?**

Huang, the Gaokao champion who went to Peking university and graduated with a Master's in International Relations, is now a 33-year-old senior sales manager in a large national insurance company based in Shanghai. For Huang, the 2007 Gaokao was a watershed moment in her life, which allowed her to achieve upward social mobility from her humble origin of being a daughter of agricultural workers in rural Anhui. In her own words, "the Gaokao gave me the only opportunity in life. It's the only fair opportunity where my own capabilities matter." She recalled her university life and subsequent setbacks of "achieving her dream". Attending an elite university, like Peking University, was difficult at times, however, as she was constantly reminded of her disadvantages – the family background of agricultural workers and a lack of economic and social capital in a metropolitan city like Beijing. Her "celebrity" status in a county in Anhui turned into that of a 'nobody' in Beijing as "PKU was packed with academic geniuses like her".

Furthermore, her lack of financial means isolated her from social life, holidays, and even "summer schools" where her privileged peers were preparing for the GRE and TOEFL tests to study in Ivy League universities. Instead, she spent every holiday working as a private tutor to earn living expenses. Huang's experiences in PKU confirmed the findings from previous research in China and elsewhere about a lack of "belonging" and "identity crisis" among those underprivileged in elite universities (Reay et al., 2009; Liu, 2018). My research also details the accounts on a hardening sense of inferiority among the rural students in urban universities (Liu, 2016). However, for Huang, this sense of inferiority cannot be softened by a glossy certificate from Peking University. As her peers who had financial means or social capital pursued postgraduate degrees abroad, Huang had to find a job immediately after graduation to support her two younger siblings and her parents.



She drifted from various professional jobs in Beijing, which were completely unrelated to her degree in International Relations. Since 2014, she started working for a large insurance company in Shanghai: “I stayed here because the pay is good and they offered some odd jobs for my parents.” She never participated in high-profile events for PKU alumni in Shanghai mainly because she “had nothing to show off” when compared to her peers. She further pondered the value of education and elite university experiences: “people put too much emphasis on education. If you don’t have money or social contacts (*guanxi*), no matter how brilliant you are in studying.” Although Huang was a Gaokao champion, she did not become a champion in her profession or in her social status. In her own words, she is a “Gaokao champion turned salesman” and a “loser” for not achieving professional success or “making big money”.

Cheng is now an associate professor in English and Linguistics at a provincial university in Anhui. She is married with a 7-year-old daughter. When asked the extent to which the Gaokao changed her destiny, Cheng’s answer was philosophical: “probably it did not change my destiny, but it definitely steered the course”. The Gaokao failure “killed her dream” of being a professional interpreter in a multinational enterprise in a metropolitan city like Shanghai or Beijing. However, the Gaokao allowed her to achieve upward social mobility in terms of occupational status and income in a medium-sized city in Anhui when compared to her parents’ blue-collar manufacturing jobs and “average” working-class salary. She also had more assets than her parents when they were her age because she and her husband jointly owned two properties. Her secure job and proximity to her parents gave her some advantages in balancing work-family conflicts: “if I had worked in Shanghai, how could I manage childcare with a full-time job? I must have to be rich to hire a nanny or have a big enough house to accommodate my parents”. Cheng was a Gaokao loser but she achieved certain upward social mobility through having a university degree which subsequently secured a professional job and urban professional status.

Xiong is now an e-commerce entrepreneur in Hangzhou who owns several companies with millions, as evaluated on Shanghai Stock Exchange Index. He is married with two kids and a plush apartment overlooking the West Lake, a premier property location in Hangzhou. It took him a while to find a gap in his calendar to be interviewed as “the pandemic did not stop him from working”. I asked him the same question I asked Xiong and Cheng, regarding to what extent the Gaokao changed his destiny. He blurted a laugh: “the Gaokao was like going through the motions or a formality. It did not change anything,” although he admitted that having a university degree “looks nice socially”. That explains why, several years ago, he did a stint in a business school in Australia; he wanted to add a “glaze of gold” to his reputation.

Yet, he was highly suspicious of the “value” of education. He further criticized the problems of China’s highly selective education system: “it’s too narrow. I was not good at studying, but I am good at business. My classmates were good at exams, but they are nowhere significant now. That’s the failure of the education system. It does not select talents.” Reflecting on his business successes, he acknowledged that he did not make it on his own as his parents invested in his start-ups and were always his “lifeboats” when his business went



through stagnation periods. Xiong is a Gaokao mediocre-turned-millionaire. The Gaokao did not blaze a new trail of upward social mobility for him because he was already socioeconomically privileged. Instead, his parents' social capital and assets paved a way for him to become a risk-taking and successful entrepreneur with considerable assets and high social status.

## 5. Conclusions

This article is a modest attempt to capture the extent to which the Gaokao affected social mobility. Using a qualitative longitudinal approach, I assessed the long-term impact of the Gaokao on people's life possibilities, by tracing three respondents with 14 years gap between their transitions to university and subsequently to the labour market. I first identified three different outcomes of the Gaokao examinations and coded them into the categories of Gaokao champion, Gaokao loser, and Gaokao mediocre. By tracing their career trajectories and subsequent social status, I highlight the complexity of social mobility from the lens of individual agency and positionality. By her own account, the Gaokao champion became a "loser" by not achieving any success measured by professional, material, or status terms. The Gaokao loser became a university professor with reasonable social status and income in her native province of Anhui. The Gaokao mediocre became a highly successful millionaire.

The Gaokao seemed to have left some marks on their life courses or in Cheng's terms "steered" different courses. However, the Gaokao failed to transform life potentialities in such a way that one's social origin does not matter in determining long-term life course transitions to the labour market or to achieve upward social mobility. The Gaokao did allow students like Huang with extraordinary academic performance and talents to move upward from a daughter of street vendors in Anhui to a professional job in Shanghai. This mobility is both socially and geographically upwards, which are two important markers to success and social mobility in the Chinese context. However, for Cheng and Xiong, the Gaokao was only a blip in their life course and did not define who they were by academic outcomes in the long run. Maximizing her academic credentials in her native province, Cheng managed to achieve upward social mobility in terms of occupational status and income. Yet, she failed to realise her dream of geographical mobility through the Gaokao because the discriminatory quota system locked her out of elite opportunities. Unlike Cheng or Xiong, Huang travelled little "socially" from his social origin to current social status with a few detours in universities in China and Australia. It was almost a case of social 'immobility'. This is because he was already privileged in terms of socioeconomic status and geographical origin. His professional success seemed to have little to do with his university experiences. It was his parents' powerful social networks, socioeconomic status, and financial assets that allowed him to venture out in the business world and to take risks when the odds were against him.

The longitudinal in-depth individual interview has significant advantages over more common methods such as national panel surveys used to capture patterns of participation in higher education. This method allowed my interviewees to tell their stories from university to the transitions to the labour market. However, it is subject to some limitations. For example, it



is extremely difficult when managing attrition rates, particularly in the last decade, whereby significant social media platforms migrated from my original project. Therefore, it might be challenging to extend this method to large-scale representative samples. Building on the insights of the current study, future scholarship on social mobility in the Chinese context should address several additional questions. First, to what extent can the Gaokao outcomes identified here be generalized to different fields of study? Second, can social mobility research combine cohort variations and university outcomes? Distinguishing cohort variations will increase our understanding of the effects of higher education participation on different life opportunities. Future research could investigate how the socialisation patterns by different social groups affect their labour market outcomes.

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