

## Chapter 7

# Social Barriers to, and Gender Gaps in, Educational Attainment for Rural Citizens in China

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### ABSTRACT

*This research project examined the social barriers to gender equalities in rural Chinese educational contexts in order to identify impediments to educational advancement and, thus, career mobility and poverty reduction, especially for rural girls in the long-term. The research questions of this study were as follows: In what ways and to what extent do different social factors influence the gender gaps among rural Chinese students' academic outcomes? The examined barriers were (1) gender, (2) parental educational attainment, (3) opportunities to practise Mandarin at home, (4) social welfare entitlement, (5) adequacy of educational facilities, and (6) transport accessibility. Human capital theory and dependency theory were used to develop the conceptual framework. Low paternal and particularly maternal education are associated with the widening rural Chinese cohorts' gender gaps in educational attainment; the magnitudes of the found associations are moderate.*

### INTRODUCTION

In rural China, the rates of poverty had reached 4.5%, with 43 million impoverished people residing in the countryside by the end of 2016 (Xue & Zhou, 2018, p. 207). The rural and urban populations are identified according to their usual residence. The rural Chinese population is the population that is administered at the county level (excluding towns); and the urban Chinese population is the population that is administered at city or town level. In addition, cities are areas that are officially administered at the national level as cities; and towns are areas that are officially administered as towns within provinces and autonomous regions (Martin, 1992, p. 392). For poverty alleviation, the Central Government aims to promote education universally, particularly in rural areas (Fan *et al.*, 2002, p. 4; Heckman, 2005, p. 50;

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Kipnis, 2011, p. 107; Brown & Park, 2002, p. 523). The *1995 Education Law* states that, '[the] Educated population shall enjoy equal rights under the law [in] such matters as school entry, grade promotion and employment...' (Su, 2011, p. 19). In this book chapter, the author would like to address whether, and, if applicable, to what extent does, a range of social factors identified in existing literature affect access to rural education in China. The examined barriers included: (a) gender; (b) parental educational attainment; (c) opportunities to practise Mandarin at home; (d) social welfare entitlement; (e) adequacy of educational facilities; and (f) transport accessibility. Specifically, this research project would draw a focus on the gender aspect, and compare rural citizens' educational attainment by gender, in association with how any observable gender gaps in education level are related to those barriers. Secondary data analyses of nearly nationally representative datasets were employed to statistically interpret any gender gaps occurred in the existing rural Chinese education system.

### ***Hukou Status***

The associations between education and rural development can saliently be demonstrated in Chinese contexts. Within the leading developing country, individuals holding an urban *hukou* are registered as 'residents'; whereas, those with a rural *hukou* are 'peasants' (Bian, 2007, p. 218). The latter group is viewed by, for example, Dr. Jieyu Liu, Reader in Sociology of China and Deputy Director of SOAS China Institute at SOAS University of London (2017, p. 1037) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Gallagher *et al.*, 2009, p. 30) as economically, socially, and educationally disadvantaged. The *hukou* system (also known as the household registration system) was founded in 1958 by the Communist Party of China (CPC) to restrict the movement of the Mainland Chinese population (Liu, 2017, p. 1037; Gallagher *et al.*, 2009, 30). According to the *hukou* system, each citizen is assigned either an urban or rural *hukou* (Bian, 2002, pp. 104–7). Until the late 1990s, citizens' *hukou* status was inherited from their mothers. However, from 1998 onwards, the Chinese State Council gave approval for newborn babies to inherit their *hukou* identities from either parent (Ma & Wang, 2016, p. 47). Those holding a rural *hukou* can only gain access to state benefits, welfare, and opportunities designated for rural Chinese communities (Chan & Zhang, 2009, p. 819; Young, 2013, p. 28; Davin, 1999, p. 7). These benefits include educational welfare, where rural and urban children receive free or subsidised 12-year rural and urban education, respectively.

Unfortunately, rural primary education often features poor teaching quality; whereas, secondary and tertiary institutions, particularly those that are well resourced, are primarily located in urban regions (Knight *et al.*, 2013, p. 151). Being associated with a rural *hukou* often prevents parents from sending their children to elite urban schools (Xue & Zhou, 2018, pp. 1101–12; Wu & Treiman, 2004, p. 369). Since rural Chinese youth are frequently denied urban residency, they must attend rural schools or pay expensive 'guest fees' to study at less competitive urban public schools (Brauw & Giles, 2008, p. 277; Zhao, 1999, p. 778; Westmore, 2017, p. 21; Fang & Lin, 2013). Rural Chinese youth, therefore, struggle with a limited curriculum, in addition to being subject to poor teaching quality and facilities (Fan *et al.*, 2002, p. 5; Murphy, 2002, p. 93; Mok, 2004). In impoverished rural regions, children often attend primary and secondary schools that are far worse equipped than schools designated for their urban elite counterparts (Yung, 2010, p. 195).

From the 1980s, the Central Government has loosened the requirements to change rural to urban *hukou* status. Participating in military services, entering higher education, and securing a white-collar job in cities are among the factors that enable the conversion from rural to urban *hukou* (Yeung, 2013,

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