

**Title:** Who deserves a better life? Social inequality in Chinese higher education access

**Author:** Chen, Yu

**Awarded:** 2015

**Abstract:**

This thesis explores the sociological issue of how and with what outcomes students' trajectories through the Chinese higher education system are shaped by the nature of policy, on the one hand, and their social backgrounds, on the other. In relation to policy, from 1999 onwards there have been major changes in higher education policy which have provided new opportunities for higher education development in China. As a consequence, during the period from 1999-2010, the gross enrolment rate increased nearly six-fold. However, this expansion has been paralleled by other policies that allocate additional resources to model (formerly key) schools as well as to a small group of already elite universities. The question, then, of who gets to go to these exclusive and elite institutions, and the ensuing social justice outcomes, are at the heart of this thesis. A mixed-methods research design strategy was used to investigate the relationship between higher education expansion and access, institutions, key schools and university applicants. To identify those influences shaping students' choices and experiences required a focus on both their families' social, cultural, economic, and political capital and their personal understanding of their choice and experiences. The fieldwork design involves focus groups with university applicants, interviews carried out in China with policy makers and university applicants, as well as a survey examining the kinds of social backgrounds of students in key and non-key schools. This study examines both policy makers' perspective of China's higher education expansion since 1999, and university applicants' experiences and understandings of the choices of higher education access. Theoretically, the study is based on a critical conceptual framework and is inspired by Bourdieu's theory of the forms of capital to understand differences in higher education access in China. The research findings suggest there is a relationship between families' social, cultural, economic, and political statuses, and that these relationships have important implications for social outcomes, equity and justice. Widening access to higher education in China does not appear to be matched by equal access to opportunities for social equity, and mobility. The findings reveal that Chinese higher education policy makers fail to see, take account of, and respond to, the outcomes of higher education expansion and their unequal consequences and impacts on university applicants as this is mediated through key schools. The study also finds that the differences between students is less a question of aspiration - in that all Chinese students and their families have high aspirations. Rather, those families with access to economic, social, cultural and political capitals strategize their paths through the institutions - including access to key as opposed to non-key schools. Interviews with students reveal the pressure on them to be a 'good person', and that this status is the outcome of securing a place in university. By exploring how higher education trajectories are shaped by students' family backgrounds in China, this study offers a more holistic approach to examining the influences shaping student's experiences and outcomes. This study also contributes to sociological debates on ways to understand the relationship between higher education expansion policy and social equity and mobility issues in a global context.