Ethnic Minorities and Preferential Education Policy in China: A Myth of Meritocracy or a Path to Equality?

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01 Introduction

- China, home to 56 ethnic groups, experiences regional variations in economic development and education, with some ethnic minority groups and regions having limited access to quality educational resources.
- The Gaokao, China's national college entrance exam, is crucial for university admissions. Since the establishment of the People's Republic, the national government has implemented preferential education policies to address historical inequalities and promote equality among its diverse population.
- This study evaluates the effectiveness of preferential education policies, such as lowered Gaokao score thresholds, quotas, reserved spots, preparatory classes, and financial aid for ethnic minorities and their implications.
- While these policies aim to reduce disparities, they inadvertently result in superficial adjustments that fail to address deeper structural inequalities, such as limited access to quality education and socioeconomic barriers. A one-size-fits-all approach overlooks the unique needs of different ethnic groups and regions.
- This research advocates for more contextualised reforms that promote genuine educational equity beyond mere meritocracy.
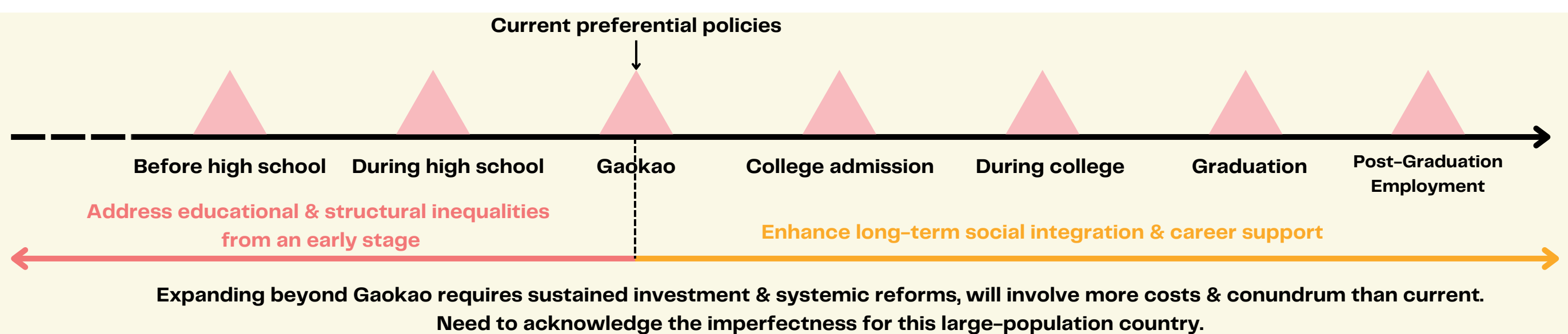
02 Conceptual Lenses

- Justice Theory
- Deficit Discourse
- Cultural Capital Theory

03 Methodology

Literature-based research
- **Literature Review**
  - Chinese ethnic minority education
  - Preferential education policy in Gaokao
  - Education and social mobility
  - Regional education disparities (urban-rural divide)
- **Policy Analysis**
  - Chinese Preferential Education Policy for the Ethnic Minorities

Current preferential policies

Before high school — During high school — Gaokao — College admission — During college — Graduation — Post-Graduation Employment

Address educational & structural inequalities from an early stage

Enhance long-term social integration & career support

Expanding beyond Gaokao requires sustained investment & systemic reforms, will involve more costs & conundrum than current. Need to acknowledge the imperfectness for this large-population country.

04 Findings & Analysis

1. Trends in admission data for ethnic minorities
- **Increased enrolment and performance** due to policy interventions, but still below the national average.
  - Only around 10% of university students are non-Han (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021).
  - Lower academic performance: ethnic minority students' GPAs are on average 0.13 lower than Han students (Wang, 2022).
- **Access vs. readiness**: Lower admission scores improve access, but many struggle post-admission due to weaker preparatory education and poor educational quality in home regions.

2. Preferential policies & structural inequalities
- **Regional disparities**: Unequal access to quality education.
- **Fairness dilemma**: Disadvantaged Han vs. urban minorities vs. rural minorities.
- **Post-admission gaps**: Minority students often feel disconnected due to differing academic foundations.
- **Stigmatisation & stereotypes**: Preferential policies reinforce deficit narratives.
- **Sinicisation vs. inclusion**: Are policies about cultural integration or assimilation?
- **Meritocracy paradox**: Are lowered thresholds a "conditional privilege" or true equity?

3. Educational paradox
- **Dilemma between anti-sinicisation vs. socialisation**: Teaching in minority languages vs. preparing students for a standardised society.
- **Mismatch of expectations**: Education focuses on integration, but cultural practices remain distinct.
- **"Escaping the box"**: Students educated under different systems still face dominant societal norms in jobs and further education.
- * Only discover sinicisation in education, but not other realms of the society. (ethnic minorities celebrate festivals, rituals, practice living experiences and behaviours differently from Han majority in many ways.) Why?

05 Policy Recommendations

- **From access to capacity**: Shift from deficit-based assistance to empowerment and capacity-building, fostering de-labeling policies.
- **Extended support**: Go beyond Gaokao quotas with long-term interventions.
- **Infrastructure**: Improve internet access, teacher training, and digital education to close gaps.
- **Grassroots NGO collaboration**: Partner with local NGOs to tackle educational barriers like gender bias and financial constraints.

06 Conclusions

Limitations:
- No primary data from the stakeholders (minority students, domestic teachers, school administrators, Chinese policymakers) & empirical analysis.
- Restricted access to the most up-to-date database and evidences.

Future perspectives:
- **Deficit vs. empowerment discourse**: How can policies shift from framing ethnic minority education as compensatory to empowering students with holistic support?
- **Longitudinal study**: Future research should assess the long-term impact of preferential policies by tracking ethnic minority students' university and workplace integration, social mobility.
- **Role of digitalisation in bridging educational gaps**: AI and digital resources may provide more accessible learning opportunities, but issues of digital infrastructure in minority regions remain.
- **Alternative pathways**: eg. vocational education in providing equitable opportunities beyond academic-focused policies.

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