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## Inside the College Gate: Rural Students and Their Academic and Social Success

Ailei Xie

The great expansion of Chinese higher education has created more spaces in colleges and universities for students from rural communities. The proportion of rural students in higher education institutions increased, for example, from 48% in 2000, the third year in which China's government implemented policy initiatives to expand its higher education sector, to around 59% in 2012 (Sun 2013). Recent research suggests that the proportion of rural students in key universities of China, the most elite ones, has decreased steadily in the past 30 years, despite the growth of the rural college student population (Sun 2013). However, recent policy initiatives launched by China's central government have reversed this trend (Lu 2013; MoE China 2014). Key universities are being pushed to increase the number of their rural students by setting up special recruitment plans with admission quotas for rural students. The number of rural freshmen, as a result, has increased. For example, in 2012, the first year of the policy giving priority to students from rural communities was launched, the number of rural freshmen increased by around 10%, followed by over 8% and 11% in 2013 and 2014, respectively (Lu 2013).

Gaining admission to colleges and universities is the first step toward upward social mobility for rural students. Adjusting to higher education institutions constitutes the next critical one. The academic, financial, and social challenges that rural students will confront may generate more intensive pressures for them, cause them to question their identity, frustrate their academic aspirations, and weaken their commitment to the new institutions that they enter. These challenges may, therefore, lower their chances of success in navigating the college environment and integrating socially and academically at the university. Their success in colleges and universities, in turn, may shape their opportunities to accumulate valuable resources for employment upon graduation and long-term career success (Liu 2014; Stuber 2011).

The purpose of this issue of *Chinese Education and Society* is to take a look at the state of research on rural college students at universities in China. The articles collected for this issue examine the challenges that rural students face at universities and how these challenges are associated with their social and cultural characteristics.

The first article, written by Gao Yao, Liu Zhimin, and Fang Peng, is based on a survey carried out in 2010 at 20 higher education institutions of Jiangsu, an east China province near Shanghai. It examines the impact of family background on the academic performance of undergraduates by looking at quantitative data collected from over 3,500 participants. The authors conceptualize the influence of family as family capital measured by family income and the father's and mother's occupation status. Their measurement of academic performance covers such indicators as grade

point average earned at universities, the results of the National College English Test, and the chances of being appointed/selected as leaders of student bodies. Although the sampling strategies could still be questioned, the findings are still revealing. The data document constant academic achievement gaps between students from different social backgrounds, including rural and urban ones. The authors point out that rural students usually have lower academic performance, with place of birth serving as a good predictor. The findings also suggest that students from rural communities are less likely to be selected/appointed as leaders of student bodies at universities. The authors analyze the influence of so-called family capital and point out that family income rather than the father's and mother's occupation status is a better predictor of the academic performance of college students. Inspired by the work of their peers from the west, the authors argue a joint effect of family and school on the academic performance of college students at universities. They question the ability of higher education institutions to serve as a great equalizer and claim that parents from the upper and middle classes have successfully passed their advantages down to their children in education. They believe that parents from unprivileged backgrounds, including rural ones, should become more involved in their children's learning process and help them to achieve success in colleges and universities.

The second article, by Yu Xiulan, investigates the process of rural students' integration into college. The author uses a mixed research design with a small-scale survey followed by in-depth interviews. The process of rural students' integration into colleges and universities, most of which are located in cities, is conceptualized as a process of transition from rural to urban culture. When this happens, what are the strategies that rural students may employ? The author distinguishes between the strategies of (a) remaining committed to their rural culture, (b) distancing themselves from their rural backgrounds and coming to embrace urban culture, and (c) practicing a rural culture but with the intention to embrace urban culture. Based on the data collected, the author argues that the results of using any of these strategies are unsatisfactory. The reason, the author argues, is that the strategies may have the potential to bring confusion, conflicts, and struggles, which inevitably carry connotations of inferiority for certain cultures and mean either alienation from their own cultural traditions or the new culture. This may, as a result, become a barrier to their integration into college. The author calls for the creation of a more diversified college environment in which both the urban and rural culture can find a place. Rural cultural traditions, she argues, should be respected and valued at universities. Rural students, she suggests, should embrace their own culture tradition while borrowing the finest elements of urban culture.

The third article, written by Zhang Yiquan and Wang Yijie, is a qualitative study of a very small sample of rural students. This article presents a fair amount of detail about the process of how rural students integrate into college and the challenges that they confront. These challenges include independent learning, new teaching methods in the university classroom, higher English language requirements, extracurricular activities, and romance. The authors report that rural students have less advanced social skills. They have also less cultural capital, a term widely used in recent research, which becomes a barrier for them to establish social networks among their peers in urban areas. They also experience difficulties in dating because of feelings of shame about where they came from. Finally, when the time comes to graduate, they will find that they have not accumulated enough social and cultural capital for the job market.

The fourth article, by Hu Haili, is also based on an analysis of qualitative data. The author notes that the market reform has created a more stratified society in China. She argues that the

concept of class culture should be introduced to the analysis of rural students' college experience at universities. She sees colleges and universities as places with a middle-class culture and the process of rural students' integration at universities as a process of transforming from an insider of a lower-class culture to an insider of a middle-class culture. The author further suggests that, as a result of the transformation, a middle-class identity will develop for rural students. With the qualitative data that she collected, Hu points out barriers to this transformative process. For example, rural students have less economic capital to secure a middle-class lifestyle. They do not have the cultural capital that would ensure that they will be accepted in the social circle of their peers from middle-class families.

The fifth article, by Zhu Xinzhuo, Shi Junhua, and Dong Zhihui, is a case study of an elite university that is a member of the 985 universities. They examine how the family backgrounds of college students are associated with their chance of being selected/appointed to student body leadership, particularly in student unions. They sampled nearly 700 sophomores and juniors and over 120 student leaders. They asked about their family backgrounds, which were measured by their parents' occupations, family locations, family income, and parents' level of education. The findings of their research are simple but evident. Undergraduates from cities are more likely to be appointed/selected as leaders of student unions. Undergraduates from the middle and upper social classes are also more likely than their peers to be appointed/selected as the leaders of student unions. The results are similar to the findings of the first article discussed, where participants were sampled from over 20 higher education institutions, including both elite and non-elite ones in the Jiangsu province. This suggests that rural students are left behind socially in both types of institutions by their counterparts from cities. Unlike the authors of the first article, who claim that family capital, economic capital in particular, is associated with the chance of being appointed/selected for student leadership, Zhu et al. argue that cultural capital can also explain the gaps between students from different backgrounds, including urban and rural ones. They maintain that the such quality for student leaders, as leadership, social skills, and decision-making skills can hardly be ascribed in rural and lower-class families.

The sixth article, written by Li Fengliang, Hou Longlong, and Wen Dongmao, addresses the impact of parents' education on the social and academic lives of college students. The data were obtained from a national college graduate survey in 2003. Their findings suggest that the higher the level of the father's education, the greater chance their children have of passing the College English Test, a standard national English exam in China. The higher the level of the mother's education is, the more likely their children are to be appointed/selected as student leaders. Li and his colleagues' research is not directly associated with rural students. However, their analysis addressing the influence of family on the academic and social success of college students at universities is revealing. Because rural students are usually from families categorized in the lower class of Chinese society, the social roots of the academic and social success that Lin and colleague claim, therefore, are informative in understanding the intergroup differences between urban and rural students. They also raise the important issue of Communist Party of China membership, which is usually seen by college students as capital for a job search upon graduation.

These selected articles present the state-of-the-art of research in China about students from rural and less affluent backgrounds at colleges and universities. They document a constant pattern indicating that rural students in higher education institutions are left behind academically and socially by their peers from cities. The articles also look for explanations for these intergroup differences. These explanations include (a) family capital deficiency, as rural students have less

access to capital in different forms, such as human, economic, and cultural capital, which can translate into lower levels of academic and social preparation for colleges, and (b) cultural cringe, a phenomenon in which people from rural origins suffer a sense of embarrassment caused by feeling that their rural culture is inferior to the urban culture, which brings a painful dislocation between an old and a newly developing identity and barriers to integration at universities. Both lines of research challenge the vision that universities can serve as a great equalizer and maintain that they have, in fact, reproduced inequalities.

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