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Fairness in Admission: Voices from Rural Chinese Female Students in Selective Universities in Chinese Mainland

Abstract As the Chinese mainland has transitioned from elite to mass higher education, the race to attend university has escalated to become a race to attend selective universities. This study focuses on rural female university students and explores how they make sense of their higher education admission experiences. We rationalize that the inquiry into fairness is crystallized through examining rural female students' voices, which remain largely marginalized from the literature. Drawing from in-depth interviews with 22 rural female undergraduates from five selective universities in northern China, we focus on their perspectives towards three key issues in higher education admission: entrance exams, region-based quotas that put them at distinct disadvantages, and new reform initiatives.

Keywords Chinese higher education, reform and fairness, university admission, well-roundedness, rural female students

Introduction

Higher education in Asia has experienced tremendous development over the past few decades, and is now considered one of the regions producing high level human capital. The Chinese mainland has recently emerged as a new giant in higher education. In 1999, a series of national level policies were instituted to

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promote China's transition from elite to mass higher education by drastically increasing university enrollment. As a result, the current Chinese higher education expansion is unprecedented in its magnitude both within China and in global terms. Data from the Chinese Ministry of Education indicates that from 1999 to 2014, total undergraduate enrollment in higher education institutions increased from four million to slightly under 25 million (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2000, 2015), and higher education in China has transitioned from an elite to a mass undertaking.

In the aftermath of this transition to mass higher education, institutions in China have become increasingly stratified. Universities are now categorized by tiers with Tier 1 universities including 96 national and provincial key universities designated by the central government (Li, Whalley, Zhang, & Zhao, 2011). These universities get special funding from the central government and their own provinces, and attract the most competitive students. Tier 2 universities usually get less competitive students compared to Tier 1 universities. Tier 2 universities mostly receive funding from their provincial governments.

With the expansion and stratification, the race to attend university has escalated to a race to attend Tier 1 universities. This study focuses on students' experiences of getting into Tier 1 universities in China. Historically, education in general and higher education in particular, has been the quintessential vehicle for upward social mobility for Chinese students from humble beginnings (Hannum & Wang, 2006). This is especially so for students from rural backgrounds, as defined by their *hukou* status. The *hukou* system, as the internal residence system is commonly known, categorizes Chinese people according to urban or rural status, and ties access to services and benefits to this *hukou* status. Most rural students move their *hukou* temporarily to the place where their institution of higher learning is located, often in the cities. In this study, we define rural students as those with rural *hukou* before university, as we reason that it is their experiences prior to university that are most relevant to their perspectives on higher education admission.

Rural Chinese people are excluded from many social and educational benefits that their urban counterparts enjoy (Wang & Zuo, 1999; Wang, 2005). However, being admitted into universities provides a unique route for rural students to move to urban areas. In addition, due to the deeply-entrenched patriarchy in rural China (Gaetano & Jacka, 2004; Ma, 2011), rural females are severely under-represented in Chinese universities. Ma (2010) shows that the seeming

gender parity in postsecondary education in China only applies to urban students, and rural female students' underrepresentation in Chinese universities, particularly elite ones, is serious. For example, a survey by Liu (as cited in Ma, 2010) on new entrants at Peking University in 2005 shows that rural females only constitute 4.2 % of its student population (p. 40).

However, research is quite scarce about rural female university students in China. The few articles written about their lives typically follow the deficit model to either blame the students or blame rural culture (Ma, 2011), silencing the voices of rural female students. It is for this reason that we choose to focus on rural female university students, their voices and perspectives, on the process of university admission in China. We emphasize rural female students' agency in navigating their university admission process, while aiming to dig deep into the broad structural and cultural frameworks, to further understand their experiences and sources of their disadvantages.

Higher education entrance examination scores play an exceptionally important role in China. The exam is called *gaokao* in Mandarin Chinese. For rural female students, what does *gaokao* mean to them? To what extent does *gaokao* contribute to the fairness of admission, and for that matter, change their own life trajectory? In addition to *gaokao* scores, university admission is connected with one's region in China. In particular, students in major cities are more likely to get into selective universities. How do rural female university students understand the policies that grant privilege to students from major cities? Now, as the educational system in China has been influenced by the Western notion of "well-rounded" education (Lareau, 2003; Stevens, 2009; Zhao, 2007), the exclusive focus on test scores is questioned. Chinese higher education institutions attempt to reform in the direction of admitting and educating more "well-rounded" students. How do rural female students view these new initiatives?

In what follows, we present a literature review in four parts. The first part introduces the *hukou* policy that defines the rural and urban population; the second part discusses rural women's disadvantaged experiences under the disguise of the "gender egalitarianism" policy ushered in in the context of contemporary Chinese society; the third part explores the role of *gaokao* in higher education admission in China in the broad context of standardized testing, and the new reform initiatives aiming to move beyond the exclusive significance of *gaokao*; the fourth part draws from cultural capital theory and proposes that

this theoretical framework will advance our understanding of these rural female students' experiences and the rationale for *hukou*-based college admission system in China. We draw data from multiple sources, including national statistics on higher education admission in China, institutional admission data from Tsinghua University—one of the top two elite universities in China—and in-depth interviews with 22 rural female students across five university campuses.

***Hukou*, Quota, and Higher Education Admission**

The Chinese government established the *hukou* system during the 1950s to regulate Chinese citizens' "geographical mobility through a system of migration permits and recruitment and enrolment certificates" (Chan & Zhang, 1999, p. 820). Although rural *hukou* status guarantees access to the land, it disadvantages rural residents with regards to other social benefits, such as education, housing, and medical care (Meng, 2001; Wang & Zuo, 1999; Wang, 2005). One's *hukou* status was inherited from one's mother until 1998 when the Chinese State Council approved a new policy to allow the child to inherit it from either side of the parents (Chan & Zhang, 1999). Since *hukou* is determined by blood rather than place of birth, this system is often referred to as "the Chinese version of racism" (Han, 2010), keeping rural people on the lowest rung of the social ladder. Dong Han (2010) states that China's development of industrialization and modernization resulted in a "racialization" of its rural population "unique to the Chinese context" (p. 594). Racialization in China, as Han argues, is primarily based on *hukou*, the politically imposed regulation that arbitrarily segregates Chinese people into a rural/urban binary.

Since 2002, when President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao came to power, a series of reforms were implemented to address long-standing disadvantages faced by the rural population. Under President Hu's slogan of establishing a "harmonious society," the new leadership removed rural agricultural taxes, funded modest medical insurance for farmers, and sponsored rural education (Whyte, 2010). Despite the improved conditions, institutional discrimination for people with rural *hukou* is still strong (Whyte, 2010; Hu & Salazar, 2008). For example, many urban public schools only recruit students from their local school districts. Some give a limited quota to students from outside the local school district while charging sponsorship fees. This institutionalized discrimination

excludes most students with rural *hukou* from urban public schools and pushes them to receive education either in rural public schools or urban schools for rural migrants’ children, which are generally not as well-equipped and funded as their urban counterparts (Hannum & Wang, 2006; Han, 2010).

In terms of higher education opportunities, studies have found that the chance for a student living in an urban area to go to a Tier 1 institution is 1.48 times higher than for a rural student (Ding, 2007). Urban *hukou* is also geographically-specific. There are 23 provinces, four municipalities and five autonomous regions in the Chinese mainland. Each year, universities in each region, following the guidelines from the central government, assign admission quotas to each geographic area at the level of province, municipality or autonomous region. Students within each region are then selected based on their *gaokao* scores. Universities and colleges tend to give more quotas to the region where they are located. However, the distribution of universities in general, and selective universities in particular, are far from equal geographically: Most Tier 1 institutions are concentrated in major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai and southeastern coastal areas (Yang, 2007). As such, major cities tend to have higher admission rates to selective colleges. Here admission rates refer to the number of students admitted divided by the number of applicants. Table 1 shows the admission data of Tier 1 institutions from 2009 to 2011.

Table 1 Higher Education Admission Rates by Region in the Chinese Mainland (2009—2011)

Regions	Total Admission Rate				Admission Rate to Tier 1 Universities			
	2009	2010	2011	Average	2009	2010	2011	Average
Beijing	0.80	0.85	0.86	0.84	0.17	0.24	0.24	0.22
Tianjin	0.79	0.85	0.90	0.85	0.19	0.21	0.23	0.21
Shanghai	0.84	0.85	0.89	0.86	0.18	0.19	0.20	0.19
Qinghai	0.73	0.75	0.80	0.76	0.13	0.14	0.14	0.14
Hainan	0.81	0.89	0.93	0.88	0.12	0.13	0.14	0.13
Jilin	0.70	0.77	0.79	0.75	0.12	0.13	0.14	0.13
Zhejiang	0.83	0.84	0.86	0.84	0.09	0.13	n/a	0.11
Shandong	0.74	0.80	0.87	0.80	0.07	0.13	0.15	0.11
Xinjiang	0.60	0.71	0.77	0.69	0.10	0.10	0.13	0.11
Heilongjiang	0.84	0.91	0.87	0.87	0.07	0.09	0.09	0.09

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Regions	Total Admission Rate				Admission Rate to Tier 1 Universities			
	2009	2010	2011	Average	2009	2010	2011	Average
Inner Mongolia	0.71	0.80	0.88	0.80	0.07	n/a	0.10	0.09
Jiangsu	0.71	0.80	0.82	0.78	0.08	0.08	0.09	0.09
Guizhou	0.54	0.64	0.76	0.64	0.06	0.10	0.12	0.09
Liaoning	0.79	0.87	0.82	0.83	0.06	n/a	0.11	0.08
Fujian	0.70	0.78	0.87	0.78	0.06	0.07	0.10	0.08
Chongqing	0.73	0.79	0.76	0.76	0.08	0.09	0.08	0.08
Jiangxi	0.66	0.70	0.77	0.71	0.07	0.07	0.08	0.08
Shaanxi	0.54	0.60	0.67	0.60	0.07	0.08	0.09	0.08
Guangdong	0.70	0.78	0.83	0.77	0.06	0.07	0.07	0.07
Ningxia	0.62	0.65	0.70	0.66	0.04	0.11	0.07	0.07
Anhui	0.55	0.67	0.77	0.66	0.06	0.07	0.08	0.07
Hubei	0.62	0.67	0.70	0.66	0.05	0.06	0.10	0.07
Yunnan	0.63	0.75	0.80	0.73	0.01	0.08	0.08	0.06
Hebei	0.65	0.69	0.84	0.73	0.04	0.07	0.07	0.06
Guangxi	0.66	0.71	0.76	0.71	0.05	0.06	0.07	0.06
Gansu	0.55	0.62	0.68	0.62	0.06	0.06	0.06	0.06
Hunan	0.57	0.81	0.86	0.75	0.05	0.06	0.05	0.05
Sichuan	0.60	0.70	0.72	0.67	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.05
Shanxi	0.49	0.61	0.72	0.61	0.03	0.06	0.07	0.05
Tibet	0.58	0.59	0.60	0.59	0.06	0.05	0.05	0.05
Henan	0.58	0.65	0.71	0.65	0.04	0.04	0.05	0.04

Note. Data compiled by the authors from China Education Online. (n.d.). 高考报名人数与录取率 [National College Exam enrollment report]. Retrieved January 27, 2016, from <http://www.eol.cn/html/g/report/2015/report1total.shtml>; Total admission rate includes admission to any postsecondary institutions, including two to four year programs.

Table 1 shows that such major cities as Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin consistently had much higher admission rates to Tier 1 institutions than other areas. Specifically, in 2011, close to a quarter of students from Beijing were admitted to Tier 1 institutions, much higher than the rest of the country, a majority of which are rural areas.

This admission privilege associated with major cities is even more pronounced for elite universities, such as Tsinghua University. Table 2 lists the admission information for Tsinghua University—dubbed as China's MIT—for 2011. The table shows that the admission rate for students with Beijing *hukou* is higher than

for students anywhere else in China.

Table 2 Regional Admission Rates to Tsinghua University in 2011

Regions	Number of Students Admitted	Total Participating in <i>Gaokao</i>	Rate
Beijing	339	70,800	0.479%
Shanghai	85	61,200	0.139%
Tianjin	68	64,600	0.105%
Qinghai	23	38,000	0.061%
Liaoning	127	256,000	0.050%
Tibet	9	18,000	0.050%
Jilin	77	159,000	0.048%
Heilongjiang	91	208,000	0.044%
Zhejiang	107	299,000	0.036%
Hunan	134	378,000	0.035%
Ningxia	20	60,000	0.033%
Chongqing	62	216,400	0.029%
Jiangsu	139	500,000	0.028%
Fujian	71	267,100	0.027%
Shaanxi	98	383,000	0.026%
Hainan	14	54,000	0.026%
Jiangxi	73	288,600	0.025%
Inner Mongolia	51	205,700	0.025%
Shanxi	81	340,000	0.024%
Shandong	132	576,300	0.023%
Hubei	107	484,000	0.022%
Xinjiang	33	147,700	0.022%
Sichuan	106	514,300	0.021%
Guizhou	52	243,000	0.021%
Hebei	98	485,000	0.020%
Anhui	102	540,000	0.019%
Yunnan	41	224,000	0.018%
Guangxi	49	292,000	0.017%
Henan	135	855,400	0.016%
Guangdong	99	655,000	0.015%
Gansu	44	297,000	0.015%

Note. Data compiled by the authors from the Office of Admission at Tsinghua University.

Gender Egalitarianism, Gender Oppression and Higher Education as a Life Changing Opportunity for Rural Female Students

Since the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, the Chinese government has rigorously preached gender egalitarianism following Chairman Mao's slogan "Women can hold up half the sky." This policy stipulated that women have equal rights to men. Since then, the status of Chinese women has improved in comparison with their ancestors. They have been freed from foot binding, liberated from enclosed familial doors, given "the right to choose their own marriage partners and to demand a divorce" (Honig & Hershatter, 1988, p. 3), and have access to education and employment. However, they have never gained *de facto* equality with men. Liu and Carpenter (2005) contend that the egalitarian policy of the Chinese socialist government "portrayed everyone equally as a 'nut' or a 'bolt' in the giant 'revolutionary machine' on the surface," but it actually "disregarded the historically unequal social status of women and gender-biased perceptions" and concealed "sexism ... lurked below the surface of the Chinese patriarchal political system" (p. 280).

Rural women still suffer gender oppression or violence. Recent literature has noted the high suicide rate of rural women in China. As illustrated by Hyeon Jung Lee (2014), "the [suicide] rate for rural Chinese women is 38.8 per 100,000, compared with 27.5 for rural men, 10.7 for urban women, and 9.9 for urban men" (p. 26). Lee's (2014) ethnographic study of female suicide in villages in northern China pinpoints the fact that some rural women "prefer dying to living meaninglessly" (p. 42) that is, living with no dignity and value. Scholars have investigated the root causes of the suffering of rural Chinese women. Jianghong Li (2005) regards the "patrilineal family system" as "a fundamental source" of rural Chinese women's subordination because it "serves to limit women's autonomy" (p. 235). According to Li (2005), most rural Chinese women have to live in extended households with their in-laws. The in-laws have control over "the familial decision-making process," "resource allocation," and the "well-being of daughters-in-law particularly in terms of care and nutrition for daughters-in-law during pregnancy and after birth" (p. 235). These traditional family dynamics make rural women outsiders in their natal family and devalued in their husband's family. Although in an influential work (2009) Yunxiang Yan discusses the increasing individualization of Chinese societies and how it has, to

some extent, changed the previous rural household structure, which in turn, has afforded more space and liberty for rural women, this has not fundamentally changed their marginalized positions. Even for those who are able to join the migrant leagues in the urban areas to seek non-agricultural employment, existing research already shows that they are subject to renewed marginalization, discrimination and demeaning social statuses, based on their rural identity (Jacka & Gaetano, 2004; Ma, 2011).

In this context, higher education seems to be a key for rural females to change their life course. Standardized tests such as the *gaokao* in China provide a relatively objective yardstick for measurement and help instill a deep belief in education and exams being the vehicle for social mobility. The next section introduces the historical origins and backgrounds of the *gaokao* and recent new initiatives.

Gaokao and the New Initiatives for Higher Education Admission in China

Almost all Chinese students have to take the higher education entrance exam—*gaokao*—in order to enroll in universities or colleges. It is the single most important factor in higher education admission. If a student has the highest score in *gaokao* in one's province, he or she is guaranteed a place in the most prestigious university in China. Although higher education admission is contingent upon quotas assigned to each region/province, each region resorts to *gaokao* scores to select students. Thus, *gaokao* is one of the most significant life events in almost every Chinese student's life. The exam usually takes place annually in June, and it includes common components of Chinese, math and English for both science- and arts-track students¹. In addition to the above three common components, for science-track students, there is a comprehensive exam in science subjects, including physics, chemistry and biology; for arts-track students, there is a comprehensive exam in the humanities, including history, political science, and geography.

Testing as the exclusive mechanism for selecting talents has deep historical and cultural origins in China. China has the world's oldest standardized tests, the

¹ High school students in China are tracked as either science or arts students in Grade 10 or 11. The track choices are largely up to individual students and their families.

Imperial Examination System, lasting about 1,300 years. The Imperial Examination System gradually developed and solidified itself as a civil servant exam, selecting government officials (Suen & Yu, 2006). The exam was based on how much and how deeply a candidate understood the Confucian classics (Grigorenko, Jarvin, Niu, & Preiss, 2008). Societies that are influenced by Confucian culture share this commonality of the importance of testing (Niu, 2007). For example, Japan and South Korea also have the tradition of relying exclusively on test scores in selecting talents.

The high stakes of testing have been subject to criticism in China. The main concern is that the test-oriented education system produces a syndrome termed “high test scores, low abilities” (Suen & Yu, 2006). China has been seeking various reforms in the past decade to diversify its higher education admission mechanisms, in an effort to produce “well-rounded” talents. Starting from 2003, Chinese Ministry of Education has initiated the Independent Admission System at 22 elite universities (Liu & Zhu, 2015). The new system allows universities to admit their students through an independent selection process, which to some extent liberates students from the *gaokao* scores. However, the new system only applies to no more than 5% of their student population at those elite universities. That is, the large majority of students in China are still subject to the traditional *gaokao* system.

The notion of well-rounded education is related to the concept of the “whole child,” the development of children in all aspects including academic, athletic, musical, artistic, and social skills (Zhao, 2007). However, the operationalization of well-roundedness is often skewed towards some skills/abilities, while neglecting or rendering insignificant other abilities. Specifically, musical and artistic developments are valued as recognizable assets in addition to traditional academic core subjects. For example, in Tsinghua University, the specially admitted students with artistic backgrounds can have their *gaokao* scores up to 60 points lower than regularly admitted students (Tsinghua University, 2011). This new initiative has trickled down to influence the lives of students and their families. Sometimes as early as kindergarten, kids’ schedules are packed with various kinds of classes meant to cultivate their talents in such fields as foreign language, music, and arts. These activities are rarely free, and often require the extra resources of parents to invest in their children. This has potentially created a new source of stratification and inequality in education attainment. Students from rural poor backgrounds are not likely to be trained in classical arts or

modern dance. As a result, these new opportunities for university admission are much less relevant to them, and therefore create additional inequalities between rural students and urban students. Rural females, in particular, have less access to extracurricular activities that require additional family investment in their development.

Cultural Capital and the Experiences of Rural Female University Students

We propose that the theory of cultural capital and its linkage with education can help understand the experiences of rural female students in Chinese universities.

Cultural capital, a term coined by Pierre Bourdieu (1977), includes linguistic competence, informal knowledge about school, and a general understanding of the dominant culture (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), which are passed on primarily at home and in other social settings. Most research studying how cultural capital influences educational outcomes focuses on the family context, particularly socioeconomic status, and this is consistent with Bourdieu's notion that economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital are convertible (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Kaufman & Gabler, 2004; Lareau & Weininger, 2003). In studies of how cultural capital influences educational outcomes, researchers highlight the processes by which children from well-to-do families are equipped with knowledge, attitudes and "habitus," in Bourdieu's term, so that they can navigate educational institutions with comfort and familiarity (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). This is especially so in higher education institutions, which are dominated by and transmit the dominant culture. Bourdieu's insight on cultural capital has widely influenced studies of disadvantaged students in higher education in the West. Studies of those who are the first of their family to go to university—first-generation university students—have consistently found that these students are less likely to enroll in selective institutions, compared to students whose parents have a university education. These first-generation university students also have more difficulty in making the transition to university, and are found to be less comfortable when interacting with faculty and administrators who seem to be from a different cultural world than them (Choy, 2001; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996).

Some sociologists have distinguished between dominant and non-dominant cultural capital (Lareau & Lamont, 1988; Carter, 2003). However, most of the literature neglects non-dominant cultural capital and focuses instead on the cultural capital associated with the most powerful and the privileged. We propose that in China, urban-rural divide and geographic differences in general are keys to understanding the privileges associated with dominant and non-dominant cultural capital. Specifically, urban culture is dominant in China (Li, 2010; Wu, 2008). Moreover, public discourses, including scholarship and media, characterize rural people as “low quality,” and particularly degrade rural women as ignorant and backward (Wang, 2005; Ma, 2011). Here quality refers to a host of attributes, including education, culture, morality, manners, psychology, and genetics (Murphy, 2004). Jacka (2006) describes this discourse of hierarchy of people linked with an urban-rural divide and more generally, geographic spaces as a “developmental map of moral geography,” where the top of the hierarchy is major cities characterized by rapid modernization, and rural people, particularly rural women, lie at the bottom of the hierarchy.

The recent reform initiatives in higher education admission attempting to traverse test scores and aiming for “well-rounded” talents could find its roots in cultural capital too. Bourdieu’s (1977) notion of high-brow cultural capital in French society focuses on the important role of knowledge in high-brow arts and humanities for educational attainment. As Bourdieu points out, the cultivation of high-brow cultural capital is closely tied with social class and constitutes the key mechanism for upper class parents to transmit their privileges to their children. Annette Lareau’s influential book *Unequal Childhoods: Race, Class, and Family Life* (2003) provides a vivid portrait of how middle class parents raise their children in the US. They pack their children’s schedules with structured activities outside regular school hours, including music class, art class, and athletic games, in order to develop their children in a well-rounded way. Lareau terms this as “concerted cultivation.” Globalization and mass media have helped spread “concerted cultivation” to many upper- and middle-class Chinese urban families. Due to the general shortage of resources in rural families that limit rural kids’ access to high-brow cultural capital, the new initiatives in higher education admission in China have further widened the gap between urban and rural families. This disadvantage particularly impacts rural female students who have even less access to family resources than their male counterparts.

Other than extracurricular activities and special talents in music and arts,

higher education admission reforms in China also target language and communication skills. The way people speak and what and how they communicate are key elements of what Bourdieu terms as “habitus” (Bourdieu, 1977), “a sense of what is comfortable or what is natural” (Lareau, 2003, p. 275). The sense of what is comfortable is rooted in one’s socialization experience, which is ultimately linked with social backgrounds. In the UK, Oxford and Cambridge require an interview process as part of higher education admission. Although Oxford and Cambridge are pretty exceptional in requiring an interview process among British universities (Zimdars, Sullivan, & Heath, 2009), Chinese universities are now starting to adopt interviews as part of the reform initiatives. Starting in 2003, several elite universities in China now require on-site interviews that emphasize students’ social and public speaking skills. These skill sets, though important, are usually absent from the regular curriculum in Chinese high schools, rural schools in particular (Yang, 2007). Students in major cities and from well-to-do families are more likely to have exposure and opportunity to foster their presentation and social skills than students from rural and poor families (Wu, 2008; Yang, 2007).

Methodology

To recruit our participants, we first posted recruitment advertisement to campus websites of two universities that we had access to. Then we asked help from faculty and staff who were working in these five universities to send our recruitment emails to their students so some of their students could volunteer to participate in this research. Finally we used the snowball sampling technique and asked each participant who already attended the interview to recommend anyone who may be a potential participant.

We interviewed 22 rural female university students in China to explore how they viewed their experiences in the *gaokao*, their attitudes towards higher education admission policies, and the new direction towards well-roundedness in higher education admission in China. Altogether, we conducted 38 in-depth interviews with 22 participants individually: two interviews with 16 participants, and one interview with six participants. We did not conduct the second interviews with six of the 22 students because our major questions had been asked at the first interviews. The second round of interviews not only probed

questions not answered during the first, but also elicited clarification and elaboration about specific topics which did not get adequately addressed in the first interviews.

Each interview lasted between 1.5 and three hours. All the interviewees were given pseudonyms to protect their identity. All the interviews were conducted face to face, and at places of our participants’ choice, which were mainly on or close to their campuses. Since Mandarin Chinese is the language that all of our participants speak most proficiently, we conducted all the interviews in Mandarin Chinese and transcribed them in Chinese as well. In the quotes that we subsequently used in our findings, we translated them into English.

Our participants were diverse in terms of their academic backgrounds. Although all our 22 participants were from selective institutions, five of them were from the two most elite universities in China, 13 were from the two national key universities in Beijing, and four were from a provincial university in northern China. All the five universities are public institutions. In addition, six participants failed their *gaokao*, and had to repeat their high school senior years to retake the exam. Table 3 shows the detailed information.

Table 3 Descriptive Information of Participants

Name	Ethnicity	Institution	Major	Year
Zuo	Han	A provincial university	Chemistry	Sophomore
Hua	Han	A national university	Geology	Sophomore
Gai	Han	A provincial university	Information Management and Information Systems	Junior
Tian	Han	A most elite university	English	Senior
Jizhu	Tujia	A national key university	Ethnic Minority Language and Literature	Senior
Shaoshi	Han	A national key university	Chinese	Sophomore
Wan	Manchu	A national key university	Finance	Senior
Chen	Han	A provincial university	Information Management and Information Systems	Junior
Xue	Han	A national key university	Chemistry	Junior
Rang	Han	A most elite university	Broadcasting and television	Senior
Ying	Mongol	A most elite	Geology	Sophomore

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Name	Ethnicity	Institution	Major	Year
Qiao	Tujia	A national key university	Political Science	Senior
Jun	Han	A national key university	Finance	Senior
Cheng	Han	A national key university	Ethnic Minority Language and Literature	Senior
Tui	Han	A most elite university	Chinese	Junior
Yuqin	Han	A national key university	Chemistry	Junior
Xianzhi	Han	A most elite university	Nuclear Engineering and Nuclear Technology	Sophomore
Chunxia	Hui	A provincial university	Chemistry	Sophomore
Linchu	Buyei	A national key university	Finance	Senior
Cui	Han	A national key university	English	Sophomore
Shi	Han	A most elite university	Nuclear Engineering and Nuclear Technology	Sophomore
Buxue	Hani	A national key university	International Economics and Trade	Senior

We utilized feminist qualitative research methodology, because we intend to focus on how these students make sense of their experiences in navigating the university admission process in China. Feminist research methods are especially suitable for our study on rural female students. As DeVault and Gross (2007) contend, feminist research methods, particularly interviewing, “have been strongly linked to social justice concerns and projects and the idea of bringing forward neglected voices” (p. 176). In a society such as China where patriarchy and male supremacy are deeply-entrenched, women, and rural women in particular, are deprived of their voices. As such, we aim to bring their marginalized or neglected voices into the center of this study by treating them as the experts in their own lives and opening up spaces for them “to represent their experiences in their own voices” (Cuádras & Uttal, 1999, p. 160).

A co-author of this study, who conducted all the interviews, was a former rural female university student in China. She usually let the respondents know this part of her biography, to bridge the gap between the researcher and the interviewees. We used semi-structured interviews to guide our interviewees through a series of questions, as well as give them space to explore their true thoughts and

reflections in a way that is not entirely bound by our questions. Through these questions, students had the opportunity to reflect on their experiences in navigating precollege education leading to *gaokao*, college admission, and their thoughts on new reform initiatives in higher education in China.

DeVault (1990) reminds us that feminist methods are “distinctive approaches to subverting the established procedures of disciplinary practice tied to the agendas of the powerful” (Smith as cited in DeVault, 1990, p. 96). Specifically, we drew upon the feminist method of “active listening” (DeVault & Gross, 2007, p. 182) to listen very carefully to the place “where standard vocabulary is inadequate, and where a respondent tries to speak from experience and find language wanting” (DeVault, 1990, p. 103), and designed interview questions to pursue further. We also gave attention to the subtle cues, tones, intonation, and silence as well as their emotional expressions (anger, excitement, sadness, and happiness, etc.) during each interview, because these symbols might carry “meanings [that] might lie beyond explicit speech” (DeVault & Gross, 2007, p. 183) and teach us about women’s voices that might have been belied by standard verbal language.

We hand coded the data. We read and reread the transcripts carefully, line by line and word for word, and labelled words, phrases, sentences or passages that were repeated, surprising, sounded important for the interviewee based on her facial expressions, vocal intonations, or words used. We then looked for connections among codes, grouped these codes and developed common themes. Our analysis is based on conceptualizing the common themes developed from the data by using the theory of cultural capital and feminist theories of gender, as well as how the common themes challenge, complement or enrich these theories or current literature relevant to rural female students in China.

Findings

“Without My Mom, I Would not Have Entered the University”

Most participants in our study shared the view that as rural females, their only way out was to pass *gaokao* and enter a good university. However, their odds were severe, often directly from their own families. Several participants recounted stories of gender discrimination at home. Fortunately, they often have strong support from their mothers.

According to Hua, her father disliked her ever since she was born, because he expected a boy after Hua's older sister was born. From Hua's perspective, her father held the "conservative" or "feudal" view that girls should focus on housework such as cooking rather than on receiving education, so he strongly objected to her going to school, and sometimes slapped her because of her insistence on pursuing education. Yet Hua's mother understood how hard it was for Hua to live in the rural area if Hua could not receive education and get into a university, so she strongly supported her, and in Hua's words, "always quarreled with my father for supporting me going to school" (personal communication, July 8, 2011).

Xue has the family support to receive education, yet she still experienced gender bias directly from her dad who constantly doubted the value of educating her. Xue was the fourth child of her parents and has two older brothers and one older sister. Her older sister had to drop out of school due to financial difficulty. This did not happen to Xue because she was the youngest in the family and her older sister was willing to earn money to pay for her education. Even though her parents let her go to school, according to Xue, her father still had the gender bias, and in Xue's words, "regardless how much education I receive, I will surely be a family outsider after marriage" (personal communication, September 10, 2011). However, her mom instilled hope and confidence in her being the youngest child who could change her life through education.

As the second daughter of her family, Tian encountered gender discrimination as early as when she was in her mother's womb and was found out to be a girl through ultrasound. Her father once wanted to abort her, but her paternal grandma said that they could always have a third try to have a boy because they were wealthy enough to afford the fines and raise more children (luckily after Tian her parents gave birth to Tian's younger brother). Tian's family was the wealthiest among all our participants. Her father was running a private school and a clinic in the village. Because of her well-off family, Tian could enter the best high school in the city near to her home. Still, she experienced daily gender discrimination from her father who constantly ridiculed her as "lazy," "parasitic," and "unladylike" because Tian did not like to do housework, which her father expected her to do. According to Tian, the gender discrimination pushed her to study hard to get into a university, so she could escape her oppressive home.

In Jizhu's case, her father failed in doing business many times and constantly quarreled with her mother. When Jizhu was in Grade 5, her family was in such

abject poverty that her mother had to sell blood to pay for the school fees of Jizhu and her younger brother. Her mother constantly taught Jizhu such things as “As a woman, you must be able to support yourself. If you cannot do so, but always rely on other people, nobody will love and respect you” (personal communication, September 8, 2011). Jizhu’s mother saw getting into a university would provide Jizhu with the best way to support herself, so she strongly supported her education. As Jizhu commented powerfully, “Without my mom, I would not have entered the university. I would not have any prospect, either” (personal communication, September 8, 2011).

Therefore, in spite of severe gender discrimination, these rural female students benefited from the strong support of their mothers, who were often not educated themselves and the very victims of the patriarchal system. Nevertheless, their mothers recognize the liberating power of education for their daughters not to repeat their life tragedy, although that means their daughters have to go through the grueling process of Gaokao, the college entrance examination that determines the college access.

Gaokao: A Double-Edged Sword for Rural Female Students

Apparently, the *gaokao* is widely regarded as a key channel for upward mobility for rural female students. This is especially significant for China today, where rampant corruption penetrates nearly every domain of competition (Bian & Logan, 1996; Wang, 2005; Wu, 2008). Almost all participants in our study shared the view that test scores provide the unequivocal means of evaluation that was able to prevent corruption effectively.

As the *gaokao* plays such a critical role in shaping the life chances of these rural female students, many of them suffered enormous stress. Some cried when they performed poorly during those countless prep tests before *gaokao*; some had insomnia as a result of anxiety and stress for a good score; some were upset and angry that one test is determining their life. Zuo, for example, felt so stressed at the first *gaokao* that she failed it. So she had to repeat the 12th Grade and take *gaokao* again. As she said,

The first year when I took *gaokao* I was too nervous. Unfortunately I was sick at that time too. So I did not do well. I had to repeat one year in high school. The second year when I took *gaokao*, I adjusted my mood and treated it just as a common exam. So I

performed normally the second time. (personal communication, August 28, 2011)

Some students also expressed the sense that they had to compromise their own thoughts and ideas in order to play it safe and get high scores in the *gaokao*. This is especially evident in writing essays. As Yuqin stated:

You have to write appropriately for *gaokao* essays. You cannot express your own independent thoughts. *Gaokao* does not welcome innovative ideas. No extreme ideas, no rebellious thoughts, as this will make the graders that review your essays uncomfortable and then you will get penalized with a lower score. (personal communication, August 24, 2011)

Yuqin understood that this danger of punishment was even more to be feared for her as a rural woman because passing the *gaokao* to enter university was the only way of survival for her. She fell severely sick and was almost paralyzed when she was 13 years old. Her mother told her that she could not survive in rural areas because of her physical condition, which meant she could not do hard labor such as farming. She was left no way but to study very hard in order to pass *gaokao* to enter university/college. Passing the *gaokao*, therefore, provided her the only way for survival. As she said with tears, “I had no other way out. Really this is the reality. As a rural girl, I didn’t have any other way except for getting to university” (personal communication, August 24, 2011).

Some participants in our study reported that this system inhibited their development of interests other than taking tests. Lacking the access to the dominant cultural capital in that these rural female students are not at all familiar with the university setting, and this has created a disconnect between pre-university education and university education, as the latter does require a lot of independent learning and creative thinking. Some participants expressed a sense of loss after taking the *gaokao*. They felt that their prior knowledge acquired for the *gaokao* was not relevant to their university studies, and they were not sure what they were interested in. Gai articulated this feeling of loss:

The test-oriented education provides me a key to enter university, but the knowledge I obtained to study for the *gaokao* seems useless for my current university life and future development. Right now I feel very lost about my life here [at university], as I am not

sure what I am interested in. (personal communication, September 12, 2011)

Related to the feeling of loss after entering university, some participants expressed a certain sense of nostalgia as they reflected on their high school years working towards the *gaokao*. Jizhu noted: “The *gaokao* gave me a sense of purpose and inspired me to work hard for the goal. But after this goal was fulfilled, I lost that drive. Now I kinda miss it” (personal communication, September 8, 2011).

The sense of purpose gave them meaning for that stage of life. As Tui said: “Experiencing the *gaokao* provides me an important sense of identification and belonging. I know where I stand from the scores I got from the *gaokao*, what kind of universities I can go to. I know who I am from this experience” (personal communication, September 16, 2011).

The loss of purpose and drive is in the context of the higher education environment, which is completely different from the test-oriented precollege life. Cheng commented:

High school and college are totally different worlds. The goal of high school learning is to gain high scores in the *gaokao*. The goal is clear and definitive. I like it. But in college, you have to set new goals for yourself and plan accordingly. I still have not got used to this self-directed life style.... (personal communication, August 23, 2011)

Apparently, higher education requires a different mode of learning that demands self-initiative and independent thinking, concepts that are alien to rural female students in our study. As Chinese precollege education is largely geared towards the *gaokao*, this finding may indicate one of the unintended negative consequences of the *gaokao*.

Disempowerment by Quota-Based Admission Policy and Agency for Making Changes

The region-based quota system puts rural students at salient disadvantages, while giving students from major cities, such as Beijing or Shanghai where universities are concentrated, easier access to higher education admission. Our data presents diverse voices from rural female students regarding this issue. Their views range from anger and yearning for change, to acknowledgment of the unfairness while

feeling unable to change. They all expressed a sense of powerlessness before the predetermined quota system, yet at the same time, they recognized that their hard work could help them become the best student they could be, from which they also derived agency to make changes to their lives.

Some participants expressed their feeling that the quota-based admission system was totally unfair and unacceptable. According to them, students in Beijing have already better learning environments than students elsewhere, and have been given a leg up, which helps them gain higher *gaokao* scores. This resonates with the view that the *gaokao* is not fair, precisely because the process of education leading to the *gaokao* is inequitable in teaching and resources.

However, the majority of our participants had mixed views on this issue. On one hand, they felt the quota system was unfair; on the other hand, they felt the policy made sense. Some interpreted it as a sort of local protection, namely, universities located in Beijing should prioritize admission for students from Beijing. Zuo put it this way:

Without this policy, all students would rush to Beijing, which will make our capital overly-crowded. Although the best universities are concentrated in Beijing, I think this policy is reasonable in controlling the population flow and maintaining the stability of our capital. (personal communication, August 28, 2011)

Some students considered this policy as parallel to some provincial universities giving priority to admitting students from their own province. Nonetheless, Tian is the only one among our participants who disagreed. She stated:

I know that students from Beijing can be admitted to prestigious universities such as Xiamen University [the best one in Fujian province] with a much lower score in the *gaokao* than students from Fujian province, the very region where Xiamen University is located. It is all because so many good universities are in Beijing, and students in Beijing therefore have many choices. For those few who are willing to leave Beijing for universities in other places, they get advantages in admission there... (personal communication, September 11, 2011)

Yet she added:

But so what? This is China. We have no influence upon the policy. We are not in the

position of power. What we can do is to make efforts to change our own life, but we cannot change the external environment. (personal communication, September 11, 2011)

This sentiment of accepting the status quo due to the inability to change is palpable among our participants. Unfortunate in face of the existing unfair system, they were nonetheless remarkably pragmatic about focusing on things under their control. They recognized the distinction between the unchangeable external environment and their controllable internal environment, albeit limited, through their hard work to make a difference in their life chances.

Our participants pointed to the role of *hukou* to highlight the unchangeable system. As Jizhu noted: “This [*hukou*] is something you were born with and you cannot change. This is your fate. I can only make efforts on my part to make up for it [the fact that I do not have a Beijing *hukou*]” (personal communication, September 8, 2011).

While rural female students felt powerless to change the social and political structures, they still enacted their agency to work on something that could make a difference in their lives. In other words, although they felt unable to change their rural *hukou* and the associated disadvantages, they still believed in individual efforts, i.e., studying hard to attain a high score in the *gaokao*, and to enroll in a good university.

Non-Dominant Cultural Capital Rendered Invisible

Chinese higher education admission policy makers have recently adopted some new initiatives that aim to go beyond test scores and recruit well-rounded students. However, the notion of well-roundedness is often seen in terms of special talents in music, arts, and the kinds of high-brow cultural capital that are often beyond rural students’ education and experiences. Some of our participants subscribe to the notion of dominant cultural capital and think that rural students are less well-rounded than their urban counterparts. However, others disagree as they think that rural students have certain abilities and attributes unique to their rural upbringing—the non-dominant cultural capital—that should be recognized yet remains invisible in the new initiatives. Overall, the consensus is that the new initiatives disadvantage rural students as they have little opportunity to cultivate these special skills and knowledge. As Linchu put it:

[We] rural students do not have the chance to foster our abilities in music or fine arts. So that will naturally disadvantage us and exclude us from the competition. I think this will benefit urban students, or students from well-to-do families. Our dream to change our destiny through *gaokao* would be diminished with this reform. I think the reform that emphasizes well-roundedness will create a vicious circle and widen the urban-rural disparity. (personal communication, August 17, 2011)

This view resonates with the position of Shaoshi, who attended the Independent Admission exam by Tsinghua University, but failed it because it tested a lot of knowledge that she had never learned. She attributed her failure to the unequal distribution of educational resources between rural and urban areas. She said:

I do not know anything beyond those tested in the regular *gaokao* exams, as my education is test-oriented. But I would not accept that I do not have the ability to learn. I do, but I have no resources, no opportunities to broaden my horizon, no mentor... (personal communication, September 23, 2011)

Since many independent admission exams have on-site interview components, such social and communication skills as public speaking are indispensable for success. However, rural students, rural females in particular, are often raised to be shy and publicly reserved. As He stated:

... It is hard for us to practice our oral communication skills, or to cultivate the public presentation skills. It is just difficult for us to have these opportunities to practice. [You may find] rural students are a bit shy, and they tend to shy away from the public to present themselves, because this is not the way they grow up. (personal communication, September 10, 2011)

Although our participants acknowledged their disadvantages, some have expressed views different from those of the dominant discourse regarding cultural capital. Our participants pointed out that their rural upbringing granted them freedom and happiness that is key to the development of a well-rounded person. They mentioned that their childhoods were usually spent in carefree play in nature. They climbed trees, harvested wheat along with their parents, and chased their friends in the fields. In contrast, their urban counterparts had to

spend time in structured activities arranged by their parents, often away from nature.

In addition, some participants contended that their rural upbringing enabled them to have independent life skills their urban counterparts often did not have. They argued that independent life skills should be integral to the notion of cultural capital, yet are rendered invisible in the current practices of higher education admission. In rural areas, girls and women have been expected to cook and do housework from the time they are very young. As Cheng noted:

My urban roommates find it difficult to wash clothes, cook and do other chores... It is a piece of cake for me because I have been cooking since I was five years old and washing clothes for the whole family ever since I was seven or eight years old. When I first came here [university], I helped my roommate make the bed, as they did not know how. I also fixed the bench when it was broken. Besides, I also know what herbs treat what kind of disease because I learnt it when my father was sick. (personal communication, August 23, 2011)

Other than the independent life skills, rural students also have certain knowledge that directly comes from their rural upbringing, yet what constitutes well-rounded education in current Chinese higher education admission discriminates against the kinds of attributes that rural students embody. As Gai stated:

I know the names of various vegetables and corns, but my urban classmates don't. Yet my knowledge is not perceived as useful and valuable in the formal educational system and in the urban university setting. My urban classmates have knowledge of stock market and computers, but I don't have this knowledge. Yet their knowledge is recognized. This is not fair. (personal communication, September 12, 2011)

Thus the traditional notion of cultural capital neglects the knowledge and skills that marginalized students bring to school. The discourse of well-rounded education in China focuses on urban contextualized knowledge and skills. Rural female students we interviewed recognized the bias of such dominant cultural capital and challenged it by emphasizing the abilities they developed through their rural upbringing experiences. In doing so, they cultivated non-dominant

cultural capital that empowered them in the disempowering urban-biased educational system.

Conclusion

Fairness in higher education admission is what institutions of higher learning all over the world have been wrestling with in the past decades. Higher education admission in China has long been considered as one of the most important vehicles for social mobility. As one of the most disadvantaged groups in China, how do rural female students conceptualize their experiences with higher education admission? We believe that inquiry into fairness is crystallized through listening to these students' voices, as they remain largely marginalized from scholarly and public discourses.

Our study provides new and complex insights into the role of standardized testing in higher education admission. Standardized testing has been a critically contested issue in various countries. The validity and potential damage of standardized testing to education quality are hotly debated. *Gaokao*, the most consequential standardized testing in China, has provided each student, regardless of social backgrounds, an equal opportunity to perform and an equal yardstick to measure performance. This gives rise to the widespread perception among our participants that "everyone is equal before test scores." As such, higher education admission based on *gaokao* is fair. However, there is a certain paradoxical sentiment about fairness. On one hand, our participants are keenly aware that *gaokao* has helped millions of students in China, including themselves change their fates, and thus, higher education admission relying on *gaokao* scores still serves as a key meritocratic mechanism for talent selection; on the other hand, there is a parallel theme emerging from our interviews that the process leading to *gaokao*—the precollege education—is not fair. For rural students in particular, their elementary and secondary school education is disadvantaged in terms of teaching quality, school facilities, and other education resources. In other words, although there seems to be an equal opportunity to perform, there is definitely not an equal opportunity to learn. It takes more, in both effort and ability, for rural students to attain the same test scores as urban students.

For rural female students in particular, they pay inordinately high costs, academically and psychologically, to perform well in the *gaokao*. The students in our study were deeply aware of the oppressive reality they lived in as rural women, understood the golden opportunity that *gaokao* potentially presents, and aspired to gain higher education admission, through which to take charge of their life courses. They suffered great stress as a result of working towards the exams around the clock, and lamented the repression of independent and critical thinking as a result of the test-oriented educational system. Moreover, some reported a loss of interest and drive after enrolling in university. The endless preparation for *gaokao* ironically gave meaning to their lives, yet deprived them of the curiosity and passion to pursue other interests. This posed real challenges for their university education when *gaokao* was not the goal of education any more. Independence in learning and researching, critical thinking, initiatives in ideas and actions are crucial in university study, but unfortunately were quite alien to students in our study. We observed that this issue is quite prevalent among the general population of university students in China as most of them were subjected to the test-oriented precollege education. The higher education community in China needs to increase awareness of this issue and design ways to provide support for students, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds in particular, to transition to university study, which requires quite a different mindset and mode of learning than their earlier stages of schooling.

The *hukou* system grants people from major cities more privilege and opportunities to learn than people from rural areas. Our participants made the point that they had no power to change the system; but they focused on what they could do, trying to work hard and get the best *gaokao* score they could. Their relentless effort within the grossly unfair social structures provides a remarkable illustration of agency and resilience on their part. Despite their effort in working within the existing system, these rural female students expressed strong disagreements with the new reform initiatives in admission that aim to move beyond test scores. They were concerned that the new policies of higher education admission on well-rounded education put them at a disadvantage, as they did not have resources or opportunities to learn music, arts, or public speaking skills, recognized talents according to the new policies. To them, their

rural upbringing granted them independent life skills and unique knowledge such as agriculture, which should have been recognized yet was rendered invisible in the new initiatives. These rural female students' voices highlight the significance of the non-dominant cultural capital that they embodied, which is nonetheless often rendered invisible in the cultural capital literature. The consensus among our participants is that the new reform initiatives put students from rural origins at a disadvantage, thus potentially making disadvantaged students even more disadvantaged. This is the major issue of social justice that the new reforms in higher education admission in China have to deal with.

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