

# Education in the Asia-Pacific Region: Issues, Concerns and Prospects

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Volume 43

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Jing Liu

# Inequality in Public School Admission in Urban China

Discourses, Practices and New Solutions

 Springer

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The University of Tokyo  
Tokyo, Japan

ISSN 1573-5397                      ISSN 2214-9791 (electronic)  
Education in the Asia-Pacific Region: Issues, Concerns and Prospects  
ISBN 978-981-10-8717-2              ISBN 978-981-10-8718-9 (eBook)  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-8718-9>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018935898

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Printed on acid-free paper

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The registered company address is: 152 Beach Road, #21-01/04 Gateway East, Singapore 189721, Singapore

# Foreword

Since the 1980s, the Chinese government has promoted the principle of nine-year compulsory education with exam-free, cost-free entrance to public schools based on proximity to place of residence. Under this principle, children are supposed to be assigned to lower secondary schools by lottery. However, in urban areas, severe competition pushes parents to use various means to bend the system to access public schools with better objective conditions, such as better school facilities, more qualified teachers, superior students and leadership, and greater support from above. Parents do so by making use of connections with power, by using resources, or by manipulating the criteria for special selection based on academic excellence or special talents. It is not only parents but also schools who want competent students, and private tutoring institutions driven by commercial interests play roles to create different channels for school admission and the ways to utilize them.

*Zexiao*, which is the main theme of this book, means the diversified mechanism of competitive admission to lower secondary school and the practices of stakeholders related to it. The literal translation of it in English is “school choice,” but its actual meaning is very different from its generally accepted idea of offering alternatives to the students and parents to better fit their educational needs. *Zexiao* is like a giant elephant. One may be able to touch a part of its body but it is difficult to grasp the whole shape of it, because it is largely hidden under the surface of formality. While *Zexiao* is a social phenomenon which has caught the attention of the media and the public in the urban areas, it is more likely to be discussed in a superficial and sensational manner. There is still only limited academic discussion based on critical and comprehensive analysis of *Zexiao*, its ethical implications, and effects on the increased gap of educational opportunities among social classes.

In this book, Dr. Liu successfully uncovers the social, structural, and economic dynamics behind *Zexiao* and specifies the elements which constitute the whole mechanism, through the analysis of discourse surrounding it. For this purpose, he reviewed newspaper articles (professional papers on education, national papers, and local papers of major cities) dating back over thirty years, in addition to policy documents, reports, and education-related regulations. To match the analysis of discourse with that of practices on the ground, he also conducted a case study of

schools in one school district of Beijing, interviewing administrators, school principals, teachers, and parents. By combining these two sets of analysis, he presents the complete picture of this giant elephant from the macro policy level to the micro level of schools and individual actors involved in its practice. It is a major strength of this book and a potential area of contribution to academic and political discussions.

In addition, Dr. Liu considers *Zexiao* not only an issue of manipulation of the school admission system among the urban well-to-do families, but also in relation to the restricted educational opportunities of the poor and migrants from rural areas. By adopting the theory of social closure, he tries to explain the phenomena as mutually enforcing processes of reproduction and exclusion. The uncoordinated but collective acts of people who try to maximize their own profits by monopolizing the limited resources and opportunities have accompanied the practices of exclusion. Dr. Liu points out that it was actually the strong control by the centralized state which caused such practices to emerge and deviate the admission process through informal means, and thus systematically exclude those without power, regardless of the formal arrangements to ensure equality.

Dr. Liu Jing was among the first group of students whom I supervised in Nagoya University and the first Ph.D. who flew from my humble nest. He is one of the most hardworking students in my memory and always tried to do all and even more than what was suggested to him. Looking back, I feel that he has proven himself by devoting his best efforts to the field of his choice. As he writes in the Preface of this volume, *Zexiao* overshadowed his own earlier life. The elite secondary school which he managed to enter as a “special talent student” was not necessarily a comfortable place, restricting him in the pursuit of his own curiosity and assessing his capacity for something for which he did not have passion. After being treated as an unsuccessful student, he came to Japan to restart his tertiary education, with a deeply held unyielding spirit under his softly smiling face. The major he chose was education.

The steps he took to untangle the sociopolitical structure of *Zexiao* was, I believe, also a journey to make sense of his adolescence. The rewards he received for his hard work, such as dissertation awards, must have boosted his self-esteem and confidence gradually. Now, Dr. Liu Jing publishes his comprehensive analysis of the school assignment mechanism in the capital city of China, which is largely invisible from the eyes of international observers. I have no doubt in its academic value, particularly for being published in English, and I am proud.

Congratulations, Liu Jing.

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Shoko Yamada

# Preface

It has been eight years since I became keen on investigating how people interact in admission to public junior high schools in urban China and why they had to do so. I could not clearly tell why I was so interested in this topic until I realized these are all growth paths that I experienced. As a primary school student in 1994, I experienced abolishment of entrance exams to junior high schools in Beijing. Also, I felt how my parents became worried about my schooling in a “bad school” based on the principle of proximity-based school admission to junior high school. Moreover, I observed how they were forced to visit my class teacher and school principal with gifts for their “help” with a recommendation of my promotion to “good schools.” Moreover, the experience of playing the violin as a hobby also let me understand that knowledge is no burden right after I was successfully enrolled into a “good” junior high school as a “special talent student” who just knew how to play the violin. In addition to these, I learned many other alternative ways of going to good schools from my buddies in the same class. Some of them went to good schools by paying additional fees. Others gained enrollment by partnerships between the good schools and the work units of their parents. More than 20 years have passed, and I recognized that students and parents had more difficulties and challenges to access good schooling in urban China from media, research papers, stories of friends, and conversations between passengers on the subway or buses. And I knew the options and processes for entering into a good school became increasingly more complicated and more competitive than what I experienced in 1994. Upon entering the research community—as a Chinese citizen and researcher in the field of China’s education development—I told myself that I should stop taking things for granted. And I felt a desire to explain about the unique urban education phenomenon regarding admission to public junior high schools that exists in urban China.

The specific subject of the book is the competition in urban China for student admission to public junior high schools from grade 6 to grade 7 (G6 to G7) called *Zexiao* (a straightforward English translation is “school choice”). In the international context, school choice is considered a government tool for promoting free choice in parents’ decisions about their children’s education, the improvement of school accountability, efficiency and educational quality, or the prevention of social

problems. Conversely, in China's context, *Zexiao* is not supported by the government at the compulsory education level (G1 to G9) since it violates the essential principle of admission to public schools. Rather, *Zexiao*, which usually takes place around entry to G1 or G7, the beginning of primary school or lower secondary school, creates competition among students, parents, public schools, local education authorities, and private tutoring institutes. Moreover, in the recent past, competition caused stratification in admission to public junior high schools and led to educational inequality in public education in urban China.

In the midst of millions of words that been written and the countless academic papers or news reports that have been published, there are few which interpreted how the positional competition in admission to public junior high schools developed in the midst of rapid social change in Chinese society. Moreover, it was still difficult to figure out how people engaged and interacted in such competition and what are the reasons behind people's engagement and interaction. We are hard pressed to find accounts of why there is a rise of *Zexiao* despite the government continuously saying no to such practices for decades. In addition, little is available to inform us about the current solutions to deal with the competition and social stratification in admission to public junior high schools in urban China.

This book addresses these omissions. It distinguishes *Zexiao* in the context of urban China from school choice in the global debate. Then, it interprets the development of *Zexiao* by analyzing public discourses on such practices between the 1990s and the 2000s. It also reveals interaction among stakeholders in *Zexiao* to further indicate how people engage and interact in *Zexiao* and why they do so through a case study of Community A in Beijing. In addition, it provides a review of current new solutions made by the government to deal with the ongoing competition which has caused social exclusion and educational inequality. More importantly, by adopting the theory of social closure, this book provides a new framework for deepening analysis of the dynamic interactions involved in social exclusion to further construct knowledge of the interrelationship among people in the context of today's urban China.

I am not sure to what extent I have successfully investigated the omissions above. This book is a highly relevant source of information about policy making and policy implementation in balancing efficiency and equity for public education policy makers and planners. It provides scholars with comprehensive data and a detailed interpretation of the diverse issues relevant to educational inequality in Chinese public education in the context of a country in rapid transition from a profit-driven society to a more balanced society post 2015. Moreover, it adds the different interpretations and dynamic practices of *Zexiao* as competition for student placement to the broader field of school choice research. These can be taken as sources for expanding a comparative study about parental choice between countries in non-Western contexts.



# Acknowledgments

This book is based on a revision of my Ph.D. dissertation submitted to the Graduate School of International Development, Nagoya University, Japan, in 2013. To acknowledge properly the generosity of the people with me on this journey, I started to recall people I met, places I visited, and stories I experienced in the past years.

Breaking with tradition, I express my grateful thanks to my parents who gave me life in the 1980s and allowed me to experience being a special talented student for a successful admission to public junior high school in 1994. Their engagement in making efforts to send me to “good schools” definitely left me with a vivid memory to understand why and how parents actively engage in children’s schooling in China. Also, I acknowledge their unconditional support throughout my student life. Their understanding of my dream and patience for the time-consuming process for my Ph.D. study always encouraged me to move forward.

My sincere and warmest appreciation goes to Dr. Shoko Yamada, my former academic advisor and the chairperson of my dissertation committee, for her continuous guidance, critical but constructive comments, and patient instruction intellectually and mentally in the past years. Her kind offers of involving me in her research projects and paper writing gave me precious experiences and training for becoming an independent researcher in the academic world.

My greatest gratitude to the people involved in the fieldwork conducted in Beijing. My appreciations go to all the respondents who generously shared their personal experiences of *Zexiao* with me for this study. Their concern, dedication, and commitment to equality in high-quality public education in China deeply touched me and pushed me to move forward to explore why inequality exists and how to deal with it.

Finally, I heartily express my appreciation to Dr. James Jacob and Dr. Francis Peddie, who generously proofread the book draft and kindly helped me to polish the language used in the book. A special thanks to the anonymous peer reviewers of the book for their comments to improve the shape and the content of my work. I also owe grateful thanks to the team at Springer for their thoughtful suggestions and boundless support for publishing the first book of a young scholar like me.

## Series Editors' Introduction

This volume by Jing Liu on *Inequality in Public School Admission in Urban China: Discourses, Practices and New Solutions* is the latest book to be published in the long-standing Springer Book Series "Education in the Asia Pacific Region: Issues, Concerns and Prospects." The first volume in this Springer series was published in 2002, with this book by Jing Liu being the 43rd volume to be published to date.

This is an important book on an important subject, since although this volume refers specifically to competition and school choice in urban China for student admission to public junior high schools (which is called *Zexiao*), the topic is also of great interest internationally. The reason is that school choice is regarded as being a tool for promoting free choice in parents' decisions about their children's education. As such the book addresses key matters at the core of promoting access and equity in schools such as strengthening the accountability of schools to their local communities, and society as a whole, and ways of improving efficiency and quality in schooling. The research reported on here explains in a clear evidence-based way, at a time of unprecedented rapid social change in China, how competition for admission to public junior high schools has developed.

Jing Liu explores and interprets the various discussions and practices occurring concerning the development of competition for school admission to public lower secondary education in urban China. He identifies trends and changes in discussions that are shaped by varying forces which exist in public secondary school admission policies and practices, in the move from a profit-driven society to a more equitable society. The research identifies and explains the power relationships among and between various stakeholders involved with decision making and practices concerning public school admissions. In so doing, the research reported on here "exposes how current socio-economic, institutional and educational systems are shaping the engagement of stakeholders in the public school admission process to lower secondary schools in urban China; and presents some ongoing reforms as new solutions for a more equitable public secondary education with balance and quality in China since 2015."

In terms of the Springer Book Series, in which this volume is published, the various topics dealt with in the series are wide ranging and varied in coverage, with an

emphasis on cutting-edge developments, best practices, and education innovations for development. Topics examined include: environmental education and education for sustainable development; the interaction between technology and education; the reform of primary, secondary, and teacher education; innovative approaches to education assessment; alternative education; most effective ways to achieve quality and highly relevant education for all; active aging through active learning; case studies of education and schooling systems in various countries in the region; cross-country and cross-cultural studies of education and schooling; and the sociology of teachers as an occupational group, to mention just a few. More information about this series is available at <http://www.springer.com/series/6969>

All volumes in this series aim to meet the interests and priorities of a diverse education audience including researchers, policymakers, and practitioners; tertiary students; teachers at all levels within education systems; and members of the public who are interested in better understanding cutting-edge developments in education and schooling in Asia-Pacific.

The reason why this book series has been devoted exclusively to examining various aspects of education and schooling in the Asia-Pacific region is that this is a particularly challenging region which is renowned for its size, diversity, and complexity, whether it be geographical, socioeconomic, cultural, political, or developmental. Education and schooling in countries throughout the region impact on every aspect of people's lives, including employment, labor force considerations, education and training, cultural orientation, and attitudes and values. Asia and the Pacific are home to some 63% of the world's population of 7 billion. Countries with the largest populations (China 1.4 billion; India 1.3 billion) and the most rapidly growing mega-cities are to be found in the region, as are countries with relatively small populations (Bhutan 755,000; the island of Niue 1600).

Levels of economic and sociopolitical development vary widely, with some of the richest countries (such as Japan) and some of the poorest countries on earth (such as Bangladesh). Asia contains the largest number of poor of any region in the world, the incidence of those living below the poverty line remaining as high as 40% in some countries in Asia. At the same time, many countries in Asia are experiencing a period of great economic growth and social development. However, inclusive growth remains elusive, as does growth that is sustainable and does not destroy the quality of the environment. The growing prominence of Asian economies and corporations, together with globalization and technological innovation, are leading to long-term changes in trade, business, and labor markets, to the sociology of populations within (and between) countries. There is a rebalancing of power, centered on Asia and the Pacific region, with the Asian Development Bank in Manila declaring that the twenty-first century will be "the Century of Asia Pacific."

We believe this book series makes a useful contribution to knowledge sharing about education and schooling in Asia Pacific. Any readers of this or other volumes in the series who have an idea for writing their own book (or editing a book) on any aspect of education and/or schooling, that is relevant to the region, are enthusiastically

cally encouraged to approach the series editors either direct or through Springer to publish their own volume in the series, since we are always willing to assist perspective authors shape their manuscripts in ways that make them suitable for publication in this series.

Office of Applied Research and Innovation  
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December 2017

Rupert Maclean

Lorraine Symaco

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