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Expanding Access to Undergraduate Higher Education for China's Ethnic Minority

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Expanding Access to Undergraduate Higher Education for China's Ethnic Minority Populations

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Abstract

China has one of the world's oldest and largest sets of minority affirmative action policies, which provide 125 million individuals from recognized ethnic minority groups with preferences in family planning, school admissions, employment, business financing and taxation, and financial subsidies. This paper aims to examine how China implements preferential policies for ethnic minority undergraduate applicants to its higher education institutions. Policies of preferential admissions in China are designed to compensate for inequalities in educational opportunity among different ethnic groups. This compensatory approach is based on the concept that equal treatment of differently situated groups may itself create inequality. Yet preferential policies alone will not eliminate inequities in educational attainment, if preferential policies did not exist, however, competitive examinations and the meritocracy principle would have retained the status quo and perpetuated existing (dis)advantages. Well-focused, high-leverage preferential policies can produce significant and enduring changes, but they will demonstrate limited success unless they are part of a larger, system-oriented, and far-reaching socioeconomic development strategy.

Resumen

China tiene uno de los sistemas de políticas de acción afirmativa para minorías más antiguos y extensos del mundo, proporcionando a 125 millones de personas de grupos étnicos minoritarios preferencias en áreas como planificación familiar, admisiones escolares, procesos de inserción laboral, financiamiento y tributación a empresas, y subsidios financieros. Este estudio tiene como objetivo examinar cómo China implementa políticas preferenciales para los solicitantes de grado de minorías étnicas en sus instituciones de educación superior. Las políticas de admisión preferencial en China están diseñadas para compensar las desigualdades en las oportunidades educativas entre los diferentes grupos étnicos. Este enfoque compensatorio se basa en que la igualdad de trato hacia grupos de diferentes situaciones y contextos puede por sí misma crear

desigualdad. A pesar de que las políticas preferenciales por sí solas no eliminarán las desigualdades en el logro educativo de los estudiantes marginalizados, si estas políticas no existieran, la competitividad en las exámenes y el principio de la meritocracia académica habrían mantenido el statu quo y perpetuado las (des) ventajas existentes. Bien enfocadas, las políticas preferenciales de alto apalancamiento pueden generar cambios significativos y sostenibles, pero alcanzarán un triunfo limitado a menos que sean parte de una estrategia de desarrollo socioeconómico más amplia, orientada al sistema y de mayor alcance.

Keywords

Preferential policies, China, ethnic minority students, access to higher education

Introduction

China and the U.S. are very different in policy and practice, yet share similar challenges related to inclusion of ethnic minority populations (Zhou & Hill, 2009). Like the U.S., China faces the huge challenge of ensuring access to higher education for its 56 ethnic groups. For the majority Han Chinese, like White individuals in the U.S., ethnicity tends to have little practical salience (Phinney & Baldelomar, 2011); nonetheless, they are implicitly the standard by which the other 55 groups, about 8.89% of the total population, are judged (Zhou & Hill, 2009).

In the pursuit of greater inclusion, China has one of the world's oldest and largest sets of minority affirmative action policies (Leibold, 2016; Sautman, 1998a). Known as preferential policies in China, these policies provide 125 million ethnic minorities with preferences in family planning, school admissions, hiring and promotion, the financing and taxation of businesses, and financial subsidies. Although affirmative action in higher education encompasses a smaller number of minority individuals compared to preferential policies in family planning, higher education has become a prerequisite for entry to administrative careers and middle-class status (Mackerras, 2005).

Furthermore, nearly two-thirds (64%) of China's territories are ethnic autonomous areas, which are home to 71% of China's total ethnic population, contain the bulk of its natural resources and occupy 86% of its land borders (Information Office of the State Council, 2010). Thus, minority areas and ethnic issues are crucial to the national unity of China and expanding access to higher education for minority students is considered essential in building a knowledge economy and promoting social harmony in the Chinese developmental state (Evans, 1995).

This paper examines China's preferential policies for admissions of ethnic minority undergraduate students to its higher education institutions. The following research question guides our discussion: *What are the scope and effect of policies of preferential admissions to undergraduate programs for ethnic minority students in China?* Although graduate minority students also benefit from preferential admissions policies, the scope of this paper does not permit an exploration of preferential policies for graduate students.

This study is important for three reasons. First, there is no shortage of research on minority students in Chinese universities, but higher education preferential admissions policies for minority populations are less often explored. Second, 25 years since Sautman's (1998a)

comprehensive review of preferential policies for minorities in Chinese universities, it seems timely to provide a contemporary account of the scope and effect of these preferential policies. Third, this study provides international and comparative perspectives which are essential for facilitating mutual understanding and addressing global challenges in diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education.

CONFUCIANISM AND THE POST-CONFUCIAN MODEL OF HIGHER EDUCATION

For much of its history, China was a highly pluralistic society guided by a culturalist tradition assimilating many diverse groups into its cultural center (Postiglione, 1999). Confucius (1979) advocated for education for all, irrespective of social class or ethnic status, for sagely qualities were defined in ethical and cultural terms rather than in ethnic terms (Chan, 2010). Further, “when distant subjects are unsubmissive, one cultivates one’s moral quality in order to attract them, and once they have come one makes them content” (Confucius, 1979, 16, 1).

Marginson (2011b) proposed a post-Confucian model of higher education in East Asia and Singapore, which is characterized by a strong nation-state, an inclination toward universal higher education, national examinations driving competition and family commitment, and government determination to invest in education and research. Similarly, the Chinese tradition emphasizes the good of the collective, the applications of knowledge for practical ends, and the role of higher education in promoting prosperity and social order (Zha, 2011).

PLURALITY WITHIN UNITY AND MULTILEVEL EMBEDDEDNESS

Fei (1989) forwarded a notion of China as an “ethnic plurality within the organic unity of the Chinese nation” (p. 1). This “plurality within unity” concept sets out how ethnic groups operate within the scope of Chinese civilization in which “the Chinese” were formed by the assimilation of hundreds of ethnic groups throughout China’s long history. Similarly, official documents on ethnicity in China emphasize that China is a multi-ethnic, unified state (Information Office of the State Council, 2010). This ‘multi-ethnic’ characterization indicates that China officially recognizes the existence of its ethnic groups, while the description of China as ‘unified’ emphasizes national, territorial, and political integrity (Sautman, 2012).

In the framework of embedded autonomy (Evans, 1995), public power in China is constructed around a complex multilevel combination of a national apparatus interacting with provincial, prefect, and county structures. From the 1940s to 1960s, five provincial-level autonomous regions were established: the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region; Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region; Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region; Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region; and Tibet Autonomous Region. There are also sub-provincial autonomous areas, including autonomous prefectures, counties, towns, and villages. In addition, Guizhou, Yunnan, and Qinghai, due to a high concentration of ethnic minority populations, are considered ethnic provinces and receive fiscal subsidies for ethnic areas like the five autonomous regions (Freeman, 2012).

ETHNICITY, POVERTY, AND ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

In China, there is a substantial but incomplete connection between geography, ethnicity, and impoverishment (Hannum & Wan, 2006; World Bank, 2009). The confluence of these factors is

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particularly salient in the Three Areas and Three Prefectures in western China, which the Chinese government identifies as areas with higher incidence and greater extent of poverty. The Three Areas refers to the Tibet Autonomous Region, southern Xinjiang, and the ethnically Tibetan areas of Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan, and Gansu. The Three Prefectures include the Linxia Hui Prefecture in Gansu, Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan, and Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan.

What the poor lack ultimately is human capital (World Bank, 2009). As the importance of human capital development in reducing poverty is widely recognized in China, its poverty reduction efforts have been development-oriented, focusing on providing opportunities by building capacity for and transferring capacity to the poor. China has also greatly expanded enrollment in higher education and created an increasingly stratified and hierarchical academic system with diverse institutional types (Zha, 2011). At the central part of the system are research universities that are key to the global knowledge economy, first-tier four-year institutions affiliated with the Ministry of Education and other central government bodies. But enrollment growth in China has occurred mostly in second-tier four-year institutions and three-year vocational colleges under provincial and local governments.

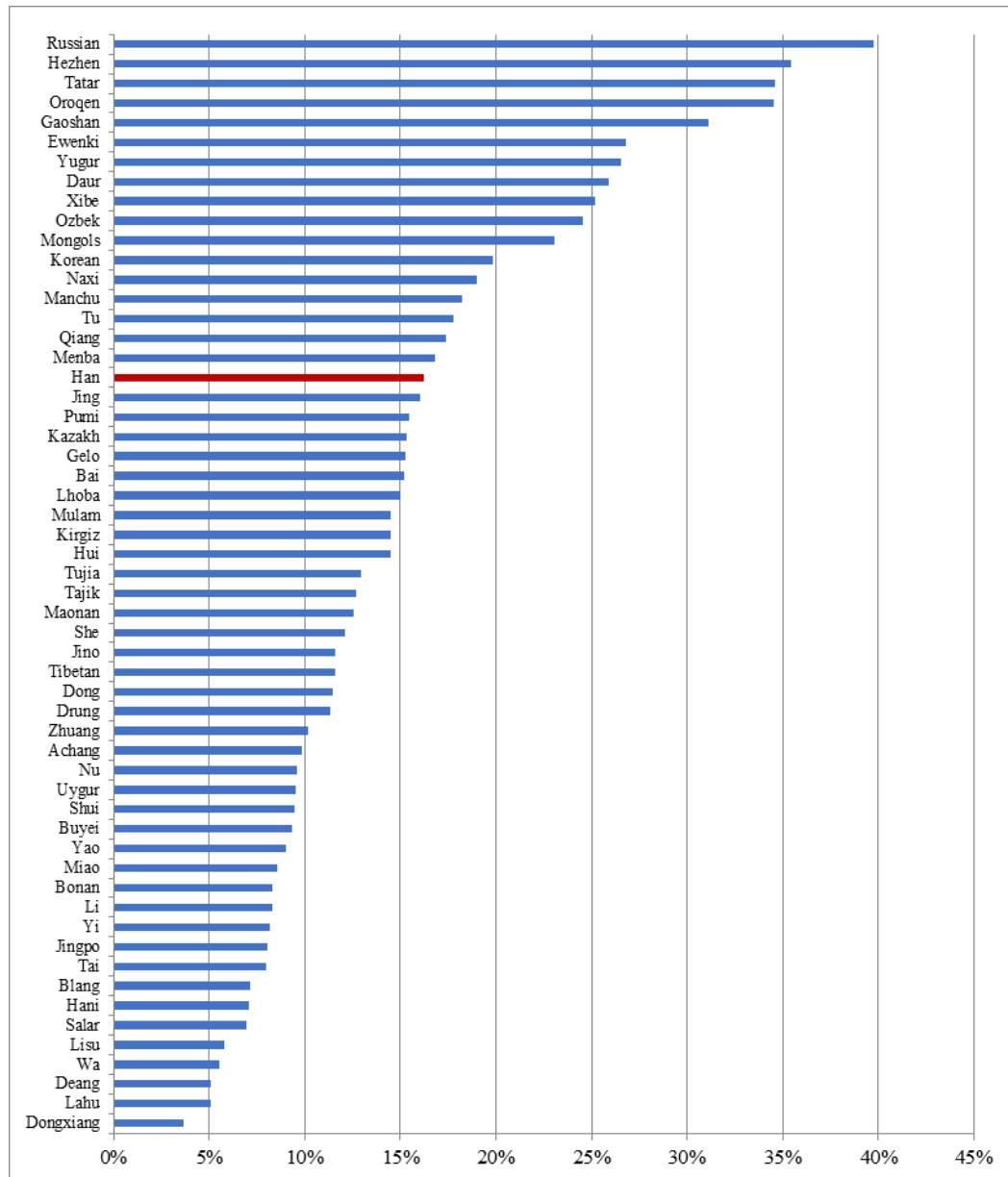
China's high-stakes national college entrance examination, the *gaokao*, is the major determinant of admission to higher education in China (Davey et al., 2007). The *gaokao* is generally regarded as distantly related to the imperial civil service examination, which selected officials mainly based on individual merits and was not abolished until 1905 (Elman, 2013). Although admissions policies and institutional rules are complicated, cultural, social, political, and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) can help students and parents navigate the so-called rules of the game. In essence, the college entrance exam works as a sorting and differentiation device and as a crucial mechanism of identity formation (Goodman, 2014). Access to first-tier research universities, while mediated by competitive examinations and the meritocracy principle, is more determined by parental influence than anything else.

ETHNICITY AND THE HIGHER EDUCATIONAL GAP

Most of China's ethnic minorities occupy western regions of the country, which are generally poorer and more remote than its prosperous east coast (Verhoeven & Zhang, 2016). The educational opportunities of these minority students are far lower than what is available to those in central and eastern China. Furthermore, many minority students are the first generation in their families to enter not only higher education, but literacy and schooling.

In 1982, 0.69% of Han people aged six and above were college educated, but the share among ethnic groups was only 0.44% (National Bureau of Statistics, 1985). By 2020, 16.25% of Han were college graduates, as compared with 12.05% of ethnic minority groups (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). As shown in Figure 1, there are large variations in higher education attainment among China's minorities, with 17 ethnic minority groups outperforming Han in postsecondary educational attainment. However, there remain 38 ethnic minority groups with significant numbers of populations achieving lower educational attainment than the Han majority.

Figure 1: Ethnic Groups and Higher Education Attainment, 2020



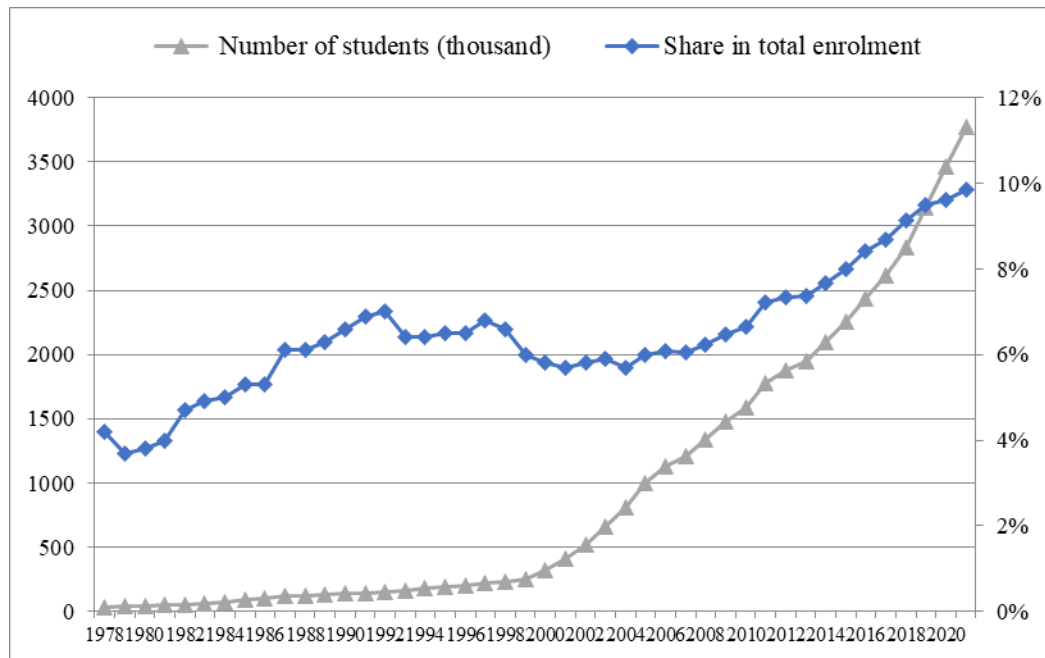
Source: China Population Census Yearbook 2020, by National Bureau of Statistics, 2022. China Statistical Press.

The minority proportion of Chinese university students increased from 4.2% in 1978 to 7.0% 1992, after declining in the late 1970s due to the reimposition of the merit-based entrance examination (see Figure 2). The share of minority students fell again after 1992, dipping to 5.7% in 2004, due to the marketization and massification of higher education (Zhu, 2010). Since 2005, increasing government expenditure on higher education (Yuan, 2012), financial aid and student loan schemes (Yang & Cheng, 2013), rapid economic growth, and rural–urban migration have brought down tuition fees (Jacob et al., 2018) in relation to per capita income for both urban and rural households. As a result, there has been a steady increase in the share of minority students in

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higher education, reaching 8.67% in 2017 and 9.14% in 2018, finally in proportion to the minority share of the overall population.

Figure 2: Minority Students in Chinese Regular Higher Education Institutions, 1978–2021



Source: *Educational Statistics Yearbook of China*, by National Bureau of Statistics, 2005–2021. *China Statistical Press*. *China Ethnic Statistical Yearbook 2018*, by National Bureau of Statistics, 2018. *China Statistical Press*.

Methodology

This paper utilized a constructivist qualitative research design drawing on documentary analysis (McCulloch, 2004) to explore how China's set of preferential policies for ethnic minority students are applied to their admission to undergraduate studies in the country. Our qualitative document analysis entailed emergent and theoretical sampling of documents, development of a protocol for systematic analysis, and constant comparisons to clarify themes, frames, and discourse (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). This approach to document analysis was constructivist in that our understanding of documents reviewed was constructed from our perspectives and standpoints and the larger context in which the documents were created (Crotty, 1998).

We reviewed both primary documents and secondary sources related to the research question: the former included some 400 laws, regulations, and other official documents issued by the central and provincial governments from 1984 to 2023, and the latter journal articles, book chapters, and news reports. This led to triangulation, the process of checking different sources of data and diverse, sometimes conflicting, perspectives to gain a deeper understanding of the issues being studied (McCulloch, 2004).

In addition, McCulloch (2004) emphasized the need to “relate the *text* to its *context*” (p. 5). This requires researchers to regard documents as social and historical artifacts and take into consideration broad educational, social, political, economic, and other relationships that help explain the contemporary meaning of the documents. For example, materials relevant to a particular provincial policy was complemented by previous policy documents and central government guidelines, with the aim of situating the provincial policy in the context of its past and present and in relation to central government laws and regulations.

Findings

China’s policy for preferential admissions for minority applicants has a legal basis in *the Law on Regional National Autonomy* (National People’s Congress, 1984, Article 65):

The state establishes and manages ethnic institutes, establishes and runs ethnic classes and ethnic preparatory courses in institutions of higher learning that specialize in recruiting ethnic minority students ... When institutions of higher learning and secondary professional schools recruit new students, they should appropriately relax the admission standards and conditions for ethnic minority applicants.

The Provisional Regulations for Admissions by Regular Higher Education Institutions further elaborated on the above guidelines (State Education Commission, 1987, Article 37):

The cutoff points may be lowered for minority candidates from frontier, mountainous, and pastoral regions as well as from areas where ethnic minorities live in concentrated communities, as appropriate in the local circumstances.... Ethnic cohorts shall lower cutoff points for minority candidates from frontier, mountainous, and pastoral regions as well as from areas where ethnic minorities live in concentrated communities.

The State Education Commission (1999, Article 2), in its directive on ethnic education in areas of scattered ethnic communities, opened the door to extending preferential policies for minority students beyond minority areas. The National People’s Congress (2001, Article 71) stipulated that “special consideration shall be given to the admission of students from minority nationalities with small populations.” These refer to the 28 ethnic minorities with a population of less than 300,000. The Ministry of Education (MoE; 2002) required that admission scores be lowered by no more than 20 points for minority students from frontier, mountainous, nomadic, and minority areas.

The above laws provide a general framework and require administrative regulations to provide substantive additional guidance (Postiglione, 1999). Provincial authorities have used administrative measures as instruments of compliance and enforcement in line with local circumstances. This has resulted in more variegated regulations and practices that reflect diversities across regional and ethnic lines. Regional differences notwithstanding, our analysis of primary and secondary sources demonstrated that preferential admissions in China are enacted in four main aspects, as discussed below.

PREFERENCES IN EXAMINATIONS

As the *gaokao* is the major determinant for admission to higher education in China, one way to facilitate preferential admissions is to make the process of completing the *gaokao* more accessible for minority students by allowing them to use their own indigenous languages (Clothey, 2005; Sautman, 1998a). When seeking admission to the 19 minority-serving institutions and to some of the 236 minority area universities and colleges, minority students can become *min kao min* or ‘minorities taking the examination in a minority language,’ as opposed to *min kao han*, ‘minority students taking the examination in Mandarin Chinese.’ It is also possible to take the entrance exam in an indigenous language and then enroll in classes taught solely in Mandarin Chinese once enrolled at the university.

The option of *min kao min* is largely available in minority areas with large numbers of indigenous language speakers (Sautman, 1998a). These include four autonomous regions and eight provinces providing bilingual education to minority students in primary and secondary education (see Table S1 in Supplemental Materials). For students from areas where the minority population is linguistically diverse (Yunnan and Guizhou), the number of *min kao min* placements for the *gaokao* are smaller. In addition, minority candidates from ethnic groups without written languages or from areas where the minority population consists overwhelmingly of Mandarin Chinese speakers (e.g., Hui in Ningxia) generally cannot complete the *gaokao* in a minority ethnic language.

Compared to their *min kao min* peers, *min kao han* students have a wider range of choices in institutions and programs offered (Ma, 2009). *Min kao han* students tend to be in a better position to amass cultural capital from credentials and social capital through expanded social networks, which are converted into social and economic opportunities in the job market (Tang et al., 2016). Thus, despite the educational benefit of learning in one’s own native language, marketization and globalization may prod students and parents to choose the language(s) of the job market, Chinese, English, and other high-demand foreign languages (Rehamo & Harrell, 2020).

PREFERENCES THROUGH BONUS POINTS

In most Chinese provinces, the *gaokao* has a total of 750 points; however, in the face of fierce competition for university seats, even a single point can make a substantial difference in college admissions. There is considerable variation in the number of points awarded to minority students, ranging mostly from three to 20 points. In the central province of Shanxi, where the share of minorities in population is just 0.26%, the lowest in China, minority students receive no added points, but had priority enrollment over Han students with the same scores before 2021 and can apply for ethnic cohort and one-year preparatory classes.

As noted earlier, provincial authorities implement preferential policies considering local circumstances, which may go beyond broad national guidelines. For example, a 1982–1983 study of minority education in Beijing found that Hui students from a city-center Hui community lagged behind their Han peers in educational attainment (Wang, 2007). Beijing thus began to award 10 additional points in 1984 to minority students who applied to municipal institutions. Similar practices were adopted in China’s eastern and central provinces, where minority populations largely live in scattered ethnic communities. Indeed, Sautman (1998a, p. 99) found

that “almost all minority students who apply to universities benefit from the award of added points on the entrance exam.” Furthermore, the range of bonus points awarded was much wider than the MoE 20-point cap.

Given the increasing share of minority students in postsecondary education and the large disparities in access to institutions of higher education among ethnic groups, the State Council (2015) calls for maintaining and further improving preferential policies for minority students from frontier, mountainous, nomadic, and minority areas. More developed areas, however, may consider gradually scaling back or even cancelling bonus points for minority students due to adequate intermingling and convergence in educational attainment among minority and Han students (State Ethnic Affairs Commission, 2015). This has resulted in the phasing out of bonus points in some central and eastern provinces.

PHASING OUT BONUS POINTS

Bonus points for ethnic minorities were abolished in Shaanxi in 2015, Shandong in 2017, Jiangsu in 2021, and Anhui in 2022. Like Shanxi, these four provinces have very low percentages of minority populations (see Table S2 in Supplemental Materials). Minorities residing in these provinces are mostly Hui, who have traditionally lived intermixed with Han people and speak Mandarin Chinese.

Further, four more eastern provinces have announced plans to phase out added points for minority students in the coming years. Of these, while Jiangxi, Fujian, and Zhejiang all have small minority populations, minorities constitute 15.19% of the population in the northeast province of Liaoning, mostly Manchu, Xibe, Mongols, and Koreans. With six Manchu and two Mongol autonomous counties, Liaoning is the first province in China to phase out bonus points for minority students from minority counties. Liaoning is also cancelling the five added points awarded to Mongol and Korean graduates from bilingual ethnic senior secondary schools in 2023. As presented earlier, Manchu, Xibe, Mongols, and Koreans all outperform Han in college education attainment. Xibe in northeast China and Manchu nationwide speak Mandarin Chinese.

MORE TARGETED BONUS POINTS

Except for the nine central and eastern provinces discussed above, minority candidates receive added points in the *gaokao* in all the 22 other provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions (see Table S3 in Supplemental Materials). The MoE (2021) stipulates that provincial-level authorities, while complying with laws and regulations and considering development in primary and secondary education in recent years, shall formulate eligibility criteria for bonus points in a targeted manner and lessen the range of bonus points awarded appropriately. Where there are considerable linguistic and cultural differences between ethnic minorities and Han people, and primary and secondary education is of poor quality, bonus points must be maintained in addition to fostering bilingual education and improving the quality of basic education (State Ethnic Affairs Commission, 2015). Further, the MoE requires provincial governments to explore and improve policies for bonus points for severely impoverished frontier and minority areas in accordance with local conditions.

For example, all minority students received bonus points in the western province of Guizhou, where minority people represent 35.7% of the total population. Those from the nine urban

districts in three major cities, Guiyang, Zunyi, and Anshun, received 10 added points. Minority students from the remaining 79 counties/cities received 20 points. However, in 2021, Guizhou announced a scheme to scale back added points, beginning in 2022 (Guizhou Education Examination Institute, 2021). By 2026, only minority candidates from the Qiandongnan Miao–Dong Autonomous Prefecture, Qiannan and Qianxinan Buyei–Miao Autonomous Prefectures, and 10 autonomous counties will receive five added points, except for those from the capital cities of the three autonomous prefectures, which are considered more developed in basic education.

In Inner Mongolia, bonus points are only offered to minority candidates from five ethnic groups: Mongols; Daur; Oroqen; Ewenki; and Russians. As mentioned above, these five groups outperform Han in educational attainment by a large margin. Nonetheless, Mongols are the eponymous minority group in Inner Mongolia, while the other four have not only autonomous areas at or above the township level in the region, but also fall into the officially designated ethnic minorities with small populations, as discussed previously.

However, in 2021, the Inner Mongolian Department of Education (2021) announced a scheme to scale back bonus points for the aforementioned five ethnic groups from 10 to five, starting in 2024. Inner Mongolia divides its 103 county-level entities into two categories. Category A involves 36 border, nomadic, and autonomous county-level entities, but excludes capital cities of prefectures and cities with independent planning status, which are considered more advanced in popularizing standard Chinese language and overall educational development. Category B includes the remaining 67 county-level entities. Beginning in 2026, five points will be awarded only to minority students from the five ethnic groups in the 36 Category A county-level entities.

The targeted approach to bonus points has taken a different twist in Beijing, where minority students received added points for admissions to municipal institutions, as noted above. Starting in 2017, however, five bonus points applied only to minority students who transferred from frontier, mountainous, nomadic, and minority areas while in senior secondary schools, reducing to single figures the annual number of minority candidates eligible for preferential admissions policies. Similar policy shifts occurred in two other municipalities, Shanghai and Tianjin.

BEYOND 20 POINTS

Qinghai, located in northwest China, houses six Tibetan autonomous prefectures. Almost half of Qinghai's population are ethnic minorities, and all minority students there receive 20 points (Qinghai Education Examination Institute, 2022). Applicants from the six autonomous prefectures receive 15 more points for provincial institutions all over China, totaling 35 points. Further, the *min kaohan* students from Yushu, Guoluo, and Huangnan Tibet Autonomous Prefectures, who have completed primary and secondary education locally and sit for the *gaokao* in the same way as Han students, receive an additional 10 points for institutions in Qinghai, constituting a total of 45 points.

The western province of Sichuan can be divided geographically roughly into two parts: the Sichuan Basin and Western Sichuan Plateau, the latter neighboring Tibet. Ethnic minorities, including mainly Tibetans, Yi, and Qiang, constitute 6.1% of Sichuan's population, and largely live on the Western Sichuan Plateau. There are vast disparities in educational resources and access between the Sichuan Basin and Western Sichuan Plateau.

Minority applicants from the Ganzi Tibet Autonomous Region, Aba Tibet–Qiang Autonomous Region, Liangshan Yi Autonomous Region, and 19 autonomous counties receive added points (Sichuan Education Examination Institute, 2022). As these autonomous areas are considered severely impoverished, Sichuan goes beyond the 20-point ceiling, with minority students receiving 25 points when applying for first-tier universities, and 50 points for all other institutions. Han students from these areas receive 10 points when applying for first-tier institutions, and 25 points for other universities. These added points beyond the 20-point cap apply, in principle, only to universities in Sichuan.

In 2023, however, Sichuan Provincial Department of Education (2023) announced a scheme to scale back bonus points in compliance with the MoE cap, to be initiated in 2024. By 2026, minority candidates from the above three autonomous prefectures and 19 autonomous counties will receive 20 bonus points, applicable to all institutions, while their Han peers will be awarded 10 added points.

PREFERENCES THROUGH QUOTAS, CUTOFF SCORES, AND INTERIOR SCHOOLS

Added points may seem straightforward in college admissions, but they can, and, in some circumstances, need to be complemented by other factors to increase their impact. Affirmative action that consists of quotas, numerical, or percentage goals defined by race is impermissible in the U.S. (*Regents of Univ. of California v. Bakke*, 1978), but quotas are essential to the entire admissions process in the Chinese higher education system (Sautman, 1998a).

ADMISSIONS QUOTAS

Chinese minority students benefit from quotas setting aside a certain number of spaces for them. Guangxi mandates that institutions affiliated with the autonomous region shall strive to raise the proportion of minority students to the minority proportion of the regional population, and, in principle, minority students shall represent at least 65% of their annual intakes at regional minority universities. In Inner Mongolia, *min kao min* Mongol students are admitted through separate quotas and hence different cutoff points, which were 70 to 100 points lower than those for students in the Mandarin Chinese track in 2022. Similar quotas are also available for the *min kao min* Tibetans and Mongols in Qinghai.

In Xinjiang, quotas are reserved for southern regions, where most of the rural population and Uygurs reside (Clothey et al., 2018). This southern Xinjiang track admits only students from the 11 indigenous minority groups: Uygurs; Kazakh; Mongols; Kirgiz; Tajiks; Xibe; Uzbek; Tata; Daur; Tibetan; and Russians, except for the Hui. The cutoff scores of the southern Xinjiang track were around 100 points lower than the Mandarin Chinese track for first-tier four-year universities in 2022, but the difference in scores was smaller for second-tier baccalaureate institutions (see Table S4 in Supplemental Materials).

Students from the 11 indigenous minority groups receive 15 added points when seeking admission through the Mandarin Chinese track or in the southern Xinjiang track (optional test in foreign language), as do the *min kao min* students not from these indigenous minority groups (Xinjiang Admissions Commission, 2022). Hui applicants are awarded five bonus points. The

total of added points is subject to the MoE 20-point cap, but this should be put into perspective, for quotas and separate cutoffs often make a much bigger difference in college admissions.

CUTOFF POINTS

In Tibet, separate cutoff scores are set for minority candidates whose families have lived in the autonomous region for at least two generations. In 2022, the cutoff point for first-tier institutions was about 100 points lower than that for other students (see Table S5 in Supplemental Materials). However, this difference was much smaller for second-tier universities.

As in Xinjiang, separate cutoff scores are complemented by a bonus point policy in Tibet. The following student populations in Tibet receive 10 bonus points: (a) students from farming and nomadic families from border towns under border counties, minority or Han; (b) minority candidates who are ineligible for the separate cutoff scores; and (c) the Menba, Lhoba, Deng, and Sherpa (Tibet Education Examination Institute, 2022b). Menba and Lhoba are both ethnic groups with small populations. Deng and Sherpa, unlike the 55 recognized minority groups, are among the ‘undistinguished ethnic groups.’

INTERIOR SCHOOLS

China launched an ambitious program in 1985 to redistribute students from Tibet and Xinjiang to schools in central China. Known in Chinese as ‘interior boarding classes’ (*neidi ban*), this schooling system involves schools in major Chinese cities staffed largely by Han Chinese teachers and administrators from that host city and follow the national curriculum except for ethnic language and literature classes (Postiglione, 2009). These residential schools are voluntary and have remained hugely popular with parents and students (Leibold, 2019). More than 200,000 minority students have participated in the program, generating an ethnic elite group, who are employed mostly in Tibet and Xinjiang and are expected to contribute to the Chinese society for decades to come.

The MoE (2010) mandates that most students in interior schools come from underprivileged remote and rural regions. Specifically, 70% of students in Tibetan interior classes and 80% in Xinjiang schools shall come from minority peasant and nomadic families. Additionally, 10% of places in the Tibetan classes are set aside for the children of non-Tibetan cadres, public officials holding an administrative post in party and government, and 10% of the Xinjiang class seats for Han peasant and nomadic families. Children who gain access to interior schools attend for free; otherwise, many families could not afford the expense. The government bears costs for tuition, food, accommodation, health care, and transportation to and from the schools.

Quotas are reserved for graduates from interior senior secondary schools for admission into interior Chinese universities. For graduates from Tibetan interior classes, separate cutoff scores are set for minority students whose families have lived in Tibet for at least two generations. In 2022, cutoff points for first-tier institutions were 50–55 points lower than those for the children of non-Tibetan cadres, but the disparities were smaller for other institutions.

Graduates from Xinjiang interior senior secondary classes are divided into three tracks in college admissions according to their ethnic status and the language of instruction in junior secondary education: Han students with Mandarin Chinese education; minority students with Mandarin Chinese education; and minority students with ethnic language education or bilingual education.

Like in Tibet, there are large disparities in cutoff points between these three tracks for first-tier universities, but the differences are smaller for other institutions.

PREFERENCES AND INTEREST CONVERGENCE

As alluded to previously, minorities are not the only group who have received preferential treatment in university admissions. When minorities and Han people converge in their interests, needs, expectations, and ideologies, they can join forces to pursue and advance ethnic equity and common prosperity. Jingning, a mountainous area in the east-coast province of Zhejiang, provides an example of the principle of interest convergence (Milner IV, 2008).

People in Jingning filed a request to form a She autonomous county in late 1983, when the 1984 *Law on Regional National Autonomy* had yet to become law. Although She people represented only 10% of the local population, the request was approved by the State Council in June 1984, immediately after passage of the *Law on Regional National Autonomy*. Today, Jingning She Autonomous County is the only She autonomous county in China and the only autonomous county in eastern China.

Minority candidates from Jingning receive five bonus points on the *gaokao*. What is notable is that Han students from Jingning who have completed their high school education there can also receive three added points for admissions to institutions affiliated with the Zhejiang Provincial Government, on the legal basis of the *Regulations on Regional Ethnic Autonomy of Jingning She Autonomous County* (Zhejiang Provincial People's Congress, 1989).

As noted earlier, bonus points for minority students in Zhejiang will be phased out by 2027 and, in fact, Han students in Jingning will no longer receive added points, starting in 2024. Still, She people and the Han majority in Jingning provide a microcosm for (re)thinking preferential policies and a source of inspiration for practicing the principle of interest convergence.

Similar patterns of interest convergence, combined with harsh socioeconomic realities, shape preferential policy in Gansu. Located in China's northwest, Gansu stretches across the Gobi Desert, mountainous areas, and vast grasslands (Hannum et al., 2011). Minority people, mostly Hui and Tibetans, constitute 9.42% of Gansu's population, but Gannan Tibet Autonomous Prefecture and Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture are designated as "severely impoverished areas." In fact, the inland province is China's poorest, with the lowest GDP per capita since 2014, and the lowest GDP per capita among autonomous areas.

Gansu's preferential policies thus target poor areas (Gansu Education Examination Institute, 2020). Minority students from the two autonomous prefectures and five autonomous border counties receive 20 points. As of 2023, Han students from these poor areas also received 20 points. In the meantime, bonus points will be phased out by 2029 for minority students from autonomous towns outside the two autonomous prefectures and five autonomous counties in this province.

Finally, in Ningxia, which neighbors Gansu, Hui people constitute 35.15% of the population. Hui and Han share a common language, but Hui observe Islam and have their own identity. Although the Hui are disadvantaged as compared to Han in educational attainment and household wealth, there seems to be no income gap between rural Hui and Han in Ningxia (Gustafsson & Sai,

2014). This is because the Hui earn more off-farm income and young Hui males are more likely to migrate.

Furthermore, ethnic disparities are intersected by topographical differences in Ningxia. Northern Ningxia is rather flat, but southern Ningxia is a mountainous area. This makes schooling less accessible for all children in the southern region, regardless of their ethnic status. Thus, in Ningxia, all minority students receive 10 bonus points with minority candidates from the southern mountainous areas earning an additional 10 points when applying to institutions in the autonomous region (Office of the Ningxia Admissions Commission, 2018). Additionally, Han students from the southern region also receive 10 points when applying to local universities.

Discussion and Conclusion

Like affirmative action in the U.S., preferential policies in China are an issue of considerable debate and controversy, particularly for those who are ineligible for preferential treatment (Leibold, 2014). When the MoE readjusted provincial admissions quotas to admit more students from poorer western areas into universities along China's east coast in 2016, thousands of parents demonstrated in six cities in the eastern province of Jiangsu and central province of Hubei, fearing that out-of-province quotas would be at the expense of local students (Sharma, 2016).

Additionally, some Han have attempted to have their ethnic status forged to give their offspring an advantage in college admissions. In 2009, 31 Han students in Chongqing Municipality, located in southwest China, were found to have had their ethnic identities altered to receive 20 bonus points on the *gaokao* (Leibold, 2014). Among them was He Chuanyang, the top candidate in liberal arts and humanities in Chongqing even without the extra 20 points.

Due to the relatively large differences in cutoff scores across provinces and among ethnic groups, some families relocate to other provinces and ethnic autonomous regions offering greater educational access for their children (Ross & Wang, 2011). These students are called *gaokao* migrants, for their families may have their permanent residency transferred although they do not actually live or complete their whole senior secondary education in their new place of residency. As such, the MoE (2021) and local authorities have tightened procedures for verifying the residential status and eligibility for bonus points of candidates.

Minority students are often admitted with lower scores on average than their Han peers because of lowered minimums and added points. However, compared with what Sautman (1998a; 1998b) depicted more than two decades ago, there seems to be a gradual closing of minority–Han educational gaps. In addition, retention and graduation rates for minority students do not appear to be lower than those for Han students. These reasons include the high retention and graduation rates of Chinese undergraduates in general (Marioulas, 2017), nation-wide efforts to improve quality and breadth of higher education, the relative concentration of minority students in minority area universities and minority institutions (Sautman, 1998a), the provision of preparatory classes and ethnic cohorts (Teng & Ma, 2009), and expanding fiscal transfers for primary and secondary education to ethnic areas (Freeman, 2012).

Policies of preferential admissions in China are designed to compensate for inequalities in educational opportunity among different ethnic groups. This compensatory approach is based on

the concept that equal treatment of differently situated groups may itself create inequality (Lang, 2010). To paraphrase Justice Powell in *Regents of Univ. of California v. Bakke* (1978), to the extent that ethnic status was “considered only to the extent of curing established inaccuracies in predicting academic performance, it might be argued that there is no ‘preference’ at all” (p. 306, n. 43).

Affirmative action and preferential policies have often been initiated as a temporary expedient in achieving equity (Sowell, 2004). The majority of the U.S. Supreme Court said in *Grutter v. Bollinger et al.* (2003): “We expect that, 25 years from now, the use of racial preferences will no longer be necessary to further the interest approved today” (p. 343). This confident pronouncement presupposed a degree of control which has proved largely illusory. At the time of this study, the U.S. Supreme Court has overruled race-conscious admissions, ruling that the practice is racially discriminatory (*Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, 2023).

China, however, has taken a prudent approach in handling preferential policies for minority students. Maoliti Mansuer, head of the MoE’s Minority Education Department, commented in 2015, “Our ultimate goal would be to scale back bonus points for minority students, but we do not yet have a clear-cut timetable for this” (He, 2015, para. 1). While bonus points for minority candidates have been or are being phased out in nine of China’s central and east-coast provinces, preferential policies are here to stay in western China, particularly in the five autonomous regions and three ethnic provinces. Further, a combination of bonus points, quotas, cutoffs, and/or interior schools will be maintained for severely impoverished areas, where bonus points alone may be insufficient to compensate for disparities in educational opportunity. This more targeted approach considers geography and corollary socioeconomic realities as well as the ethnic status of candidates.

Indeed, preferential policies alone will not eliminate inequities in educational attainment, for equity in higher education cannot be separated from a host of other social and economic issues (Altbach et al., 2009). Access to and rates of completion for senior secondary education, which is linked to income and parental education and profession, must be improved. In fact, the largest inequalities in college access in China emerge when students transition from junior secondary to senior secondary school, at the first post-compulsory milestone along the pathway to college (Loyalka et al., 2017). If preferential policies did not exist, however, competitive examinations and the meritocracy principle would have retained the status quo and perpetuated existing (dis)advantages.

The preferential policy system in China has been threatened by marketization and globalization (Sautman, 1998a; Teng & Ma, 2009). Despite its extensive state-sponsored preferential policies, it took China 19 years for the participation of minority students in higher education to return to 1992 levels, and then six more years for the proportion of minority tertiary students to reflect the percentage of minorities in the overall population. This market ideology not only limits the potential of ethnic minorities participating in higher education, but also slows the immense public good (Marginson, 2011a) offered by minorities and Han collaborating for long-term commitment and common values and purposes. Well-focused, high-leverage preferential policies can produce significant and enduring changes, but they will demonstrate limited success unless they are part of a larger, system-oriented, and far-reaching socioeconomic development strategy.

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