

Educational equity research in the mainland of China: A historical perspective

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Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, there have been various discussions concerning educational equity in the different stages of education development. This paper focuses on the history and current situation of educational equity research in China. It examines the changes in the discourse on Chinese educational equity research in the Mao and post Mao era. In effect, academic research on educational equity was almost not-existent in the Mao era. At that time, the practice of educational equity was government-led and deeply affected by political ideology. In the post-Mao era, especially since the 1990s, research into educational equity has rapidly developed. Western academic discourses were considered and adapted to the context of China. This paper argues that the dominant discourse of Chinese educational equity research has changed as China's historical, economic and political contexts changed.

Keywords: Educational equity; educational equality; Marxism; China

INTRODUCTION

Educational equity is becoming a social and political issue in many countries around the world, including rapidly developing China. In 2006, the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee issued the *Decision on a Number of Major Issues about Building a Socialist Harmonious Society* (关于构建社会主义和谐社会若干重大问题的决定). The *Decision* sets, as a basic requirement of Chinese education, continued educational development and the promotion of educational equity. This *Decision* marks the first instance of a definition of educational equity by a central government document. Since then, the concept of educational equity has gradually entered the different levels of government documents, and the value of educational equity is being reflected in reforms of Chinese education.

In spite of the importance of educational equity in China, research into Chinese educational equity outside of China is limited. A search of key terms: "education(al) equity (equality)" and "China (Chinese)" in the ERIC and ProQuest Databases revealed only 22 English language, peer reviewed articles from 1989 to 2016. As shown in Table 1, the articles can be further divided into categories.

In this limited cache of 22 articles, 11 articles were written by Chinese scholars; 8 articles were co-authored by Chinese and Western scholars, and only 3 articles were solely authored by Western scholars. That means that more than 86 percent of English literature on Chinese educational equity research has been contributed by Chinese scholars. This limited literature provides some information for interested scholars but there is a need to provide more local (Chinese)-based literature to the international research community to

enable international scholars to understand the historical development and current situation of Chinese educational equity.

Table 1: International context of Chinese educational equity research

Themes	Author(s)	No. of Articles
Resource/finance issue	Ding & Lu, 2007; Dong & Wan, 2012; Sun & Barrientos, 2009; Tsang, 1994; Wang, 2013	5
Regional /rural issue	Fan & Peng, 2008; Jacob, 2006; Li, Zhou & Fan, 2014; Robinson, 2008; Wei, 2012	5
Minority/ethnic issue	Carjuzaa et al., 2008; Kwong & Hong, 1989; Sun & Qi, 2007; Wang, 2013	4
Policy study	Jia, 2013; Mu et al., 2013; Wang & Gao, 2013; Zhang, Huan & Li, 2007	4
Gender issue	Wang & Staver, 1995; Zhang, Kao, & Hannum, 2007	2
Subject teaching study	Zhao, Valcke, Desoete and Verhaeghe, 2012; Zhu, Gu, Collis and Moonen, 2011	2
Total		22

EDUCATIONAL EQUALITY THEORY AND PRACTICE IN THE MAO ERA

According to Ma Rhea (2014), the concepts of educational equality and educational equity align with the Aristotelian equality principle (the same for all) and fairness principle (different but appropriate). Brighouse (1995, p. 145) defined educational equality as “the same educational opportunities must be available to equally talented individuals with the same willingness to make an effort to acquire the necessary skills and qualifications”. To Opheim (2004, p, 13), “educational equity refers to an educational and learning environment in which individuals can consider options and make choices throughout their lives based on their abilities and talents, not on the basis of stereotypes, biased expectations or discrimination”. In this paper, the two terms are utilized to discuss the same issues in different Chinese historical contexts. The major purpose of using different terms in the different contexts is to highlight the impact of political ideology on the development of Chinese educational equity research.

Marxist educational equality theory

Marxist theory on educational equality has two main sources: Marxist discourse on equality, and Marxist theory of the comprehensive development of the individual. In fact, Marx and Engels did not explicitly and systematically offer a theory of equality, nor did they directly discuss issues of educational equality. Marxist discourse on equality is derived mainly from the essays of Engels. In his essay, *Anti-Dühring* (1877), Engels talks of equality as one of the fundamental human rights, which transcends national boundaries. “It was a matter of course that the demand for equality should assume a general character reaching out beyond the individual state, that freedom and equality should be proclaimed human rights” (Engels, 1959, p. 146). He further writes:

The idea of equality, both in its bourgeois and in its proletarian form, is therefore itself a historical product, the creation of which required definite historical conditions that in turn themselves presuppose a long previous history. It is therefore anything but an eternal truth (p.148).

Based on the critique of equality beliefs in class society, Marx and Engels explained the proletariat's concept of equality as: "the real content of the proletarian demand for equality is the demand for the abolition of classes. Any demand for equality which goes beyond that, of necessity passes into absurdity (Engels, 1959, pp. 147-148).

In Marxist theory, people who are in power provide an authoritative interpretation of equality. That is, interpretations of equality were made by feudal lords in a feudal society, the bourgeois in a capitalist society and the proletariat in a socialist society. Therefore, in a Marxist discourse, "any social equality is not abstract, absolute and eternal; however, it is specific, relative and historical" (Zhang, 2006, p. 19, my translation). Engels (1959) points out that:

[Social equality] has either justified the domination and the interests of the ruling class, or ever since the oppressed class became powerful enough, it has represented its indignation against this domination and the future interests of the oppressed (pp. 131-132).

In general, the Marxist discourse on equality includes two aspects: "(1) any social equality involves the performance of certain economic relations; (2) any social equality has a class nature" (Li, 2008, p. 267, my translation) From a Marxist perspective, then, the most decisive factors of social inequality are economic relations and the division of labour.

Marxist theory on the comprehensive development of individuals is explained by Marx, in *Grundrisse* (1857-58), by the three stages of the historical development of society:

Relations of personal dependence (entirely spontaneous at the outset) are the first social forms, in which human productive capacity develops only to a slight extent and at isolated points. Personal independence founded on objective [sachlicher] dependence is the second great form, in which a system of general social metabolism, of universal relations, of all-round needs and universal capacities is formed for the first time. Free individuality, based on the universal development of individuals and on their subordination of their communal, social productivity as their social wealth, is the third stage. (p. 5)

For Marske (1991, p.45), the three stages of social development are characterized as "personal dependence," "personal dependence founded on material dependence," and "free individuality." The concept of absolute advancement of a person can be exemplified in the relationship between man and nature, man and society, and the individual itself. From a Marxist perspective, the complete development of individuals should include "comprehensive development of human capacity, human social relations and human personality" (Li, 2006, p. 32, my translation). To attain people's full growth, the abolition of private property is a prerequisite. According to Engels (1847):

The rounded development of the capacities of all members of society through the elimination of the present division of labor, through industrial education, through engaging in varying activities, through the participation by all in the enjoyments produced by all, through the combination of city and country (p. 66).

Education is one of the important ways to realize the maximum potential of individuals. To Marx, it is in society's best interests to provide "an education that will, in the case of every child over a given age, combine productive labour with instruction and gymnastics, not only as one of the methods of adding to the efficiency of production, but as the only method of producing fully developed human beings" (Engels, 1959, p. 443). Engels (1847) also observes that:

Education will enable young people quickly to familiarize themselves with the whole system of production and to pass from one branch of production to another in response to the needs of society or their own inclinations. It will, therefore, free them from the one-sided character, which the present-day division of labor impresses upon every individual (p. 66).

Marxist discourse has played a dominant role in the transformation and reconstruction of Chinese society in the wake of the establishment of the People's Republic of China. Marxist philosophy has also been the theoretical foundation of social science research in China, with research on Chinese educational equity no exception. Mao shared the theoretical terrain with Marx and Engels, and cleverly blended Marxist discourses on equality and comprehensive development of individuals into the practice of Chinese educational equality.

Maoist educational equality practice

Before the establishment of the Socialist system in 1956, China's education policy was the New Democracy. The pursuit of educational equality was the core value of education policy making in the early 1950s. It emphasized the provision of education for most of the people. For example, a variety of informal educational practices were established, such as Literacy Class, Workers' and Peasants' Fast Learning School, Amateur School, Political School, Cadres¹ Training School, providing cadres, workers and peasants with opportunities to access all kinds of education at different levels. After years of effort, the percentage of students from these groups was much higher than from other social groups. For example, in the field of higher education, the percentage of students from workers and peasants increased "from 20.5% in 1952 to 55.28% in 1958, and reached to 71.2% in 1976" (Ma & Gao, 1998, my translation). However, various policy analysts and policy makers argued that new China's education overemphasized the class attribute of Marxist discourse on equality, in which family background and political belief became the primary criterion for access to education. For instance:

Influenced by the theory of class struggle, educational equality emphasized "equality within the class" and advocated the priority of worker-peasant children to access education by implementing a "class line" policy that discriminated against "non-working people's" children. It seriously infringed citizens' equal rights to access education (Yang 2006, p. 3, my translation).

In the early 1950s, new China, as a socialist nation recently born from a civil war, urgently needed many high-level, professional and technical personnel in various industries. To ensure that limited educational resources were used with the greatest efficiency in a short time, the Chinese government gathered human, material and financial resources to organize

¹ Cadres – public officers in state organs, armed forces and people's organizations.

a number of *Key Schools* (重点学校), into which they put the country's best teachers and students. However, *Key Schools* quickly became the privilege of the cadres' class. This was against Mao's ideals of educational equality, which targeted ordinary workers and peasants at the grassroots level. Mao was aware of the seriousness of the problem. In 1955, all the schools for children of cadres were cancelled.

It is possible to argue that the educational policy of the New Democracy was apt for the situation of China at that time. In order to speed up social and economic development, China drew lessons from the Soviet Union, within the context of the "Cold War". With the start of the Socialist Transformation² in 1953, the education system of New Democracy was replaced by a formal and institutionalized copy of the Soviet system of education, based on Kairov's pedagogy that used Marxist discourses to describe and interpret educational issues. Kairov claimed that "education is a tool of the ruling class³ to consolidate its class domination for its own political purpose" (Pan, 2006, p. 20, my translation). In a historical context, Kairov's pedagogy played a positive role in the development of Chinese education. However, it overemphasized the class nature of education and learning of systematic knowledge, which "resulted in a rigid form of education, divorced from practical life" (Peterson, 2001, p. 173). Informal and universal education, directed towards workers and peasants, was eventually abandoned by the education system. None of this was conducive to providing all-encompassing education in the new China. Yang (2000) discussed the negative influence of the Soviet model on Chinese educational equality, arguing that the main problem was the serious imbalance in the allocation of educational resources which emphasized higher education and neglected elementary education. This led to substandard elementary education that weakened the development of education (especially in the rural areas) over the long term.

Mao was opposed to uncritically copying the experience of other nations, which were divorced from the context of China. He was particularly opposed to the rigid education model of the Soviet Union. With the completion of the Socialist Transformation in 1956, the question of how to form a socialist education policy was put on the agenda. Following the Marxist discourse on the comprehensive development of the individual, Mao Zedong outlined the socialist education policy in his article *Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People* in 1957. He said China's education policy should ensure educated people are morally, intellectually and physically developed, and become workers with a socialist consciousness and culture. Here, Mao, for the first time, utilized Marxist theory on the comprehensive development of individuals to interpret new China's education.

When relations between China and the Soviet Union deteriorated, China began to conduct a comprehensive critique of the Soviet model, which became known as the *Proletarian Dogmatism* (无产阶级教条主义). In 1958, China's central government issued *On the Instructions of Education Work* (关于教育工作的指示), which clarified the Party's education policy: education serves proletarian politics and combines with productive labour. In order to implement the policy, a nationwide "education revolution" was gradually launched, which affected many aspects of Chinese education. One of the

² From 1953 to 1956, China completed the socialist transformation of agriculture, the handicraft industry and capitalist industry, finished shifting the means of production from private ownership to public ownership, and thus introduced the basic system of socialism.

³ According to Marxism, the Proletariat is the ruling class in a Socialist society.

important foci of the education revolution was the push to emphasize educational equality. According to Mao, ensuring the educational rights of working people's children was the main task of education. At that time, rural, grassroots-oriented education was the primary focus of education policy. In order to change the workers and peasants' vulnerable position, Mao sought to break the constraints of formal education and to use a variety of channels, and a variety of ways to develop education.

Because of Mao's preference for the worker and peasant classes, education policies were particularly conducive to universal education in the vast rural areas of China. According to the research of Yang (2006), there was a big development of rural education between 1962 and 1976. For example, the percentage of students in junior high school in the countryside, 33.7% in 1965, increased to 75.2% in 1976. In contrast, the percentage of students in junior high school in the city decreased from 42.1% in 1965 to 15.6% in 1976. However, "it is very simple, brutal and devastating to promote the education ideal by completely negating intellectuals, launching a mass movement and levelling political criticism" (Yang, 2006, p. 4, my translation). Due to the overemphasis on the political function and class nature of education, development of education sacrificed quality of education and deprived the non-working classes of their educational rights. In the context of the Cultural Revolution (from 1966 to 1976), *Taking the Class Struggle as the Key Link* (以阶级斗争为纲)⁴ became the dominant policy discourse related to educational equality. By limiting the educational rights of non-working class people, Chinese education only achieved "educational equality within specific social classes" (Yang, 2006, p. 4), which advocated the priority of workers and peasants' children to access education, and implemented a discriminatory education policy for non-working people's children. Yang (2006) further argued that, with the emergence of the privileged class of cadres, even educational equality within working and peasant classes became distorted; by emphasizing family background and political faith, children of the cadre class had inordinate opportunities to access education.

Discussions of the effect of education policy on the comprehensive development of individuals run through the whole Mao era. The first words on this can be found in the *First National Conference on Secondary Education* (第一次全国中等教育会议) in 1951. According to the speech of the first Minister of Education of new China, Ma Xulun, the purpose and educational objectives in general secondary schools must comply with the principles of thorough improvement to guarantee that young generations gain all-round maturity in intellectual, moral, physical and aesthetic arenas. In the same year, the *Journal of People's Education* published diverse discussion papers on comprehensive development. For example, Pan (1951) postulated that all people must be educated so that each gains the necessary knowledge to be full citizens of a nation. In a different vein, Zhang (1951) criticized misjudgements about implementation of egalitarian teaching methods, which emphasized general knowledge and neglected specialty knowledge; emphasized full advancement and disregarded focal development.

The Chinese socialist social system was established in 1956 with the completion of the Socialist Transformation. In order to meet the needs of the socialist education policy, many other scholars joined in the discussions on the idea of comprehensive development education. Looking at different understandings of "individuals", Chen (1956) pointed out that the comprehensive development of *individuals* is the comprehensive development of

⁴ Once a popular political slogan that exaggerates and exalts the class struggle in China.

human beings. The attention in discussions was, thereby, transferred from “personality” to “humans” per se. These discussions played an important role in constructing the Socialist education policy. In 1961, the policy officially stated:

Education must serve proletarian politics and must combine with production to make certain educated people develop their moral, intellectual and physical aspects, to become workers with socialist consciousness and culture (Zhen & Zhu, 1991, pp. 136-137).

In general, these discussions enriched Marxist discourse on educational equality and the education policy of comprehensive development played a positive role in the recovery and advancement of new China’s education. A great number of experts emerged in various fields in the Mao era. However, under the influence of Leftist philosophy, the education policy of comprehensive development was misunderstood in the Great Leap Forward.⁵ Education combined with production was misunderstood as education plus physical work. Almost all the teachers and students in all types of schools did physical work in factories and rural areas, and also took part in all kinds of social activities. Some schools had their own factories and farms. Due to the overemphasis of physical work in the education system, the systematic learning of knowledge was neglected, which caused a decline in educational quality. The negative influences of these educational ideals extended to the “Cultural Revolution.” In the early period of the Cultural Revolution, primary schools and universities suspended all classes and launched a revolution whereby all teachers and academic staff were forced to do physical work in the factories and farms. The Cultural Revolution seriously disrupted Chinese education.

EDUCATIONAL EQUITY RESEARCH IN THE POST-MAO ERA (SINCE 1978)

After the Cultural Revolution, *bringing order out of chaos* (拨乱反正) was one of the most important political missions for the whole nation. In 1978, the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee (十一届三中全会) re-established the ideological, political and organizational lines of Marxism. The main task of China shifted from *taking class struggle as the key link* to the construction of socialist modernization: the Reform and Opening Up Policy was officially launched. Accordingly, the restoration of standardized, systematic and academic education was the primary task of Chinese education. The adage of *more knowledge more reactionary* (知识越多越反动) promulgated during the Cultural Revolution was changed and the power of knowledge and intellectuals’ dignity were re-established. “We must create within the Party an atmosphere of respect for knowledge and respect for trained personnel” (Deng, 1984, p. 128). Meanwhile, notions of educational equality began to move from equality for the worker and peasant classes to the equality of educational opportunity for all citizens. However, concern about educational equality became subordinate to development of the economy and the realization of socialist modernization.

⁵ The Great Leap Forward is the term for Mao’s 5 Year Plan (1958-1963) of agricultural and industrial reformation that was effected by land redistribution and social and labour reconstruction. The ideal was not realised, despite initial positive results and was abandoned in late 1960. The Plan was a precursor to the Cultural Revolution.

At that time, the Soviet model was abandoned but a new development model was not established: China stood at a crossroads. In this new historical context, China's education began to translate and compile Anglo-American pedagogy and educational theories. John Rawls' "*A Theory of Justice*" is one of the far-reaching influential theories on Chinese educational equality research. Rawls (1999) stated the principles of social justice as follows:

First: each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive scheme of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for others. Second: social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that: 1) they are to be of the greatest benefit to the least-advantaged members of society; 2) offices and positions must be open to everyone under conditions of fair equality of opportunity (p. 60).

Tracing the development of Western educational equality theories, Chinese scholars (Chen & Hu, 2008; Guo 2003; Qiu & Wang, 2007; Su, 2003; Wu & Zhu, 2006;) usually regard Rawls' theory of social justice as an important theoretical starting point of the redefinition of the conception of educational equality in the post Mao era. Rawls' theory of social justice is reinterpreted as three principles: "the principle of equality and freedom, the principle of fairness of opportunity and the principle of difference" (Zhong & Tsang, 2009, p. 10, my translation). Referring to these principles of social justice, Zhong and Tsang (2009) further indicate that the allocation of compulsory education resources follows the principle of equality and freedom, and the provision of opportunity for higher education abides by the principles of fairness of opportunity and of difference. Similarly, under the influence of Rawls' theory, Xie (2009) divided the meaning of educational equity into three elements: (1) to ensure everyone enjoys equal rights and obligations of education; (2) to provide equal opportunity and conditions of education; and (3) to ensure equal results of education. The first element has a legal base, and is the prerequisite and foundation for the other levels. The three levels can also be reframed as the starting-point for equity, process equity and outcome equity.

Another Western academic rationale that played a significant role in Chinese educational equity research is the *Coleman Report: Equality of Educational Opportunity* (Coleman, 1966). This is "the first large-scale attempt to elucidate, empirically, the extent to which equality has, or has not, been achieved in a particular national educational system" (Husén, 1972, p. 13). By reviewing the changing concept of equality of educational opportunity at different stages of development, Coleman (1968, p. 6) characterized this equality as follows:

1. Providing free education up to a given level, which constituted the principal entry point to the labor force.
2. Providing a common curriculum for all children, regardless of background.
3. Partly by design and partly because of low population density, providing that children from diverse background attend the same school.
4. Providing equality within a given locality, since local taxes provided the source of support for schools.

In discussions of the *Coleman Report*, Chinese scholars (Yi & Zheng, 2007; Zhu, 2003) indicate it was helpful for Chinese educational equality research. Ma (2006) pointed out that it is necessary to comprehensively investigate current issues associated with equality of educational opportunity in China. He proposed that Chinese educational equality research establish a quality-oriented idea of equality of educational opportunity. It should, he said, construct a new school performance evaluation system with the extent of students'

progress as a core, and provide institutional protection of equality of educational opportunity to disadvantaged children. Borrowing from the *Coleman Report*, Yi and Zheng (2009) suggested constructing an index system of Chinese educational equity monitoring that: defines a direction for the development of and an orientation for the pursuit of, educational equity; collects socio-economic information about students; and selects variables that can distinctly reflect the conditions of educational equity. Generally speaking, the *Coleman Report* is one of the most influential works on Chinese educational equity research. The concept of “equality of educational opportunity” has also been the authoritative discourse of this research. Ironically, to Coleman, the concept of equality of educational opportunity is a “mistaken and misleading” concept.

It is mistaken because it locates the “equality of opportunity” within the educational institutions, and thus focuses attention on education as an end in itself rather than as it properly is, a means to ends achieved in adulthood. It is misleading because it suggests that equal educational opportunity, defined in something other than a purely formal (input) way, is achievable, while it is not (Coleman, 1975, p. 27).

Husén is another Western scholar whose works plays an important role in the research about educational equity in China. Following in the footsteps of Coleman, Husén (1972) traced the history of the concept of equality from the 18th Century and distinguishes three major stages in the development of the concept of equality of educational opportunity: the conservative stage, the liberal stage and, a new concept, the educational equality stage. To Husén, one of the conservative perceptions of equality of educational opportunity is to emphasize the “selection of talent” for commercial purposes. “It is important to search, for the benefit of the nation’s economy and the fame of the individual who might be thus discovered” (Husén, 1972, p. 28). The liberal conception of equality of educational opportunity is that:

Each individual is born with a certain, relatively constant, capacity or intelligence. The education system should be so designed as to remove external barriers of an economic and/or geographical nature that prevent able students from the lower classes taking advantage of their inborn intelligence which entitles them to due social promotion (Husén, 1972, p. 31).

According to the liberal conception of equality, “all individuals should be given the same opportunity to start their life career and not necessarily that it should ultimately bring about greater equality in terms of social and/or economic status” (Husén, 1972, p. 33). To Husén, then, equality of educational opportunity is not necessarily equivalent to social equality. Sometimes, in order to provide equality of opportunity in education, unequal treatment of different social groups is needed; “one should provide equal opportunity for unequal treatment so far as socially relevant differences are concerned” (Husén, 1972, p. 39). After reviewing conceptual changes in different historical stages, Husén finally identified “the modern, more radical” concept of equality of educational opportunity. That is, “in order to achieve the long-range objective of more equality in occupational career and standard of living, remedial action must be taken in the wider context within which the schools are operating—that is, society at large” (Husén, 1972, p. 39). Here, equality of educational opportunity is no longer confined to the education system. The achievement of educational equality should be linked to the context of social reform.

In general, from the point of view of the individual, Husén interprets the concept of equality in three ways: “(1) as a starting point; (2) as a treatment; and (3) as a final goal – or as a

combination of these three” (p. 14). Referring to Husén’s interpretation, Yang (2000) indicated that educational equity is the same as equity in other social fields, which can be divided into three types: equity of starting point, equity of process and equity of outcome. Zhu and Qu (2008), inspired by Husén’s theory, divided equity into two types, which they called interest-distribution equity and operation-procedure equity. Interest–distribution equity calls for a uniform spread of the benefits of education amongst all. Because the government usually allocates educational resources through education policy, operation-procedure equity concerns proportionate allocation of means during the operational process.

If we say Husén’s discussion on equality of educational opportunity ensues from Coleman’s theory, we must acknowledge McMahan’s theory of equity has its own character. Considering equity demands of different social groups, McMahan and Geske (1982) indicated three types of equity: horizontal equity, intergenerational equity and vertical equity. Horizontal equity requires identical treatment amongst peers, measured by actual spend per pupil. Intergenerational equity recognizes the need to rectify disparate learning opportunities due to students’ homes and environment. Vertical equity requires favourable treatment of disadvantaged students. Bao and Liu (2009) utilized McMahan’s theory to measure the application of an equity principle in the expenditure of public education resources. They indicated that there are three imbalances in the allocation of higher education resources in China: imbalance between different regions; imbalance between different institutions of higher education; and, imbalance between different levels of higher education (such as national key universities and local universities).

The above-mentioned theories all play an important role in Chinese educational equity research. Although Marxism has been the dominant discourse of the academic research in China, the introduction of these Anglo-American theories greatly broadened the academic views of Chinese scholars. The discussion of equality is currently no longer limited to Marxist discourse which mainly emphasizes the relationship between production and class struggle. The release of *Decision on a Number of Major Issues about Building a Socialist Harmonious Society* (2006) by the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee was another milestone for Chinese educational equity research. Since 2006, the research of Chinese educational equity has entered into a “New Era”.

CONCLUSION

Through offering a historical perspective on educational equity research, this paper argues that the dominant discourse of Chinese educational equity research has changed with the different historical, economic and political contexts of China. I found that academic research on educational equity almost did not exist in the Mao era. At that time, most Chinese education policy research was government-led and deeply affected by political ideology. Marxist theory of educational equality played a dominant role in the research and practice of Chinese educational equity in Mao’s era. Due to an overemphasis of the political function and class nature of education, the non-working classes were deprived of their educational rights in the Mao era. The people from the lower strata of society gained more opportunity for education. However, with the emergence of the privileged class of cadres, even educational equality within working and peasant classes became distorted. By emphasizing family background and political faith, children of the cadre class had inordinate opportunities to access education.

In the post-Mao era, especially since the 1990s, research on educational equity has rapidly developed. Chinese educational equity research introduced Western academic discourses and adapted them to the context of China. The notions of educational equality began to move from equality for the worker and peasant classes to the equality of educational opportunity for all citizens. However, due to an overemphasis on the economic function of education, educational equality became subordinate to the development of the economy and the realization of socialist modernization.

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