

How do gender and geographical factors impact Chinese children's enrolment in schools?

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Education is the keystone in a country's transition from an unskilled labour economy to a developed one with high social welfare. Many regions in China still lack an acceptable standard of living. The country's rural populations are significantly poorer than those in urban areas. This means that many families cannot afford to send their children to school, creating poverty traps for Chinese households and a middle-income trap for the country. This inequality disproportionately impacts girls in rural areas. Therefore, this blog post will address the question of how gender and geographical factors impact Chinese children's enrolment in schools.

Sparrow Village (2003, Christine Choy (崔明慧)) follows the life of a young girl and her classmates studying in rural southwestern China. The girl had to drop out of school because her family couldn't afford tuition for her and her brother. Since she has yearned for education but must help at home instead.

It's incredibly upsetting that a massive proportion of rural Chinese children don't get the opportunity to be educated. This significantly limits their options and shapes their futures. I feel immensely privileged enough to receive a high school education and study at university. Being in a city, I can access resources I often take for granted. For example, public transport means my university commute is only 15 minutes. However, the rural children in *Sparrow Village* had to travel three hours on foot to get to school.

Through *Sparrow Village*, I also became more aware of how gender comes into my access to education. Because I am female, I will face challenges in my STEM career and will likely be paid less than my male counterparts. My status as a female is lower in Western society, but these power dynamics seem much more emphasised in rural China. Girls and boys are much less equal. For instance, I have had the same access to education as boys. This is a luxury not granted to most rural Chinese girls. At a family level, my parents equally encouraged my brother and I to enter tertiary education, and there has been no difference in how they have supported us. As we see in *Sparrow Village*, girls are actively discouraged from enrolling in high school education, let alone tertiary, as tuition is too much. Many families cannot afford the opportunity cost of sending their children to school.

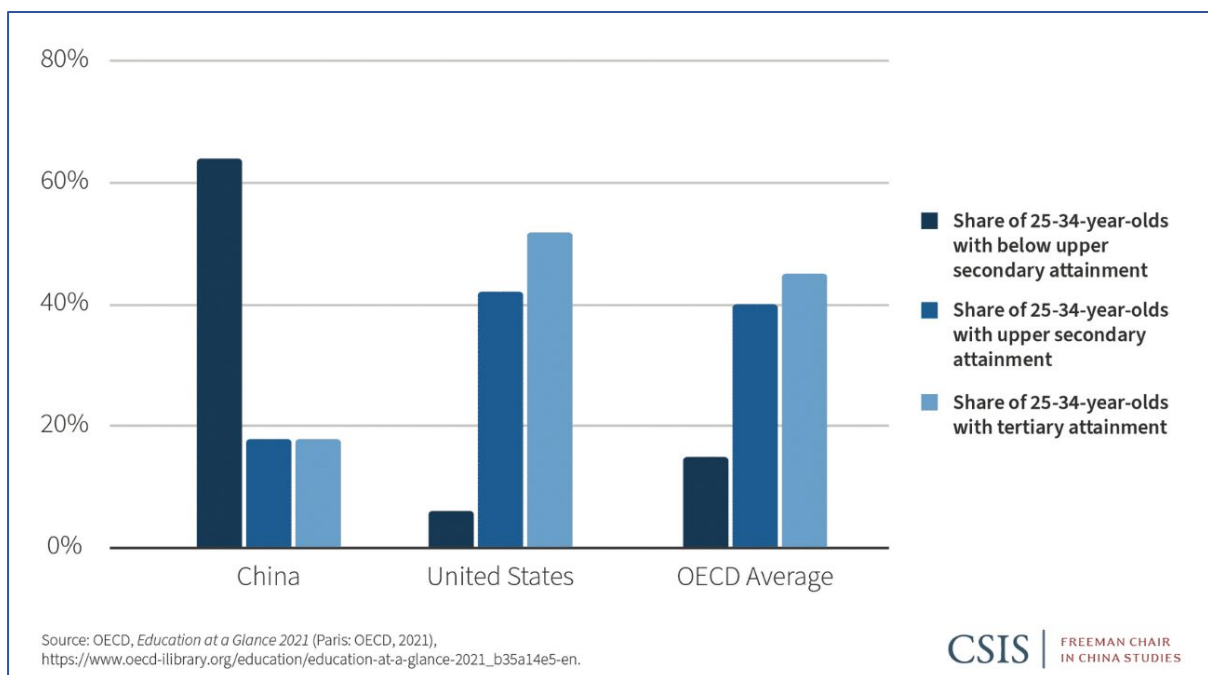
Sparrow Village increased my understanding of this complex issue as boys in these parts of China are just inherently prioritised by low-income families. The idea of girls as being of a lower status than boys is ingrained into China's society as girls marry off to other families while boys stay and earn money for them. Therefore, a girl's education is deemed less necessary at a family level. One of the girls explains, "Poor families only send their boys to school." Many families cannot afford the loss of income from sending their children to school. Some children are needed as farm workers so families

can afford to live. Low-income families are focused on surviving and escaping poverty. This can make it extremely difficult to prioritise a long-term investment like education. In *Sparrow Village*, a girl explains, "I'm torn; if I keep going to high school, then my parents will suffer a lot, but if I stop, then what will my future be?" On top of this, schools have tuition fees that impoverished families cannot afford.

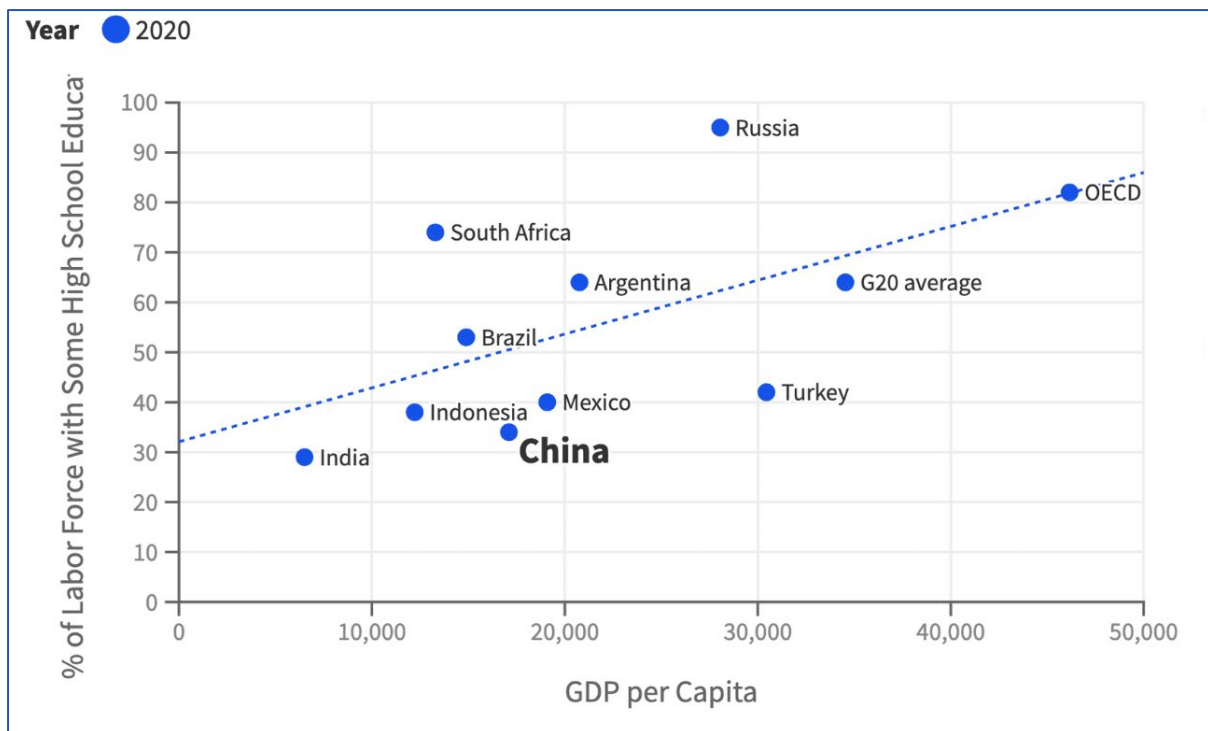
Before watching *Sparrow Village*, I thought the most effective way to target poverty was blanket policies for everyone in a particular group. For instance, cash transfers for women and girls or free lunches at schools in rural areas. However, after watching this documentary, I've developed a deeper understanding of how policies to mitigate this issue can't simply target all girls or all rural schools. Many children, like the ones in *Sparrow Village*, are missed by policies like this. There needs to be refined intersectional targeting to ensure support reaches the children most in need.

CHINA'S EDUCATION OVERALL

Education is free and mandatory for a minimum of nine years in China. This government policy appears to have worked as the current literacy rate is 99.83%, a stark increase from the pre-1950s, which was between 15-25%. Significant progress has been made, but there is still a long way to go in developing a skilled labour force. We can see that China has a minimal share of adults with upper secondary attainment compared to other nations.



As recent as 2015, 70% of China's working-age adults were high school dropouts. This lack of education is shared among countries stuck in the middle-income trap. If anything, China is less educated than most other middle-income countries, with only about 30% of their labour force having some high school education.

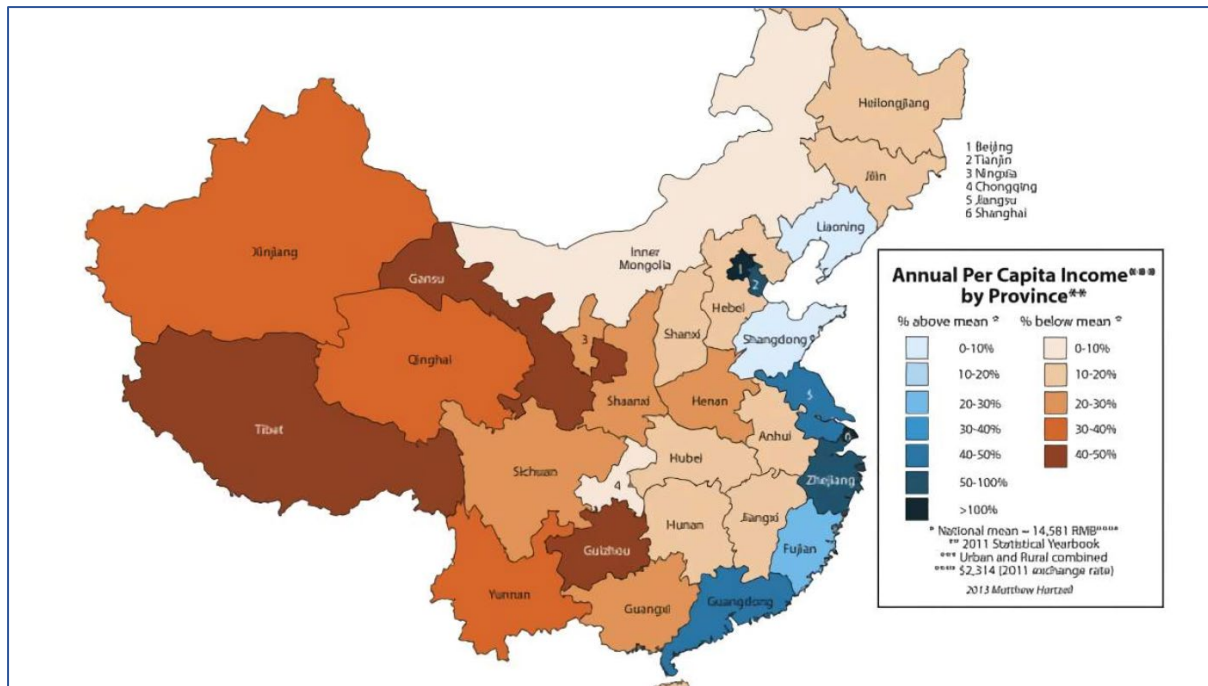


If China wants to escape this, further investment in rural higher education is required. Educational inequality is at the heart of what drives China's income inequality.

RURAL-URBAN DIVIDE

Historically, China's economic growth was fuelled by unskilled labour from the countryside. In recent decades, the unskilled wage rate in China has risen. This has led to many companies seeking cheaper labour in other poorer countries like Vietnam and Bangladesh. The decreasing demand for unskilled labour has disproportionately impacted China's interior rural areas.

This inequality is between the eastern and western Chinese provinces. Eastern provinces are generally wealthier due to their proximity to the coast, while the interior regions have much higher poverty rates. Coastal provinces are the leaders in China's economic development. This can be attributed to lower transportation costs for trading with each other and accessibility to foreign markets.



The red dot shows where Miao village, featured in the documentary, is located. It's in the bottom quartile of per capita income. This geographic labour market segmentation creates huge employment opportunity gaps between Western and Eastern China and between the countryside and the cities. This pattern leads to massive migrations of unskilled labour into cities.

On a more micro scale, there is a significant rural-urban divide within China's provinces Li (2021). The rural-urban opportunity and income divide can be observed in Guizhou, the province in which *Sparrow Village* takes place. Low economic development in Guizhou and a lower standard of living result in significant migration into cities Liu, Li, and He (2014). In addition, China employs a restrictive household registration system called the hukou system. Essentially, it ties people to where they or their parents were born. Its political function is to enhance social stability as the free movement of people was seen as dangerous. In practice, people don't stop migrating; this system makes it much more complicated and unsafe. This pattern of internal migration has significant consequences for children and their education. Due to the Hukou system, migrants often cannot put down permanent roots in their new cities. This means they are forced to leave their children behind in the countryside, or some rural migrants decide to bring their children/give birth while working in cities. Their lack of hukou status leaves these children no way of enrolling in public schools, even if their parents could afford to send them.

GENDER DIVIDE

Gender inequality is ingrained into China's culture. Confucian ideas about filial piety encourage a preference for sons who stay with their families and carry the name. Daughters traditionally marry off into another family. This means families prefer boys as they ensure secure financial support within the family. As a result, the education of boys is prioritised over girls. A girl in *Sparrow Village* states, "One of the girls I know had to drop out so her brother could continue studying". This preference for boys, in general, has created a significant gender imbalance, also a side effect of the

one-child policy. There was an increase in female sex-specific abortions and the selling and abandoning of new-born girls.

This effect seems to be more prominent in rural areas. In *Sparrow Village*, a girl points out the compounding impact of gender and geography, stating, "In these parts, boys are treated as more important than girls" As a result of this prejudice, employment opportunities for women in rural areas are sparse. Illiteracy also prevents many of China's rural women from entering higher-paying jobs in business sectors, making their lives "unnecessarily difficult". A Chinese woman is paid 72% of what a Chinese man earns: a gender pay gap of around 28%. While the EU gender pay gap was 13% in 2020.

A migration imbalance further compounds this gender imbalance. Many women leave rural villages for cities Davin (1996). The documentary closes with a girl and her mother going to the city to attempt to sell handmade baskets, hoping they will make enough money for the girl's tuition fee. It's implied they don't manage to sell any as they cannot compete with machine-woven baskets. A recent article follows what happened after the making of *Sparrow Village*. Field (2008) explains that a highway was built in the following years, significantly improving the villages' accessibility. The girl from the documentary's end takes the highway to Shanghai, where she was meant to receive an education in a local school. Instead, she worked extremely long hours in a restaurant leading her to move back to the village.

Despite its undeniable progress in education, China still has much work to do. The country's current policies miss those who need them the most, rural girls. *Sparrow Village* has abundantly clarified that gender and geographical factors significantly impact Chinese children's school enrolment. The lower socio-economic status of China's southwestern provinces makes education less accessible and often not an option for children of low-income families. This is only compounded by traditional Confucian ideas of filial piety and the one-child policy, creating inequality between girls and boys. If China wants to escape the middle-income trap, it needs to educate its population and ensure its policies reach everyone who needs support - not just urban children, not just boys.

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