

Jarren Loke: To what extent does rural-urban educational inequality restrict China's continued economic development?

Introduction

China's unprecedented economic rise has positioned it as a global leader in manufacturing, but the nation currently faces critical challenges in its transition from labour-intensive industries to high-skill, knowledge-based sectors. My research question is: "To what extent does rural-urban educational inequality restrict China's continued economic development?" Among the challenges for China's rise, rural-urban educational inequality emerges as a significant barrier that limits the development of the skilled workforce. Such disparities prevent the development of innovation and productivity, which are essential to enabling China to compete with developed economies in the production of higher value-added goods, such that the country can escape the middle-income trap (Gries, 2024a). In terms of educational attainment, the proportion of students from rural areas going on to key senior high schools is almost 20% lower than that of urban junior high school graduates (Guo and Li, 2024). Addressing this educational disparity is essential for China's continued economic progress amid the growing problem of its shrinking labour force resulting from its ageing population. Furthermore, rural-urban educational inequality is particularly persistent due to several systemic factors, which all contribute to preventing rural youth from accessing quality education. These factors include the hukou system, poor teaching quality in rural schools and poverty in rural areas. The documentary, *We Were SMART* vividly illustrates how such poverty worsens this educational inequality, which will be explored in greater detail in my blogpost.

Summary

Directed by Li Yifan, *We Were Smart* captures the lives of rural-urban migrant youth who embraced the SMART (Sha Ma Te) subculture in the early 2000s. Director Li spent two years gathering narrative accounts from approximately 915 former SMART members (IMDB, no date). This unique movement allowed these young workers, who often found themselves marginalised and exploited, to express their individuality through flamboyant and unconventional fashion and hairstyles, serving as a form of expressive consumption (Gries, 2024d). This provides them with much needed reprieve from their monotonous factory routines, helping to alleviate feelings of isolation they experienced in an unfamiliar environment and providing these workers with a sense of belonging as they formed massive QQ group chats amongst themselves.

The documentary highlights the precarious circumstances faced by rural migrants. Many endured long working hours in hazardous conditions for minimal pay. One interviewee lamented losing his mother shortly after she suffered a fatal accident with machinery at her factory. Additionally, workers are frequently exposed to toxic and harmful substances, which could lead to physical health issues such as skin rashes and other ailments. Employers provided little to no compensation for such injuries and illnesses, leaving these workers to

bear the cost. Most of the young rural migrants in the documentary are shown to have left school prematurely, compelled by poverty and the need to provide for their family. As mentioned by Xiaohui, another interviewee: “Everything costs money, I didn’t let myself touch any of it, I gave it all to my family.” This reveals how economic necessity forced these youth to abandon their education and enter the labour force at a young age, ultimately sacrificing their basic educational needs and future opportunities for personal development. The documentary illustrates how the early transition to work confines young migrants to low-wage, unskilled labour, restricting their ability to escape poverty. This is compounded by the fact that many of the migrants interviewed are second-generation “left-behind children”, whose parents also faced similar hardships. This suggests a concerning trend of persistent limited access to quality education in rural areas, perpetuated by intergenerational poverty, emphasising the deeply entrenched nature of rural-urban educational inequality and its long-term impact on China’s social and economic mobility.

Personal Reactions

Watching the documentary was an emotionally profound experience that vividly exposed the structural issues faced by China’s young rural migrants, as they were forced to become independent at ages as young as 12. Their resilience in the face of such adversity was both inspiring and deeply heartbreaking. Coming from a background where meritocracy and equal opportunity is championed, I felt great injustice at the stark disparity in education and career opportunities between China’s urban and rural residents. Although I was already aware of this rural-urban divide, these stories added a more emotional, human dimension to the disproportionate burden borne by the rural migrant population and illustrated the long-term implications of this inequality. The documentary reinforced my understanding of the critical role education plays in facilitating social mobility, which is essential to individual advancement, economic progress and national development. The documentary’s emphasis on the significance of self-expression as a defiance against dehumanising systems also resonated deeply with me as I continue to explore and understand my own identity.

Analysis

China’s economic success is largely the result of export-driven growth, which relied on cheap, unskilled labour to dominate global manufacturing. Ever since its Reform and Opening in 1978 up to 2020, Chinese exports have risen from less than 1% of the global total to 15% (Gries, 2024b). However, as wages rise, China has begun losing its comparative advantage to lower-cost countries like Vietnam (Gries, 2024a). To preserve long-term economic competitiveness and avoid the middle-income trap, China must transition towards a high-value, innovation-led economy. When transitioning from a poor- to middle-income country, there were various drivers of growth, such as mobilising inputs, marketising, removing inefficiencies and developing productivity (Rozelle, 2024). However, shifting to a high-income economy relies almost exclusively on productivity growth (Rozelle, 2024). This requires significant investments in education to develop a well-educated workforce, particularly for rural areas, which have historically supplied much of the unskilled labour for China’s export industry but have since been left behind in terms of education and infrastructure investment. Education serves a crucial role in driving economic growth by

increasing human capital and labour productivity (Grant, 2017), which relates to the educational attainment and skill levels of the population. This ultimately helps to improve the salaries and employability of China's citizens, enabling them to contribute their knowledge and expertise towards innovation (Runde, Bandura and McLean, 2023). For China, addressing the rural-urban educational inequality is essential as without equitable access, a significant proportion of the population remains excluded from contributing to high-skill industries that will power future growth.

In China, there has been a large-scale migration of over a billion rural residents to urban centres since 1980 in search of better employment opportunities, suggesting a problem of rural-urban income inequality (Gries, 2024c). This is the result of 'labour market segmentation', which refers to the significant difference in employment opportunities between rural and urban areas (Gries, 2024a). Rural families earn significantly less than their urban counterparts, typically struggling to invest in their children's education. Evidently, the ratio of disposable income between urban and rural residents in 2019 was 3.20:1 (Zhong et al., 2022). This disparity results in many rural youth leaving formal education prematurely to contribute to their household income, a pattern depicted in the documentary, showing how poverty in rural areas exacerbates educational inequality. When these young workers are unable to improve their educational qualifications, they remain trapped in the lower tiers of the labour market.

Even if rural youth were financially able to pursue education, the quality of education they receive would typically fall short of their urban peers. Rural schools frequently suffer from insufficient funding, poor teaching quality and inadequate facilities compared to urban schools (CLB, 2023). In 2014, 77.3% of secondary school teachers in rural areas held at least a bachelor's degree or above, compared to 87.8% of their urban counterparts (An, 2018). This means that rural schools are often staffed by teachers with lower educational qualifications and less training than their urban counterparts. As a result, students in rural areas typically perform worse academically than those in urban schools (Hung, 2019). This problem is compounded by the hukou system which reinforces social hierarchies in Chinese cities, segmenting the population and leaving rural migrants with limited rights (Zhang, 2017). This effectively denies rural migrant workers and their children from accessing urban public services, including education (Gries, 2024c). As such, these children are forced to either attend overcrowded and underfunded migrant schools in cities, or remain in rural areas with similarly limited educational opportunities. Overall, these systemic barriers to education for China's rural population hinders the nation's efforts in cultivating a skilled workforce, preventing the country's shift towards a high-value, innovation-led economy that enables its continued economic development.

Conclusion

"To what extent does rural-urban educational inequality restrict China's continued economic development?" Through poignant stories, *We Were SMART* portrayed the significant gap in opportunities between urban and rural residents, revealing how the inability of rural youth to access quality education locks them into low-paying, manual labour, perpetuating the cycle of

poverty. It also explores how systemic challenges like poverty, the hukou system and inadequate rural teaching standards restrict access to education for rural residents. This limits their potential and by extension, China's economic growth, ultimately obstructing the development of a skilled workforce and keeping China in the middle income trap. As China faces the challenges of an ageing population and shrinking workforce, addressing rural-urban educational inequality is crucial for sustaining economic growth and maintaining long-term competitiveness on the world stage.

Several key strategies can be undertaken to alleviate this issue. Eliminating poverty is essential in allowing rural families to prioritise education and access better opportunities. Investments in rural education quality would provide rural schools with the resources they need to both improve their infrastructure and train their teachers. Finally, reforming the hukou system would remove the systemic barrier preventing rural migrants from accessing urban schools and other public services.

Words: 1582

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