Access to higher education: California and Jiangsu

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Abstract. This study uses the mixed research method to examine the American and Chinese college entrance system with different college admission policies. Based on reading documents from education bureau and school websites and conducting a survey by using self-designed questionnaires to 38 participants from California and Jiangsu, the study explores students’ choices, family backgrounds and parental influence in deciding students’ access to higher education. The results highlight that in both American and Chinese higher education system, students’ family backgrounds play an important role in students’ access to higher education. Such findings are closely tied to social stratification and social mobility in contexts of Chinese and American society, including cultural and social capital students can acquire from parents.

1. Introduction

1.1. Choice of topic

Education is a significant part of everyone’s life trajectory. Access to higher education plays an important role in people’s choices of education opportunities which influence their subsequent career decisions and social mobility. Students have rights to choose among different universities according to their qualifications and abilities. At the same time, universities make different admission policies to admit students who can meet their requirements. Existing research on access to higher education also includes lots of themes which are worth discussing, such as race and ethnicity, parents’ legacy status, students’ special talents, and policies such as affirmative action for minority groups in the U.S. and China. Thus, access to higher education is an interesting topic with complexity that draws much discussion in various fields of the society from the perspective of students’ choices and school decisions.

For me, my personal education trajectory has made me interested in studying the subject of access to higher education in different nations’ educational systems. I was born in a Chinese family with a comfortable level of living. My parents are both civil servants who work for the local government. I am the only child in my family, so all my family educational resources are concentrated on me. My parents made a lot of efforts to help me acquire better education opportunities. After graduating from a common Chinese junior high school, I got a good score on the High School Entrance Examination (Zhongkao), which gave me the opportunity to enter the top high school in my hometown, Suzhou. However, after a series of discussion with my parents and my teachers, I decided to let go the opportunity. The reason is that I did not like the atmosphere in common Chinese senior high schools where students have to pay all their attention and time to prepare for the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao), which is the only deciding factor that tells which university students can get admitted. At that moment, I decided to enter an international department of a senior high to prepare to study at foreign universities. While studying at the international department, apart from learning A-Levels and AP, I took part in a
variety of activities and clubs, such as debate training, speech competitions, music and sports clubs. More importantly, I had time to restart playing the piano as my preferable way of relaxation after quitting it during the high-pressure period due to the High School Entrance Examination.

After experiencing traditional Chinese education system in junior high and western education system in the international department, I chose to study at Durham University in the UK as I used to be curious about the British culture. It is worth mentioning that I took part in the above activities just for interests but not for the college application because activities hardly strengthen the application in the British college admission. Although I chose to go to the UK, the majority of my classmates and my best friend went to the U.S. to accept higher education. When talking with my classmates and my best friend, I heard about “Liberal Arts” in American undergraduate education, so I began to be interested in the American higher education system at that moment.

During the experience of studying abroad, I began to think more about the disadvantages of the Chinese college entrance system. This unique experience has allowed me to explore education policies in the college admission process in China and compare it to that in the United States. By analysing and evaluating the effectiveness of different educational systems, students can make suitable choices, and universities can decide what kind of students they are looking for.

From individuals’ perspective, higher education aims to cultivate students’ knowledge and let them have the ability to distinguish right from wrong (Keeling & Hersh, 2012). At universities, students engage with knowledge from various areas, so they might have a basic understanding of the world, and after graduation, they can get the credential to prove their qualifications for jobs. Therefore, although getting access to universities can be seen as a kind of self-fulfilment, and sometimes it is not for specific aims, knowledge that the youth have learned at universities can change their life choices and help them achieve their goals. At the same time, higher education is recognised as an investment in cultural and social capital for students because universities can broaden students’ horizons to help them adapt to new environment and develop alumni network in which they can make connections with people who have different social roles.

On the society level, the role of higher education is to ensure that social resources will be relatively equally distributed to different groups of students according to their merit base and talent base (Doyle, 2010). In America, higher education represents meritocracy, so top American universities cultivate elites to take more social responsibilities (Alon & Tienda, 2007), while in China, higher education might be an effective way to improve social mobility by using a uniform standard to select talents from different social classes (Liu & Chen, 2020).

1.2. Current situation
According to Chinese official statistics in Figure 1, it shows that the enrolment ratio in Chinese higher education increased from 3.4% in 1990 to 51.6% in 2019 (Textor, 2020). This trend proves that in recent years, over half of the senior high graduates has the chance to accept higher education in China.
Figure 1. Gross enrolment ratio in tertiary education in China from 1990 to 2019.

The figure is printed from Statista, Education & Science, China.

Based on Chinese official statistics, Figure 2 demonstrates that the number of students from China going abroad increased continuously, from 179.8 thousand in 2008 to 662.1 thousand in 2010 (Textor, 2020). And as of 2018, the percentage of Chinese students who chose to study abroad funded by themselves or universities was up to 8.83 percent of the total number of university students (China Daily, 2018). Therefore, it can be concluded that studying abroad for Chinese students has become a popular choice, and it has been welcomed by more and more families.

Figure 2. Number of students from China going abroad for study from 2008 to 2018
According to the U.S. Department of Education statistics, Figure 3 indicates that the college enrolment rate for high school completers increased from 63% in 2000 to 69% in 2018 (NCES, 2018). In 2018, around 44 percent of high school completers enrolled in 4-year institutions (universities) and about 26 percent enrolled in 2-year institutions (community colleges). Thus, it can be suggested that the percentage of American students who have the chance to go to universities is a bit higher than that of Chinese students.

Figure 3. College enrolment rate of high school completers by level of institution from 2000 to 2018 in the U.S.

The figure is printed from National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES), U.S. Department of Commerce.

According to the U.S. Department of Education statistics, Figure 4 suggests that the immediate college enrolment rate of Asian-Americans was the largest during the period of 8 years, followed by the enrolment rate of White-Americans (NCES, 2018). This might be explained by gap year, one year off between finishing high school and going to university. Gap year is a popular phenomenon among White-American high school completers in which they choose to travel or work or accompany with families. Nevertheless, Black and Hispanic-Americans were under-represented in access to higher education compared to Asian and White-Americans from 2000 to 2018.
The figure is printed from National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES), U.S. Department of Commerce.

1.3. The focus of topic
The research topic I want to study is how students make the decision about higher education, particularly, what schools to apply to, and the role of family backgrounds in students’ access to higher education. To explore this topic, I relied primarily on surveys handed out online to students from Jiangsu Province in China and the state of California in America. In fact, Jiangsu and California are “sister states and provinces.” There are different kinds of higher education institutions in California such as University of California, California state university, community colleges, private schools, and religious schools (EAOP, 2016). A major factor is affirmative action that is, giving “extra points” to students from “underprivileged backgrounds”, who tend not to go to college. As for Jiangsu Province which is my home province, it is a historically cultural centre with rich educational resources. In Jiangsu Province, there are 13 key Chinese universities which are categorised by “985” and “211” project universities, and 10 top Chinese high schools which are approved to be national-level demonstrative high schools (Jiangsu Education Bureau, 2016). Therefore, when it comes to access to higher education, California and Jiangsu Province are worth studying further because the two regions have the representativeness and uniqueness in the American and the Chinese higher education system.

2. Literature review

2.1. The role of “holistic approach” in the American college entrance system
American universities are more likely to admit students with the characteristic “whole person” during college admission process. According to Ragan & Matos-Diaz (2011), apart from SAT, AP scores and GPA at high school that can demonstrate the students’ academic backgrounds, students’ application results are influenced by their talents and after-class activities. College sports help some rich white students get admitted to the IVY league college (Thompson, 2019). This shows that students’ talents such as sports might get extra points when they apply to universities. Moreover, social experiences which include the experience of being volunteers and joining non-profit organisations play an important
role in college application (Hijirida, 1974). The underlying rationale is that social activities can cultivate students’ leadership, problem-solving, critical thinking, and communication skills, which are also abilities that universities are looking for. Therefore, American universities use the holistic approach to evaluate students during admission process. However, there has recently been a scandal where wealthy white and Chinese families paid money to an agent who falsified their children’s SAT scores and extracurricular activities (especially sports) and paid bribes to coaches and other key individuals so that their children were offered admission at competitive schools (BBC News, 2019).

In the United States, racial discrimination has long been a serious issue. It includes discrimination against certain groups and in favour of others. Top elite universities such as Harvard and Yale were accused of discriminating against Asian-Americans, and Yale was recently found guilty of this by the federal government (Gross, 2019). On the other hand, in order to reduce the discrimination, particularly against African-Americans and Latinos, two groups that historically have been disadvantaged when it comes to access to higher education, an important consideration for students in the United States is affirmative action. Affirmative action refers to a policy in which an individual’s colour, race, sex, religion or national origin are taken into account to increase opportunities provided to an underrepresented part of society (Kenton, 2020). It also includes family income, whether or not the student is the first person in their family to attend college, and the students’ sexual orientation. Therefore, affirmative action can be recognised as one aspect of the federal government’s effort to ensure equity for citizens in the society, and it particularly focuses on education in order to reduce the race discrimination in the college admission process. From this aspect, it can be suggested that one of the most important solutions of affirmative action on education is to increase the ratio of target minorities, particularly for the African-Americans. Affirmative action influences California significantly because this state has much diversity and a high ratio of African-Americans as well as Latinos who are also under-represented in higher education (Levenson, 2014).

However, affirmative action has been highly contentious in California. Antwi-Boasiako and Asagba (2005) pointed out that a significant education policy related to affirmative action was to increase the ratio of target minorities based on race. However, this policy hardly reflects whether universities were intending to recruit a more diverse student body or the truly qualified students during the admission process. Due to such limitations of affirmative action, California is one of the eight states that have banned the consideration of race in university admissions and public employment (DeSilver, 2020). According to Arceneaux (2002), the ban came from the referendum, which means the law reflects the public opinion rather than just a government decision. Thus, although affirmative action in California provided more education opportunities for specific minority groups in the California admission system, due to much public opposition, the policy was rescinded in 1996 (Proposition 209).

Marion’s study (2009) proved that after the implementation of “Proposition 209” (1996) which prohibited affirmative action, campuses of the UC system announced that they would seek other ways to improve the ratio of African-Americans and other disadvantaged groups in order to reduce the discrimination. Berkeley announced that 2020-21 admission data shows that it has admitted the most ethnically diverse class of freshman students in more than three decades in terms of representation of under-represented minority students (Berkeley EDU, 2020). Thus, increasing education opportunities are provided to black minority groups, which can bring more diversity and inclusion to UC universities. However, it can be suggested that students’ family backgrounds still have some influence on students’ choices when they apply to universities because a student’s family background may decide how many educational resources that he/she can acquire, which can be explained by social capital and cultural capital.

Pinsker (2019) highlighted that white Americans were the elite groups of college applicants in the University of California application system without the support of affirmative action. This is because white Americans can be recognised as the most privileged group in society, and their children might have a big advantage during college admission process as they attended the best high schools, could afford tutors to prepare for standardised tests, and in some cases, they are the legacies of UC. In the American college admission, a “legacy” student is defined as someone whose parents attended and
graduated from the institution to which the student is applying (IvyWise, 2020). For instance, if one or more of your parents graduated from Harvard, and you apply to Harvard, you are considered as a legacy applicant. From this aspect, it indicates that social capital and cultural capital might influence students’ access to higher education. From the school’s perspective, Smith (2019) stated that white students were always the majority of high-income students on campuses, and rich families even donated a huge amount of money to buy the ‘entrance ticket’ to top universities for their children. This would boost universities’ fiscal revenue and help form a stable capital flow. Also, according to American University (1970), elite American universities rely on legacy status as a means of fostering a healthy and diverse campus and alumni community. Thus, admitting white elite students can be seen as a win-win strategy from both the student’s perspective and the school’s perspective.

Overall, from past literature, it is known that American students’ choices on college application are influenced by their parents because the “holistic approach” needs social and cultural capital. Consequently, family backgrounds might decide how many educational resources American students could acquire in higher education.

2.2. The role of Gaokao in the Chinese college entrance system

National College Entrance Examination (NCEE), or Gaokao, is an academic examination held annually in June in China. This standardised test is a requirement for all students to enter any Chinese higher education institutions at the undergraduate level (Zhang, 2020). In China, students first choose which university to apply to and have their Gaokao scores sent to their desired departments which are categorised by Arts and Science at those universities. Students can apply to four to six universities according to their preferences, and they always put the most favourite one on the top (Gaokao Plan, 2019). After the process of students’ application, schools’ admission will be based solely on Gaokao scores without relying on any other assessment methods. It is worth mentioning that general Gaokao policies are made by the national education bureau, but education bureaus of different provinces still have the right to revise general policies in order to adapt to the local situation.

Lu (2016) analysed that NCEE was an effective way to evaluate students’ learning ability due to its standardization because tests are carried out in the same way, scored in the same way, and scores are interpreted in the same way. Hence, standardization proves the objectivity of testing due to the same measurement of scoring information. From this aspect, students enter into different levels of universities and enjoy various educational resources according to their Gaokao scores, which ensures the relative equity of access to higher education in China.

Although Gaokao is a relatively objective and standardised, there exist some special policies. Wang (2013) emphasized that in the Chinese admission process, minority groups (Shaoshu Minzu) have significant advantages. China officially has 55 minority groups who comprise about 8.4 percent of the total population, and they generally live in poorer regions with inferior schools (Zheng, 2013). To be more specific, minority students can get extra points in the admission process, which means if a minority student has the same Gaokao score as a common student, the minority student will be admitted to a higher-ranking university compared with the common student. This is called the protection of minority students in the Chinese college admission system.

Apart from the protection of target minority students, another special Gaokao policy was made in 2012, which aims to increase education opportunities for students from extremely poor areas in China, who account for about 3 percent of the total high school graduates (Wang, 2018). Wang explained that from 2012, more than two thousand enrolment places at over ten pilot universities including Nanjing Normal University and Hunan normal University were provided to students from hundreds of poor towns across China. This means that poor students do not need to compete with common students in Gaokao, and they can get access to these pilot universities even with a relatively low Gaokao score. This is called the protection of poor students in the Chinese college entrance system.

To sum up, according to the previous studies and relevant education policies, Chinese Gaokao is the only standard assessment to decide students’ access to higher education in China without other interf
ference factors, which ensures the equity for majority of students, but minority students and poor students still get advantages in Chinese Gaokao.

2.3. The comparison between American holistic approach and Chinese Gaokao

Based on the above discussion, it can be seen that the methods used to admit students are totally different in the Chinese and the American higher education system. Previous studies discussed that in the American college admission system, universities wanted to recruit diverse students and take account of various factors such as legacy status and social class, while regarding Chinese Gaokao, all these research papers pointed out that students’ access to higher education was solely based on Gaokao scores regardless of students’ family backgrounds and social class. Obviously, in the American college entrance system, becoming a “whole person” needs enough social resources, but previous studies did not consider whether Chinese Gaokao score reflected a student’s talents or it still had the relationship with students’ social and cultural capital. Therefore, the aim of my research will be focusing on how cultural and social capital influence both Chinese and American students’ choices when they apply to universities.

3. Research questions

Previous studies have demonstrated that American students’ access to higher education was influenced by their race, legacy status and social class due to the holistic approach. Thus, students’ comprehensive development and success require the social and cultural capital provided by their families. I eventually came to wonder that in the college entrance system of California, whether it is easier for students born in middle and upper social class to enter the top universities.

In China, by contrast, as the Gaokao score is the only factor that decides students’ access to higher education, parents’ help might play a less important role in students’ college admission. As a result, I came up with the following question. To what extent will the role of parents influence Chinese students’ Gaokao scores? I predicted that in contrast to the American students, particularly in California, Chinese students are less influenced by their family backgrounds in terms of their access to higher education. As mentioned above, the population of Chinese students who chose to study abroad in recent years has been expanding. By contrast, I predicted that the American students are more willing to choose local universities as the percentage of American students studying abroad from 2017 to 2018 was 1.73 percent of the total number of university students (NAFSA, n. d.). Thus, I came up with the following question: how do Chinese and American students choose schools in terms of the location? Based on the data shown in Figure 2 and my speculation, I suggested that students in Jiangsu province are more willing to choose the universities outside the province and the country, while students in California are more likely to choose the universities within the state, so they do not have to move away from the family, and they pay reduced in-state tuition.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research method

To address these research questions concerning the American and Chinese students’ decisions on higher education, I chose to apply the mixed research method, which seeks to explore the difference of family backgrounds’ influence on students’ choices of college application. Quantitative research relies mostly on the collection of data and statistical analysis, while qualitative research is usually based more on interviews, reading documents and observation. In my research, I used two online surveys to collect the data of students’ answers. At the same time, I looked through documents from Chinese education bureau and searched relevant admission information on official websites of universities in Jiangsu and California. Therefore, the combination of quantitative and qualitative research method matches the aim of my study, which is to understand students’ responses regarding their family situations and choices on choosing universities.
4.2. Research design

In my study, I used the following three major sources for data collection.

4.2.1. Documents from education bureau. I utilized documents from Chinese education bureau. This includes government regulations and laws for updated Gaokao policies from the national Ministry of Education. Besides, documents from education bureau in Jiangsu Province provide detailed instructions about the implementation of lowering Gaokao scores to minority students in college admission. Documents from education bureau are reliable because the information derived from education authorities is unbiased with objectivity.

4.2.2. Web search of school websites. Through conducting my research from university websites, I had a more comprehensive overview of universities’ preferences on admitting target students. During this process, I discovered my research interests and thorough admission information with transparent data that gives a deeper understanding on both Chinese and American college entrance system.

4.2.3. Online survey. At the initial stage of my research, one of the research methods was to conduct interviews with selected participants. The intention of conducting face-to-face interviews is to gain more insights and awareness of participants’ ideas by building solid connections. However, due to the recent COVID-19 situation, many participants who are Chinese international students chose to stay at American universities instead of going back home. Other factors such as the time zone difference between Beijing time and California have also made online interviews hard to implement. I realised that it was no longer feasible to conduct interviews due to such restrictions, so an alternative solution was brought up. Instead of conducting interviews, online surveys appeared to be a more suitable choice. With the access of the internet link, it would be convenient to acquire results without having to physically approach others.

The survey was conducted through two online questionnaires so that respondents can easily access questions from two websites’ links separately. I have selected participants based on their different experience of studying at universities, who can be categorized as three groups. Participants in the first group who once graduated from the common department of Chinese senior high schools are now studying at universities in Jiangsu Province. Participants in the second group are international students who graduated from the international department of Chinese senior high schools, and now they are studying at universities in California such as University of California, Berkeley (UCB) and University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Participants in the third group are American students, and most of them are studying at UCB. Considering the totally different backgrounds of the three groups of students, I designed two versions of questionnaires with different questions. The Chinese version was for the first group of students, and the English version was for international Chinese students and American students. To ensure the quality of responses, I put a brief introduction at the top of two questionnaires to help them have a basic understanding of my research. In this way, their responses might be more effective and well-directed. Also, in order to keep participants’ personal information credential, I asked my participants to remain anonymous while completing the questionnaires.

The questionnaire particular for Chinese students was created on Survey Star, a Chinese survey platform. There were 20 questions in total with 18 closed-ended questions and 2 open-ended questions. There were also 3 Likert-scale questions about participants’ feelings and practical experience. After I finished designing this questionnaire, I sent the link via WeChat group for the period of one week. Within the one-week period, I have collected 20 answer sheets from Chinese participants including detailed information and analysis of my questions. At the same time, I started to design another questionnaire for international Chinese and American students on Google Sheets, a widely used survey-designing platform. The questions were categorised by 20 close-ended and 3 open-ended asked about participants’ individual tutors, parents’ college degrees and universities’ scholarship. After that, I sent the link to target participants via Facebook and e-mails. During the period of two weeks, I have collected 18 responses in total, particular for 16 responses from American students and 2 responses from Chinese
international students. These 38 responses allowed me to acquire sufficient information about students’ personal experience regarding their family backgrounds, which gives me the support for the further exploration.

5. Findings

5.1. Information from education bureau and school websites
Through reading documents from Chinese education bureau, I found that an increasing number of Chinese students, particularly students in Jiangsu Province, chose to go to universities outside Jiangsu Province. It is relatively easier for Jiangsu students to enter the universities in Jiangsu Province in contrast with students in other provinces in China. This phenomenon can be explained by the local government’s important role in governing the local universities. Consequently, Gaokao students can get access to local universities more easily due to the protection of the local government. This is called regional protectionism in Chinese Gaokao (Zheng, 2009). However, in 2015, Jiangsu Education Bureau enacted a new policy. According to Zhang, the leader of Jiangsu Education Department, eligible Jiangsu students who chose to apply to universities outside Jiangsu Province could get the scholarship from the local government (Jiangsu Education Bureau, 2015). This policy encouraged students to go outside rather than staying in local regions during their university time, as the experience outside the province can help students obtain new perspectives on their career planning and further life decisions. After the implementation of the new policy, the percentage of students who choose to study at universities outside Jiangsu Province increased from 56% to 67% from 2017 to 2020 (Jiangsu Gaokao Statistics, 2020).

Compared to Jiangsu students, California students always choose to apply to universities within the state, which is confirmed by information from school websites of California universities. According to Vazquez (2018), UCLA was doing their best to recruit local students and it historically maintained preference to in-state students. UCLA official data demonstrate that the percentage of out-of-state students only increased in recent years after 2015. That accounts for the fact that public universities in University of California system get money and supervision from the local government which provides funding to ensure the operation of these universities, so in-state students belong to the priority students of public universities of UC college application system (Wong, 2015). Consequently, UC system serves the local students best as the policies have enabled local students to pay lower tuition fees and get extra scholarship if qualified for local universities. Thus, California students are more willing to accept higher education at local universities.

To sum up, findings suggested by documents from Jiangsu Education Bureau and California universities’ websites indicate that students in Jiangsu province are more willing to choose universities outside Jiangsu province, while students in California are more likely to choose local universities. Thus, we can see that there is a big difference in the college decision process between Chinese and American students: for Chinese, they are encouraged to study at places far away from home, but for Americans, it is common for them to apply to domestic schools.

5.2. Survey responses from Chinese Gaokao students
According to the data from the questionnaire to Chinese Gaokao students, among participants from top 5 universities in Jiangsu Province, the percentage of participants whose parents are high-school or middle-school educational backgrounds exceed 70 percent. Thus, the data show that Chinese parents’ educational backgrounds have little correlation with their children’s access to higher education. Among all the Chinese Gaokao participants, the percentage of students who come from single-child family accounts for 95%. At the same time, 85 percent of participants come from families whose annual income ranges from 300,000RMB to 400,000RMB or above, and these families can be categorised as middle- or upper-class families in China.

Table 1 indicates that over 50% of the participants had individual tutors to prepare them for Gaokao. Table 2 shows that 66.67% of participants think that parents’ help including encouragement and communication is very useful to improving their scores during their learning process. Table 3 suggests that
86.67% of students believe that their choices are influenced by their parents when they apply to universities.

Regarding the responses from open-ended questions, Ning told me that her parents listened to her opinions very carefully, and respected her ideas and plans for future life. After a series of communication with her parents, they finally decided to support Ning’s decision to choose Nanjing Medical University as her first option. Compared to Ning, Huan seems to be “passive” in making the decision. Huan was interested in drawing pictures and designing items when he was very little, so his aim was to study Architecture at Suzhou University. However, Huan’s parents thought learning architecture is not a promising choice because becoming a designer cannot make much money in the future. Thus, parents forced Huan to study Finance at Nanjing University of Finance and Economics as his first-optional choice.

Table 1. Chinese students’ participation in after-class tutorials.

| Options         | Total | Percentage |
|-----------------|-------|------------|
| Yes             | 8     | 53.33%     |
| No              | 6     | 40%        |
| Give up         | 1     | 6.67%      |
| Effective responses | 15   |            |

Table 2. Parents’ help on Chinese students’ high-school academic achievements.

| Options          | Total | Percentage |
|------------------|-------|------------|
| Yes              | 10    | 66.67%     |
| No               | 2     | 13.33%     |
| Unsure           | 2     | 13.33%     |
| Give up          | 1     | 6.67%      |
| Effective responses | 15   |            |

Table 3. Parents’ influence on Chinese students’ choices of applying to universities.

| Options          | Total | Percentage |
|------------------|-------|------------|
| Yes              | 13    | 86.67%     |
| No               | 2     | 13.33%     |
| Effective responses | 15   |            |

Note: These 3 tables are from Survey Star.

Although findings from Chinese parents’ academic qualifications demonstrate that parents’ educational backgrounds do not directly have a positive link with their children’s access to higher education, a significant factor that Chinese parents’ educational backgrounds cannot reflect their intelligence should be taken into account. That accounts for the fact that Chinese higher education was shut down for many years due to the Cultural Revolution in 1976, so parents of the children today did not have the chance to accept higher education (Xiang, 2019). Thus, parents might not have the academic degree but the
t does not mean that they do not understand the importance of higher education. Hence, they may want their children to go to colleges even more because they have missed the chance from this aspect college degrees cannot reflect Chinese parents’ intelligence and efforts parents put to cultivate their children.

After looking through survey responses regarding after-class tutorials, it seems that students spent all time preparing for Gaokao at school, so everyone was treated in the equal way. However, I realized the fact that every student enjoys different educational resources. The majority of participants in my study are from middle- and upper-class families in Jiangsu Province, in which there is only one child with out siblings, so there is no doubt that parents will use all of their educational resources to support their only child. However, participants in my study only represent the elite group of Chinese students. There are still a large number of poor towns in Jiangsu Province, where the majority of families had two or three children (Shen, 2016). Surprisingly, in poor areas, there even exists the extreme case that a woman must finish the task that she will not give up until she gives birth to a son (Zhuang, 2004). Hence, in these low-class families with several children, each one’s education will not be paid attention to by parents in contrast with middle- and upper-class families with an only child.

To be more specific, in single-child families, parents will use their cultural and social capital to support their only child. Parents are willing to hire an individual tutor to prepare their child for Gaokao. They might send their child to take part in academic conferences or attend summer schools of top universities in China, such as summer camp of Nanjing University. These educational resources, particular for extra-curricular learning, will promote students’ interests and confidence in learning, which will lead to the success in Gaokao. Compared with students born in single-child families with abundant educational resources, students from poor families can only rely on teachers’ teaching at school to prepare for Gaokao. On the other hand, in single-child families, the only child is taken better care of by their parents in life. For instance, parents are always glad to drive cars to pick up the only child from school and serve food and drinks to their children. However, students born in three-child families might walk home after school or live on campus without parents’ care. When students are emphasized by their parents, they may feel warm and encouraged, so a comfortable living atmosphere, together with a good learning environment might stimulate them to work hard. Accordingly, students’ family backgrounds still play an important role in their access to higher education.

In middle- and upper-class families, parents’ help and influence in survey responses include parental encouragement and suggestions in children’s access to higher education. For instance, when children encounter difficulties in the learning process, parents are able to give some support to children. Parents can also provide some detailed analysis about their children’s target universities. The majority of participants in my study think that parents’ help and influence are useful because students might get more insights through a series of dinner discussions with their parents, and parents might share practical experience with their children to help them solve problems. Most importantly, as Ning mentioned, open-ended parents choose to support children’s plans after listening to children’s real wants and needs. Nevertheless, there are still parents who want to force children to listen to their advice and obey their instructions when children apply to universities. From this aspect, parents’ influence can be recognised as parental “controlment”, such as Huan’s case in my study. However, even if children get access to higher education through parental controlment, it is unsure that children will get real satisfaction from further study. To be more specific, one child finally chooses a university with top reputation according to parents’ instruction, but the child might be unhappy in next four years because he do not like the atmosphere of this reputable university. Therefore, too much influence of parents will deprive children’s freedom and independence, so this education mode should not be encouraged in family education even if children can get good access to higher education in this way.

To sum up, it was inaccurate to assume that Chinese students’ family backgrounds had little influence on their Gaokao results because parents still play an important role in providing educational resources for students to acquire for better higher education. However, parents should give suggestions to their children rather than controlling them in children’s access to higher education.
5.3. Survey responses from American students

According to the data from American students’ survey responses, among participants from UC Berkeley, the percentage of the participants whose parents have master degree or PhD degree takes up to 60 percent. Hence, the data directly reflect that American parents’ educational backgrounds have a positive correlation with children’s access to higher education. Among all the American participants, the percentage of students who have siblings accounts for 89%. What’s more, 70 percent of participants come from families whose annual income are from $45,000 to $80,000 and these families belong to middle- or upper-class families in the U.S.

Figure 5 shows that the percentage of students who have individual tutors to prepare them for academic tests such as ACT or SAT accounts for 63.6%. Figure 6 demonstrates that over 50% of participants hire private counsellors outside school to prepare them for college application. However, Figure 7 indicates that 72.7% of participants make decisions by themselves without parents’ interference when they apply to colleges.

With regards to the information from open-ended questions in surveys, James thought that playing table tennis helped him get extra points in college admission. Mary mentioned that playing the violin was her special characteristic which might strengthen her college application. Mia said that in her interview with the admission officer of UC Berkeley, her social activities such as voluntary work and internship impressed the admission officer very much. James and Mary had siblings in their families. They both admitted that when they chose colleges, their parents fully supported them without any interference. Also, they both selected “undecided major” when applying for colleges. Interestingly, Mia was born in a single-child family. She said that at first, her parents suggested her to choose Maths or Natural Science as her major, but after several family meetings, her parents supported her decision that she chose Philosophy which she was extremely interested in as her target major. However, when Mia studied at UC Berkeley, she felt depressed all the time due to the peer pressure, so she applied to transfer to UC San Diego when she finished her first year at UC Berkeley.
Fig. 7. Parents’ influence on American students’ choices of applying to universities.

Note: These 3 pie Figures are from Google-Sheets. Findings from American students’ responses prove that students’ talents and extra-curricular activities will strengthen students’ college application in terms of holistic approach, but investing in talents and activities does need parents’ social and cultural capital. This expectation is verified by the trend that American parents’ academic degrees have positive correlation with their children’s application results. Children’s education is regarded seriously in well-educated families where parents can provide affluent educational resources for their children. Children with knowledgeable parents always have outstanding academic qualifications, so they will be qualified to find competitive jobs and have the opportunity to make friends with elites from different fields. Thus, knowledgeable parents are more likely to use their abundant social resources to support their children’s application. To be more specific, knowledgeable parents may use their interpersonal networks such as one-to-one communication with their colleagues to find internships for their children, or use social media such as Facebook groups to contact a violin teacher to teach their children. Furthermore, good jobs can bring high annual income for children of knowledgeable parents, which can be proved by the data of American participants. More than 60% of American students’ parents have master or PhD degrees, and all these parents can earn annual income over $45,000 dollars totally. Thus, these parents can afford the extra paying of hiring an individual tutor to prepare their children for academic tests and college application. Therefore, well-educated parents with rich cultural and social capital act as a vital part in children’s college application.

When it comes to children’s individual decision, American parents provide abundant material support, but they tend to give more space to their children to make their own choices. The aim of Chinese parenting value is that to most Chinese parents, they expect their child to be a “dragon”, which is “wang zi cheng long” in Chinese. Thus, it is better for Chinese children to listen to parents in decision making (Zhang, 2017). However, in the American childrearing belief, reversely, parents are more likely to respect their children’s ideas in order to make children become more independent in decision-making. One important reason is that in most American families, there is more than one child per family, and every child has their own ideas and plans which will lead to totally different life trajectories. Thus, there is no uniform standard to each child, and each child’s decision can be supported by parents. At the same time, children should learn to take the responsibility of their decisions (Mei, 2003).

My study proves the effectiveness of the American family education mode. Figure 7 shows that among all my participants, the majority of families have more than one child per family. Parents in these families did not interfere much about children’s decisions of choosing universities. However, the fact is all these students without parents’ interference entered their favourite universities and have studied the interested majors. In open-ended questions, these students did not write any complaints about their parents. Instead, they were all grateful for parents’ support. Thus, it can be derived that in terms of access to higher education, a suitable way for one’s growth is the best, and open-ended family education mode can make American students understand what they really want. Consequently, when students begin to apply to colleges, it is reasonable that parents give the freedom to their children and let children decide where they want to study and what they are interested in for further study.
In addition, there is more flexibility in American universities compared with Chinese universities. For instance, Mia’s case reflects a possibility that even if an American student born in the single-child family goes to the university which he does not like due to parents’ controlment, he still has the chance to transfer to his dream school. To be specific, American students in 2-year community colleges can transfer to 4-year common universities. American students in common universities can also apply to transfer to other common universities. In 2017, UC Berkeley had the rate of transfer student admission at 27.9 percent, and 4617 transfer students were offered admission (Staff & McNamara, 2017). In 2019, the transfer acceptance rate for UCLA was 24.09%, and the school accepted 5770 students in total (Campus Reel, n. d.). Thus, an American student still has the opportunity to study at his target university even if he has already entered the current university. From this aspect, American students have more options to pursue what they truly want.

Overall, it was right that educational resources, in particular for cultural and social capital from parents, had a big influence on American students’ application results. Meanwhile, American parents give more space and freedom to their children about detailed choices of college application.

6. Conclusion

During the period of three months, I did my best on my research and tried to solve lots of difficulties. For example, designing two questionnaires was in a limited time because finding participants took a longer time than expected. Also, the number of participants I found was very restricted due to the negative influence of Covid-19 at the first stage. Professor introduced a Berkeley student to me, and he helped me find his classmates as my participants. I tried my best to deal with such problems at this unique period of time, but there were still some limitations of my research.

To begin with, limited number of the sample size was the biggest problem of my research. The total number of participants was too small with only 38 survey responses altogether. At the same time, I only gathered 2 survey responses from international Chinese students, and the information collected from the 2 participants was not effective. Thus, if I could do this research again, I would find participants as many participants as possible, and design a separate questionnaire for international Chinese students rather than putting international Chinese students and American students as a one group using the same questionnaire. In this way, I think I can find more international Chinese students and collect more effective information from them.

In addition, the sample size of my research was unrepresentative. The majority of American participants were from UC Berkeley, a public elite university, so responses of these students cannot represent students from all the universities in California. Also, most Chinese participants come from middle- and upper-class families in Jiangsu Province, and these participants enjoy affluent educational resources, so this group of students cannot represent all students in Jiangsu Province. Hence, I would suggest that in further research, I could find more American participants from different universities in California including private and public universities. Also, I could find more Chinese participants from lower-class, so I can get more insights from poor students’ responses. Thus, the representativeness and objectiveness of the sample can be ensured in this way.

Last but not least, it is common that education policies written in documents from the government or education bureau might not be practically implemented for some unspoken reasons. So, if I could do this research again, I would try to interview more officials from education bureau to get more detailed education policies. This might be effective to obtain raw data and more accurate information. Also, public universities have to follow more regulations from the government than private universities. Therefore, if I had opportunities, I would interview some staffs in private universities in the U.S. which are influential in American higher education to learn more about practical education policies implemented in American private universities.

Regarding American and Chinese higher education system, there is no absolute fairness in both systems. There is no doubt that American holistic approach needs social and cultural from original families, while in Chinese Gaokao system, family backgrounds still play an important role in Chinese
students’ access to higher education. However, it still can be analysed that the role of family backgrounds weighs more in American college admission than Chinese college entrance system.

In American higher education system, other factors apart from academic tests are more and more important in college application, and holistic approach will finally lead to the stabilization of social classification. According to Egelko and Asimov (2020), UC cannot accept entry exams because some students, such as those with disabilities, are disadvantaged when it comes to taking those tests. This statement means that standard tests such as SAT or ACT will become the optional requirement in college admission. Regardless whether the SAT or ACT functions as one part of the qualification factors, inequality of accessibility in American higher education still exists among students. This accounts to the fact that universities will use other methods to evaluate students instead of using the above tests. However, it is worth mentioning that other methods such as assessing students’ social activities or practical experience rely mostly on students’ cultural and social capital provided by their families. Thus, people with privilege and other forms of social resources will pass them on to their children. For instance, Amy Chua used her platform to find a top-level internship for her daughter Sophie (Szalai, 2014). In this way, the privilege will be maintained. This will hardly lead to the mobility of different classes, and finally cause the reproduction of inequality.

Furthermore, when some American parents use social roles to acquire more resources for their children, their behaviours are against moral values. Some wealthy parents donated money to schools through a corrupt “advisor” claiming that their daughters are athletes who should be admitted to play sports, even though this was false (BBC New, 2019). This admission scandal reflects that the vested interest may lead parents to go off the track. Also, parents’ wrong behaviour will mislead their children to believe that money can buy anything, and even can buy the entrance ticket to the top university.

In Chinese higher education system, students’ family backgrounds including social and cultural capital might lead to different Gaokao scores. Nevertheless, students who have restricted social resources still can get good scores through working hard to cover the shortage. To be more specific, Gaokao itself ensures the “equity”: it uses the same questions, the same standard of admission policy to select students. A poor student might not have enough money to hire individual tutors to prepare him for Gaokao, it is still possible for him to get good scores via relying on school teachers’ help, accompanied with the spirit of assiduous study. Also, a student with siblings might not be taken good care of by their parents in life, but there is still the possibility that the tough learning environment makes him more focused on studying with fewer distractions. Thus, social resources, the learning environment and parents’ encouragement might be possible factors that lead to the difference in students’ Gaokao scores, but they are not necessities for the success of Gaokao. From this aspect, a Chinese student in the lower social class still has the chance to step out of the comfort zone to reach the middle or the upper class through the fairness of Gaokao. This is so-called “Han Men Chu Gui Zi” in Chinese saying (Liu & Chen, 2020). Accordingly, although it is easier for students who have strong family backgrounds to acquire better education resources, Chinese Gaokao itself is a relatively fair and effective way to select talents in different social classes. To some extent, it is also a way to increase the social mobility in China.

As a Chinese student studying abroad, I would argue that the general statement should not be which education system is better, and which family education mode is better. The situations are totally different in the two countries due to distinctive historical backgrounds, cultural context, social institutions and national conditions. Such differences finally lead to the discrepancy of higher education system and family education mode in the two countries. However, Chinese and American governments are both trying to make each education system better respectively by trying to address problems such as racial discrimination in the U.S. and underrepresentation of minority groups (Shaoshu Minzu) in China because education system in both China and the U.S. ought to be best serve for students. Therefore, in my study, comparing Chinese higher education with American higher education is to point out differences. By analysing differences between the two education systems, it is possible to make improvements in both education systems due to absorbing the merits of each system. In this way, American and Chinese higher education system are trying to achieve the maximum fairness and benefit to students under the contexts of two societies.
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