

# WHAT ARE THE KEY DIFFERENCES IN ACADEMIC PRESSURE, SOCIAL LIFE, AND CAREER ASPIRATIONS BETWEEN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN MAJOR URBAN CENTERS VERSUS THOSE IN RURAL AREAS?

**Yuexi Kong**

## **Abstract:**

This study examines the differences in social lives, academic pressures, and career aspirations among high school students in urban centers and rural regions of China. Given the considerable investment China makes in education, especially in the urban areas, students in towns encounter competitive pressure that is intense albeit focused. Unlike students in the countryside, those in urban areas have greater access to multiple types of schooling and success avenues through lucrative social networks. In contrast, rural students experience what is described as ‘aspirational pressure’ - and that is in the light of limited resources. For kids in rural areas, education is the most cost-effective way to better their financial circumstances. Additionally, through extracurricular activities and peer affiliations outside of their families, urban students develop bridging social capital. On the other hand, rural students rely on bonding social capital based on relational social structures that are supportive but homogeneous. Regarding occupational aspirations, the choice of careers differs markedly, with urban students having an expansive orientation towards technology-related fields, the financial sector, or a creative industry. In contrast, rural students have a more pragmatic outlook towards teaching, the civil service, and stable jobs. The interrelated differences are significant because urban advantages and rural constraints suggest that the differences will reinforce each other, affecting the UK’s ability to sustain any inequitable education provision in China. This inequity stands in contrast with the intention of educational equity. Hence, it is evident from the data that some rural policies should aim to address structural inequities while also addressing the

disadvantages of rural students.

*Keywords:* China, career aspirations, gaokao, urban-rural divide, educational inequality, academic pressure.

## 1.0 Introduction

The rapid changes that have occurred in China over the last forty years have resulted in one of the most severe urban-rural divides in the world (Yu et al., 2019), radically altering the educational environment in China and the experiences of its students. The pronounced societal divide is demonstrated by the meteoric emergence of megacities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen (Chen et al., 2018), on the one hand, contrasted with the millions of people who remain in the vast agricultural hinterland of China. Major urban centers refer to the cities and second-tier cities that have over a million inhabitants and a high level of economic development. Counties and townships characterise rural areas with a dominant agricultural economy and a low level of urban infrastructure. The central research question driving this inquiry is “What are the major similarities and distinctions in academic pressure, social life, and career aspirations between the experience of high school students in big city urban spaces versus students in rural spaces?”

Zhang et al. (2015) detailed that the societal contrast of megacities has widened the differences in terms of education with what they termed, “the education sector” in Megacities and rural areas. In their view of education in China, millions of students in the agricultural hinterland of China are situated in education systems that are entirely different and/or divergent experiences that define their academic experiences, social formation and career ambitions in massively different ways (Knight & Shi, 1996; Gao & Li, 2022). The quality gap in education has added to the divide of the students in rural spaces and big cities as China transitioned from an industrial society to a knowledge society where education is the primary method of improving social mobility and the well-being of education-engaged youth. There exist two distinct aspects of academic pressure, which are understood as the mental and social strain that students face due to competition in education, parental pressure, and the intense pressure of examinations, especially the gaokao (national college entrance examination). According to Fu (2024), social strain, the first distinct aspect, is demonstrated in the scope and quality of peer relations, extracurricular activities, social support systems and opportunities to develop as a person

beyond academics. Social strain is further evident in the career aspirations of students, their perception of available opportunities, and the factors influencing their future planning and exposure to various career choices (Ayoroa et al., 2009; Xiang et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2017). Exploring these dimensions is important because they bridge a critical gap in knowledge concerning how China’s deep social and economic transformation has created a set of educational opportunities with the potential to reinforce or mitigate existing inequality.

The dissertation employs a qualitative research design that incorporates a systematic content analysis of secondary sources to explore complex social phenomena. The decision to utilize early studies must be viewed in light of the vast reading space in this field and the logistical challenges of conducting original research within China’s gigantic, diverse education system. The study is purposefully limited to high school kids because this is the time when social identities are formed, career decisions are about to become a reality, and academic pressure peaks. The dissertation follows a logical format that includes a literature review to establish the theoretical backdrop, a description of the methodological approach, a discussion section to present and discuss the findings, and a conclusion with a synthesis and implications. Each section builds on the one before it to form a comprehensive argument that examines the complex differences between the experiences of students in urban and rural areas in China’s changing educational system.

## 2.0 Literature Review

According to existing research, one of the main factors separating Chinese high school experiences in urban and rural areas is the pressure that is typical of the former (Hansen & Woronov, 2013; Ying, 2020). Peer competition that starts in elementary school and gets more intense throughout secondary education, intense supplemental tutoring, and parental investment in educational resources are some of the hyper-competitive academic environments that most urban students face. The sources and types of this pressure can vary greatly depending on the context (Mulvey & Li, 2023; Hao et al., 2014). These views are further reiterated by Hu et al. (2023) and Lin (2019) indi-

cating that as a result of the intense supplementary tutoring, urban families spend relatively higher amounts, about twenty to thirty per cent of the household income, on educational supplementation, establishing an educational arms race that, fundamentally, defines the daily activities of students and their psychological health.

## 2.1 Academic pressure

Rural students experience a different but equally intense form of academic pressure rooted in the perception that education represents their primary pathway out of poverty and limited local opportunities (Guo & Li, 2024; Shi & Sercombe, 2020; Jiang, 2024). Rural students often view education as a “single-plank bridge” where failure means remaining trapped in agricultural communities with limited economic prospects (Ayoroa et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2017; Guo & Li, 2024). This creates desperation-driven motivation that can be even more psychologically intense than urban competition, as rural students lack the safety nets and alternative pathways available to their urban counterparts.

## 2.2 Social Ecosystem

The aspect of social life shows perhaps the most remarkable urban-rural differences in high school life in China. Urban students benefit from a “rich social ecosystems” that includes diverse extracurricular activities, cultural institutions, peer networks, and opportunities for personal exploration and identity development (Hansen, 2012). This inequality is exceptionally high because rural students are increasingly confined to an education environment that is becoming increasingly unequal, with decreased access to the diverse social contexts found in urban areas (Guo & Li, 2024; Shi & Sercombe, 2020). Although nearly all students in public schools’ report availability of core extracurricular activities such as sports, performing arts, publications, and honour societies, rural students commonly experience limitations in realising the full range of non-academic clubs, service organisations, and specialised interest groups (Wang et al., 2017; Guo & Li, 2024). The reliability of these studies are strengthened by the authors’ longitudinal approaches and their integration of student voices with quantitative achievement data.

## 2.3 Social Infrastructure

The disparities in social infrastructure extend beyond mere availability, also encompassing the breadth and variety of the peer networks and the possibilities of career exploration. Rural children are exposed to unique physical, social, and cultural characteristics that can exacerbate many of the difficulties (Knight & Shi, 1996; Guo & Li,

2024; Shi & Sercombe, 2020). The trajectories of students’ lives diverge most starkly when students in rural communities decide to leave or remain in the home community, and those who remain are often unlikely to have access to post-secondary education and secure, high-wage jobs. Since their peer networks are generally smaller, less diversified, and more tightly knit than those of students in urban areas, this geographic restriction naturally influences the social geography of high school students in rural areas (Yu et al., 2019). These socioeconomic inequalities have far-reaching consequences across many aspects of life, such as aspirations for a profession and the formation of personal identity throughout these formative years.

The social lives of rural students are defined by constrained but cohesive social environments, which means they are able to develop closer, more intimate relationships within their limited social circles; however, this limited social world means they will also be exposed to less diversity, and have reduced opportunity to practice their social capacity (Knight & Shi, 1996; Guo & Li, 2024). Rural students realize the potential limitations on their freedom of speech and inquiry, but they also describe a strong feeling of community and its advantages, such as emotional support, according to a qualitative survey of rural counties. The authors’ extensive fieldwork and comprehension of rural backgrounds help this study by offering genuine insights into the realities of rural students.

## 2.4 Gaokao and Academic Pressure

The gaokao in China is a notoriously difficult national college entrance examination that academically pressures students in urban and rural regions alike, however, the pressures, as well as the meaning of these pressures, were quite different. Students from urban areas often attended better funded key schools that had much higher-quality faculty, cutting edge labs, and digital resources (Guo & Li, 2024; Shi & Sercombe, 2020). The culture of urban students focuses on struggling to achieve top marks in order to access an easier way of attaining a better life via accepting admittance to a prestigious university. In contrast, rural children deal with additional hurdles, including poor facilities, that often lead to staggering (very high) rates of school dropout. If children in rural areas persevere, the academic pressure is not just being accepted into a well-regarded university; the additional stress is channeling education to escape out of rural poverty. In addition, the contexts are narrow, indicative of reduced options for social mobility. The gap between rural and urban locations is expanding in this inequality dimension (Wei, 2019; Li et al., 2015). The authors’ approach is very detailed, though, there is a predominance of lucky students getting

into the top tier schools.

Due to the unique features of their various environments, students in urban and rural areas lead different social lives. Due to their greater access to financial and cultural resources, urban students enjoy more varied social experiences. A variety of extracurricular activities, including as athletics, the arts, and private tutoring, usually complement their social life and help them build a solid portfolio for college applications. According to Xie (2024), these networks are essential for the growth of social capital, which can then be converted into advantages for one's career. The social environment of rural students, as covered in academic literature, is limited but unified. Their social life tends to be smaller, local, and based on their school and village.

## 2.5 Career Aspirations

Career ambitions as a key area of urban-rural difference are an important contributor to academic pressure among high school-aged students in China, as urban students with "cosmopolitan career orientations" have multiple career aspirations, various entrepreneurial aspirations, and future career goals that reflect international ambitions. In contrast, rural students have much more pragmatic and localized career aspirations. The career aspirations of these rural students are generally limited to obtaining a secure and respectable job that provides a pathway out of poverty and supports their families. Their longitudinal survey of 2,000 students found that urban students were much more interested in working in technology, finance, creative industries, and professional services, and more willing to relocate for a career.

Rural students' career aspirations are heavily influenced by geographic and economic constraints that limit both their knowledge of career options and their practical ability to pursue diverse professional paths. Due in part to familial expectations and local economic realities, as well as in part to restricted exposure to alternative career options, rural students are more likely to aspire to stable, traditional jobs like teaching, the civil service, or small company ownership. Gao's research done in six provinces provides valuable information about how economic conditions in the regions influence student goals. A limitation is the reliance upon surveys distributed by schools that could have resulted in socially desirable responses regarding family and community loyalty. The research about career goals reveals an apparent lack of knowledge about how changing economic conditions and virtual networks may alter traditional urban-rural disparities.

There is a lack of research that examines academic pressure, social life, and job aspirations as related phenomena,

instead of as separate variables. Much of the current research focuses on one of these, ignoring nuanced relations between these factors in students' lived experiences.

## 3.0 Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

This dissertation utilizes a qualitative research approach through the secondary data analysis, which is due to the study of the complex difference that exists in the lifestyles of Chinese high school students who reside in rural areas and urban locations. The qualitative approach is best suited for this inquiry because it supports an in-depth, nuanced study of meaning about a complex social phenomenon, such as academic pressure, social relationships, and career-making, while omitting the need to gather the original empirical material. As an analytical approach, it allows for several different research perspectives and methods to be synthesized, which leads to an in-depth interpretation of urban-rural distinction that would be too difficult to interpret by analyzing a single research study.

### 3.2 Research Approach

The systematic literature review approach follows accepted practices for finding, evaluating, and synthesizing relevant academic materials. The search strategy involves various academic databases, including CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), JSTOR, Google Scholar, and education-specific databases, utilizing well-designed keyword phrases in both English and Chinese. Keywords include: China's urban-rural education, Gaokao academic pressure, Chinese students' social life, career aspirations in China, and urban-rural educational inequality. Regional terms and demographic descriptions are also included in the search strategy to ensure comprehensive coverage of the Chinese contexts relevant to the research.

### 3.3 Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria of the sources include the application of peer-reviewed scholarly articles, government reports published by reliable organizations, and research publications on established learning institutions whose publications have not exceeded the past fifteen years (2009-2024) to enable relevance to the Chinese society today. Sources directly address high schoolers (15-18 years) and include explicit urban-rural comparisons, providing an in-depth analysis of one of the environments that can be successfully compared with other surveys. Exclusion criteria exclude works that are only quantitative and do not include qualitative information, studies that only examine primary and university education, and works that

do not present sufficient methodological information to evaluate the reliability and bias of the work.

Several methodological and practical factors underlie the choice to use secondary sources instead of primary research. The extent and spatial scope of detailed urban-rural comparison in China would likely require resources and access that are beyond the confines of this dissertation project.

## **4.0 Discussion**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In rural high schools, academic pressure for families is rooted primarily in a lack of opportunities (Lin, 2018; Roberts & Hannum, 2018). Rural students experience pressure to pursue opportunities for college or vocational education because family and community expectations tend to be more realistic and avoid inflated ideas of student talent like the urban families described above (Roberts & Hannum, 2018; Zhao, 2022). Urban families create competition for students based on resource availability and expectations, while rural schools emphasize strengthening student skills as the primary facet of educational pressure on students (Zhao, 2022). Ultimately, the major distinctions between access to resources and expectations in urban families have resulted in disparities in students' experiences of academic pressure in urban and rural contexts (Roberts & Hannum, 2018; Zhao, 2022). This competitive pressure is externally driven by parental investment and peer competition, but facilitated by considerable resources and numerous avenues to success. Students in Beijing and Shanghai, as well as those in other large cities, can access a wide range of educational resources, skilled instructors, and alternative paths to university admission, which offer some cushioning to the high-stakes nature of the gaokao examination (Zhao, 2022; Guo & Li, 2024). Rural students, in their turn, experience so-called resource-constrained aspirational pressure, which can be just as intense psychologically, but lacks external support. The stress of rural students is a result of the harsh reality that education is perhaps their sole avenue for economic mobility and a way out of the poverty of local opportunities (Guo & Li, 2024; Shi & Sercombe, 2020; Cheng & Hamid, 2025). Unlike students in cities who may have a family business, professional network, or other occupations to fall back on, rural students understand that failure in the gaokao means they will likely have to work in the fields or in poor-paying work back home for the rest of their lives (Chen, 2022; Xiang, 2018). Rural students face a form of academic pressure that is not externally driven by competition, but instead internally driven by despera-

tion, family sacrifice, and community support, and is not endowed with the surplus resources of urban students.

### **4.2 Pressure Patterns**

These pressure patterns can have a differential effect, which manifests in student coping strategies and psychological outcomes. While urban students tend to experience more chronic high stress, they can typically develop more advanced stress coping skills. Urban students have access to structured counselling services, mental health resources, and parental support, with parental support acknowledging the value of psychological well-being (not only academic success, but also acknowledging that academic success is a primary purpose of their education) (Chen, 2022; Xiang, 2018; Wan, 2022). Rural students often lack access to parental, community, or structured counselling support. These students are capable of internalizing pressure in a way that will exacerbate anxiety and depression, specifically those whose experience lies primarily in the margins of potentially disappointing their parents' mental expectations of their child, or worse, the expectation built up by the community who now has invested into that student's education. These social life inequalities and social capital inequalities between urban and rural students show that those lived social inequalities are evidence of larger trends around contributing social capital and cultural experiences, that will have important implications for personal and collective growth options in the future (Xiang, 2018; Wan, 2022). Urban students make use of what sociologists identify as "bridging social capital", well-being derived from networks and associations of different groups in which they develop unique perspectives, cultural norms, and developing opportunities create various pathways in which explain their life options, career pathways (Lin, 2018; Roberts & Hannum, 2018; Zhao, 2022). These experiences out of class that are now part of the allocating largely in urban environment or community sports clubs, community service groups in the community, or community art & culture groups, not only provides means to networking and building a resume but spaces in which you begin to explore and able to deep dive into your identities and skills that take you outside of your academic studies.

### **4.3 Emotional Support**

Rural students have what can be called "bonding social capital." What this means is close to sometimes intimate ties within homogeneous communities. This facilitates emotional support and cultural continuity but lessens the degree of diversity and perspectives (Xiang, 2018; Wan, 2022; Cheng & Hamid, 2025). While emotional bonds of-

ten provide an even greater emotional foundation for community support in periods of distress, they can also facilitate peer pressure, tension and constrain non-mainstream lifestyles or modes of expression. The social experiences of rural students are often socially valued by their families and communities than urban students. This grounds social development and provides students with both opportunities for support and limitations (Song, 2023; Guo & Li, 2024). That said, it would be inaccurate to say children from urban communities always had a better social experience than children that come from rural communities. As often noted, rural students have superior community social skills, manifest greater loyalty and commitment to their relationships, and have cultural bonds that can help provide students' sense of identity and meaning in life.

Urban students exhibit what researchers term expansive career orientations, primarily shaped by their extensive exposure to multiple professional opportunities and a thorough assessment of opportunities in China's knowledge economy (Song, 2023; Wan, 2022). City students tend to have more aspirations for newer professions and occupations, partly due to the influence of technology, finance, creative industries, and international business, which is facilitated by increased exposure to these fields through family relationships, internships, and cultural organisations within cities (Jiang, 2024; Cheng & Hamid, 2025). Urban students' career planning often involves a more cosmopolitan orientation, considering international plans, pursuing higher education after high school, and undertaking small business development as ways to be ambitious and gather realistic assessments of the available paths ahead in their futures.

### 4.3 Career Aspirations

A "pragmatic constraint" that reflects both a realistic evaluation of the structural hurdles rural students confronts in accessing a variety of professional options and a restricted understanding of job alternatives shapes their career goals (Liu et al., 2022; Chen, 2022; Stout, 2022). Due to practical limitations on pursuing careers that would require extensive urban connections or family financial support, as well as a lack of exposure to alternative career options, rural students are more likely to aspire to stable, traditional careers like teaching, civil service, or local business ownership (Liu et al., 2022; Knight & Shi, 1996; Chen, 2022). This is not necessarily because they lack ambition. Their career planning may also be heavily influenced by family commitments, community demands, and geographic limitations that city students are unlikely to face (Jiang, 2024; Cheng & Hamid, 2025). The aforementioned patterns can be examined closely, and a number of important

rebuttals and different interpretations ought to be taken into account. According to some researchers, the career aspirations of rural students are viewed as reflecting cultural values of community service and family obligation, rather than merely limited choices, indicating that the career choices of rural students represent positive cultural preservation rather than restricted choices (Knight & Shi, 1996; Guo & Li, 2024).

The overlapping patterns identified within these three areas, academic stress, social life, and career goals, intersect to reproduce urban advantages and rural disadvantages in ways that may perpetuate inequalities in China that exist in spite of policy design to engender equity in education (Lin, 2018; Roberts & Hannum, 2018; Zhao, 2022; Guo & Li, 2024). In summary, the elaborate academic training and support that urban students receive compounded with social capital opportunities and tacit auto cognizance. It operates with serial development advantages that convert into an advantageous pile of credits over time. The social life of these students provides access to networks. There is also access to bundles of capital in the form of human, economic, social, and cultural capital that facilitate pursuing practical career interests. Their awareness of career opportunities also shapes their academic lenses and subsequent social behaviour toward increasing their preparedness for competitive decisions in regard to the workforce and higher education (Roberts & Hannum, 2018; Zhao, 2022). Conversely, the full extent of the disadvantageous situation for the rural students is - mix together the limits of their financial-laid academic preparation; the limited social capital opportunities and the lack of skilled career knowledge which inherently function in isolation, that add up to an aggregate constrained disadvantage that could render those students unable to be successful in both national education market and pathway white collar professional job market (Knight & Shi, 1996; Chen, 2022; Stout, 2022). But this discussion should also consider the perseverance, work ethic, and community and commitment that rural students have shown, which are major strengths that may offer certain advantages in some situations and careers that urban students may not necessarily possess easily.

The dialogue gives a detailed, elaborate discussion. The focus is on the differences in academic expectations, coping mechanisms, and career goals of urban versus rural Chinese high school students. The analysis looks in-depth at the educational context in China to understand better the present classical picture of academic pressures. The findings indicated that while urban students are experiencing external competitive pressure subsidized by various resources and different paths to success, urban students are also subjected to an unparalleled level of on-

going pressure. Comparative to academic pressures in the urban education context, the urban context provides an advantage for students to cope at a sophisticated level and builds significant social networks for the students.

The urban context also encourages them to have a broad career orientation to high-tech modern jobs. In contrast, the rural students in the study faced aspirational pressure driven by their internal agency. These learners feel aspirational pressure based on the unfortunate reality of education being their sole escape from poverty. However, the data does show that the aspirational pressure was primarily based on an intrinsic motivation process for rural children. This aspirational pressure stems from the unfortunate reality that education is often their only escape from poverty. Thus, the children experience not only the aspirational pressure, but also a lack of external resources or support needed; proposing literature does state that although they are socially bonded, they are restrained since a “pragmatic constraint” “filters” toward their career aspirations which circulate them back to traditional and stable employment. The literature does a good job explaining barriers facing rural students, such as disinvestment, social capital, and professional knowledge, however, it points out their resilience, and solid work ethic. The report advocates for an in-depth analysis and investigation into these issues of disparity, perhaps the urban advantage is an oversimplification of rural life without closely examining and scrutinizing the work. For instance, it depicts the rural students’ “pragmatic constraint” as a barrier rather than an opportunity. While this can be a limiting adjustment to their context, it is characterized as “bonded social capital” within these communities as in prohibitive, or restrictive by avoiding exploring potential benefits within it. Therefore, it is important to consider that stronger community loyalties and emotional support might be a by-product of some unknown considerations. Therefore, it is pertinent to ask if the urban-rural divide is in itself a cause or a symptom of larger socio-economic disparity. Since it is important to avoid misrepresentation and to understand the basis for rural students’ mental toughness and resiliency to not miss the recognition of the internal strength they build in learning to manage their own complex situation, this is an important step.

Despite these factors, the available literature confidently asserts that “the benefits of urban students become a positive and accumulated benefit over time,” while the “challenges faced by rural students represent an aggregate equalized disadvantage.” The evidence in support of this conclusion underscores the need for a more critical and nuanced reading of the claims as it also risks rendering a simplistic deterministic explanation of success, where a student’s future is determined by their origin.

## 5.0 Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that the differences between urban and rural students in the context of high school students in China are obvious and complicated in forms of academic stress, social life and future aspirations. The differences between urban and rural students are related to urban students experiencing a resource-rich, competitive stress due to availability of resources for school and making many paths to success, while rural students experience a resource-limited, aspirational stress, or knowing that education is their point of entry to economic mobility. Each of these kinds of academic stress could be a very subjective experience, potentially resulting in different responses to psychological stress that could be seen in a wider context of inequality and opportunity due to Chinese culture.

Urban students experience exposure to a diversity of social ecosystems, where many of those provide bridging social capital and other orientations and opportunities. Rural students experience bonding social capital in a much more homogenous community, which may provide emotional support but no alternative life orientations. These macro trends are evident in career orientation. Scholars have noted that urban students, who have much more exposure to different types of job options, have developed even more liberal career orientations from a younger age. Rural students also tend to have more pragmatic career ideals due to external structural constraints and sometimes barriers based on traditional community norms that value community service and family loyalty. Ultimately, beyond microdata that demonstrated the experiences of individual students, there are broader implications for issues of social mobility and educational justice in contemporary China. While this study has compiled systematic questions about cultural differences, it indicates that while the rapid changes to the urban/rural divide have transformed students’ educational experiences across China, these different educational opportunities may not be used to disrupt social stratification, but, rather, reinforce it.

Policies that recognize and can take advantage of the established strengths of rural students, such as their work ethic, commitment to a community, and cultural knowledge, may result in new possibilities for success without students having to sacrifice their cultural identity or social ties in order to realize economic benefits. While the research in this study is based primarily on secondary data, which may not accurately represent the contemporary transformation of Chinese society - particularly the role of digital technologies and changes in economic circumstances in altering opportunities in rural places - it is important to note that both the urban and rural study designs

generally limit their explorations to the most developed urban center or structurally the most remote rural areas. As a result, it is possible that research fails to present a rich exploration of the variety that exists across the continuum of social and learning contexts, as significant differences are ignored in students' experiences of different kinds of communities.

## 6.0 Evaluation

Writing this dissertation provided me with insights into the challenges of undertaking comparative educational research and synthesizing a range of academic literature to establish connecting and reinforcing arguments about complicated social phenomena. It became painfully aware to me along the way that the relationship between academic stressors and social aspects and career ambitions is more complex than I perceived at first, although as a researcher it is nothing to do with the assumption that the research question was somewhat straightforward. The comparison addressed only illustrative means, and what I missed out on in analyzing a more sophisticated urban-rural disjuncture within Chinese education. The structured process of reviewing the literature, confirmed the authors in the literature were able to cover the breadth of literature and the quality of the literature and biases acknowledged in terms of font size considered reputable. I also thought it was a good methodological decision to not just review the literature in chronological order but to theme the review. This allowed for the literature to identify trends and contradictions throughout the literature and methodology used in the project. The aesthetic of the literature created not only one conclusion but helped build more complex arguments that supported opposing articulations or understandings. The use of methods, data from study findings and the use of resources in English and Chinese, provided a specific analytic frame which grounds and stabilizes cultural authenticity from an insider's perspective.

A further significant barrier was finding control of time. The literature search yielded a very considerable amount of relevant literature that simply could not be examined in the timeline of the project. It was a difficult process of filtering which studies were included, which voices were not included, and limiting studies without loss to certain conclusions of the research. In the end, I am learning as well, that the most significant learning to come from this process is simply to be analytically distanced from the sources while acknowledging the unique contributions each study makes in describing complex social phenomena. Most of the early iterations of the literature review were essentially summaries of the findings in the source material without substantial critical or comparative anal-

ysis. However, as the process of writing reshaped the literature review chapters, it became evident that I should write about the methodologies adopted by each source and define the possible biases and limitations, as well as what each one contributed to the overall understanding of the research topic.

If this project were to be repeated, there would be many different changes to the process and likely the outcomes as well. First, defining more specific geographical/demographic boundaries for "urban" and "rural" from the outset would have reduced some of the confusion and inconsistency in how sources were conceptualized and analyzed. Second, a more systematic way to track approaches and characteristics across sources could have provided more information for evaluating the quality of the study's richly and contextually situated methodologies and for assessing their generalizability.

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