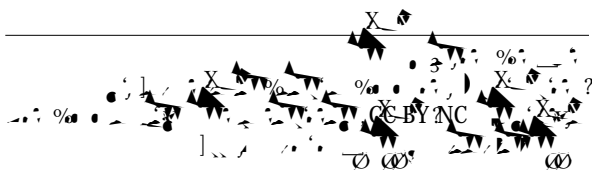


# The Quest for Educational Equity in Schools in Mainland China & Hong Kong

*Jason Cong Lin*

*In this essay, I introduce how and why minority groups and educational equity are understood and approached differently in Mainland China and Hong Kong. I describe how in the past few decades, China and Hong Kong have reformed their education systems to increase educational equity and I summarize the progress achieved. I also discuss the cultural, political, and social issues and challenges that contribute to the complexity surrounding educational equity in China and Hong Kong, elaborate on how educational equity remains a tricky issue in schools, and how different factors intersect to affect students' access to educational goods. Finally, I argue that schools in China and Hong Kong should continue both to reform their education systems to enhance the academic achievement and social development of marginalized students and to put more effort into empowering teachers and students to recognize and address the long-standing systemic and institutional obstacles.*

Diversity exists in Mainland China (hereafter referred to as “China”) and Hong Kong, but the meaning of *minority groups* varies across these two contexts. According to the latest censuses conducted in 2021, the majority of people (over 91 percent) in both societies share Han Chinese ethnicity.<sup>1</sup> In China, the term *ethnic minorities* refers to the fifty-five recognized ethnic minority groups who have always been in what is now Chinese territory. However, the major ethnic minority groups in Hong Kong include Filipinos, Indonesians, and South Asians, who often experience economic deprivation, educational barriers, and social exclusion.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the term *migrant group* in China primarily refers to Chinese people who migrate domestically, while in Hong Kong, it refers to migrants from China and other parts of the world. In China, the dominant spoken and written languages are Mandarin and simplified Chinese characters. Although English and Chinese are two equal official languages in Hong Kong and students are expected to be biliterate (that is, mastering written Chinese and English) and trilingual (speaking fluent Cantonese, Mandarin, and English), Cantonese and traditional Chinese characters remain the norms in education and society writ large. Moreover, although the Chinese government is officially atheist, it recognizes five religions: Buddhism, Catholicism, Daoism, Islam, and





schools are owned and managed by charitable or religious bodies, and some serve specific ethnic minorities. This interaction of elitism and marketization causes educational equity advocates in Hong Kong to pay more attention to abstract

A series of interventions to reform education systems in China and Hong Kong over the past few decades contributed to these movements toward educational equity. At the macro level, the Hong Kong government has put forward numerous pieces of legislation to foster educational equity for minority students, including the Sex Discrimination Ordinance (1996), the Family Status Discrimination Ordinance (1997), the Race Discrimination Ordinance (2008), and the Discrimination Legislation (Miscellaneous Amendments) Ordinance 2020.<sup>13</sup> To ensure the legislation can be effectively implemented, some independent statutory bodies with responsibility for promoting educational equity, such as the Equal Opportunities Commission, have been established to monitor the application of the legislation and provide feedback accordingly.

To improve educational equity between rural and urban areas, between different regions, and between different ethnic groups, the Chinese government initiated the Special Post Teacher Plan in rural areas in Central and Western China (including some ethnic minority areas) in 2006. This policy has focused on reducing the gap in educational quality and enhancing the overall quality of teachers by encouraging and recruiting competent university and college graduates to work in schools in these areas. This project has enhanced educational equity in three ways: 1) by creating more job opportunities for college and university graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds (such as low socioeconomic status and ethnic minority families), 2) by enhancing the teaching capacity in some neglected subjects in these areas, including arts, foreign languages, and information technology, and 3) by benefiting students in these areas through significantly improved school performance.<sup>14</sup>

In the name of enhancing educational equity, avoiding unnecessary compe-

larly open schools for those students who do not have the necessary facilities and guidance to ensure that they can access these educational resources.

At the local policy level, some experimental cases are worth mentioning. In certain Chinese cities (for instance, Hangzhou), local education bureaus have adopted government-purchasing schemes to buy education services from private schools so that all eligible children of migrants can enjoy a free and high-quality compulsory education. Modes of the purchasing schemes include paying tuition fees to private schools for student placements, increasing the public expenditure per student in private schools to meet the standards of public schools, and offering professional

In addition to what is happening inside classrooms, schools in China and Hong Kong are working to establish good relationships with parents and communities. Minority students' learning greatly benefits from an effective school-home-society relationship, while weak support at home and in society can further impede children from minority backgrounds from achieving higher academic performance. The

the only way to achieve social and class mobility and fundamentally change themselves and their families' destinies. This is illustrated by two well-known Chinese proverbs: "knowledge changes fate" and the "carp jumps over the dragon gate." In Chinese culture, all levels of education are connected (for instance, attending a good primary school leads to a good secondary school), and education is considered a precondition for many other opportunities, including a well-paid job, personal well-being, a good marriage, and a high quality of life. As education is promoted as the desirable path that everyone should follow, it creates intense competition and anxiety among all stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, and school leaders, as most of them have no choice but to compete for limited educational resources. In this climate, the communities who do not share this cultural view on education can be left behind. Studies have documented that some non-ethnic Chinese parents in China and Hong Kong do not value schooling like their Chinese counterparts because of their religious beliefs or cultural traditions, which impedes their children from receiving quality education in such competitive societies.<sup>19</sup>

The pervasiveness of Chinese culture in China and Hong Kong significantly influences the construction of gender and perpetuates gender inequity. In China, gender disparities in educational opportunity and attainment are largely caused by parental investments and their ideas about the education of females. Influenced by ancestor worship, the tradition of "son preference" – the belief that only sons can carry on the family lineage and provide financial and physical support for their families – and the view that daughters do not need to attain a high level

dents are about 27 percent more likely to report evidence of gender disparities in schools than their Han counterparts in China. And given that ethnic minorities are exempted from the one-child policy, they often have more than two children, and parents tend to send boys to school for education and keep girls at home to do household chores.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, although girls in Hong Kong schools generally seem to enjoy almost equal opportunity and, in some cases, even better academic performance than boys, ethnic minority girls have much higher dropout rates (some never go to school), worse school experience, and lower performance than their ethnic Chinese counterparts.<sup>26</sup>

Chinese culture often sustains the unequal power relationship between the Han/Chinese and non-Han/Chinese groups and strengthens educational inequity between them. As two Chinese societies, China and Hong Kong experience long-standing systemic and institutional issues of integrating minorities who do not look Chinese, speak Chinese languages, embrace Chinese cultures, or enact Chinese lifestyles and values. Because assimilation has been a common practice in both China and Hong Kong, minority groups often do not have other options. In particular, schools often promote Han/Chinese-centric knowledge, skills, and values, while neglecting, downplaying, or misrepresenting minority perspectives.<sup>27</sup> Also, learning Mandarin in China and Cantonese in Hong Kong is critical social currency for racial/ethnic minorities if they want to integrate into schools and societies.<sup>28</sup> For example, in Malaysia and Singapore, the dominant languages of instruction in schools, and exams are mostly conducted in written Chinese. This reliance on students' fluency in Chinese is likely a barrier to adequately assessing non-Chinese students' academic knowledge. In fact, research shows that the overpromotion of and overreliance on both written and spoken Chinese in schools as a de facto assimilation strategy has contrib on both en-USat0.092 Tw 11 0 0 11on str



not compete in the rat race) for educational equity to be achieved. Specifically, in such a cultural tradition, most students are expected to learn very similar (if not the same) knowledge, skills, and values, and compete through the same exam systems (such as *Gaokao* in China or the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination). But these knowledge, skills, and values represent only a very narrow conception of what is valuable to learn and achieve in schools: students are diverse and need different knowledge, skills, and values to live meaningful and fulfilling lives. The intense (and sometimes meaningless) competition already puts numerous students and teachers in a miserable loop that serves neither their own nor society's goals because they are bounded by the Chinese cultural tradition. A prominent understanding among many parents and educators in China and Hong Kong illustrates this point: if a student cannot even earn through competition an admission ticket to educational resources, then they have already lost at the starting line, and what choices can they actually have later on? This understanding created a trending topic in both public commentary and research in today's China and Hong Kong:

of schools have become more frequent and stronger. For example, under political pressure, schools in Hong Kong are required to enhance national security and Chinese identity-related education across different sectors. This attempt to amplify the Chinese aspects of Hong Kong society and identity further intensifies the challenges in effectively educating different marginalized groups, especially the non-ethnic Chinese.

Only by acknowledging and understanding how systems operate and impact diverse students can the public be equipped to tackle barriers to attaining educational equity within and beyond schools. Unfortunately, many systemic and institutional issues in China and Hong Kong, such as Han Chauvinism, ethnic/language hierarchy, racial prejudice and discrimination, gender bias, and lack of religious freedom, are justified or denied by the governments and schools, and thus remain largely invisible to the public and difficult to address. This is partially because, in the current political climate, these issues are defined by the governments as sensitive topics that risk dividing society, jeopardizing political legitimacy, and endangering national security. Following this logic, schools should either not allow teachers and students to discuss them or promote the official and “correct” answers provided by government. However, papering over these issues or treating them as noncontroversial not only does not change the fact that they exist in China and Hong Kong, but also impedes students from comprehensively understanding these issues and learning how to address them. In this sense, the current political climate in China and Hong Kong intensifies educational inequity by covering up or justifying the systemic and institutional issues that impede it.

Worse, although the governments and schools claim to be neutral, they favor the dominant majority in practice. For example, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic minorities are blamed, explicitly or implicitly, for not sharing Chinese culture, not valuing education, not actively mastering the dominant languages, and not sufficiently embracing assimilation.<sup>36</sup> Following this logic, it is their choice, not the majority group’s oppression, that led to their marginalization, fewer educational opportunities, and lower socioeconomic status and educational achievements. This way of thinking neglects any systemic reasons behind individual choice, thus reinforcing systemic inequity and injustice.

Further, religious minorities are not allowed to reveal their religions or practice their religious rituals within schools in China, given the Han-dominant understanding that schools should be “religion-neutral.” Some religious communities withhold children (especially girls) from school because schools do not recognize and sometimes directly oppose religious practice, including by teaching atheism, encouraging students to get rid of their “backward” and “superstitious” religious beliefs, and banning Muslim female students from wearing the hijab. In this context, some parents worry that children will lose their religion by attending school and thus they keep them away from school.<sup>37</sup> Here, schools are

not religion-neutral but favor the dominant group's understanding of religion. As a result, religious minority students' educational opportunities are reduced, and their educational achievements are undercut by the social, emotional, and mental health issues associated with the de facto secularization and religious discrimination in schools.<sup>38</sup>

In this conservative context, there is little space for individual schools or teachers to make curricular or pedagogical changes. In China, the challenges that minorities face and their underlying causes are largely overlooked in the current one-size-fits-all national curricula that are not related to minority students' real lives and rely on standardized measures and products to suppress and marginalize students' diverse identities.<sup>39</sup> Minority students do not see themselves and their struggles accurately represented in the current curriculum, and are thus less likely to benefit from the curriculum and schools in general. In fact, a significant number of minority students either voluntarily leave or are "forced out" of this education system that fails them, widening the educational gap between the majority and minority students.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, school leaders and teachers have limited options. To keep their jobs, school leaders avoid taking actions that are not favored by the government, and they thereby become part of the systems that reinforce educational inequity. School leaders then pass these constraints on to teachers, who also worry about losing their jobs if they engage in practices discouraged by the school administrators, in effect limiting teachers' autonomy in fostering educational equity in classrooms. As many recent cases in China and Hong Kong have illustrated, teachers who discuss sensitive issues without promoting the views favored by the governments are punished in various ways, including job termination or even imprisonment.<sup>41</sup> The potential punishments keep teachers from discussing the above topics in the classroom, which are highly relevant and troubling to minority students in their daily lives.<sup>42</sup> In addition, the teacher training

were enrolled in primary schools and 321,162 in secondary schools in Hong Kong in 2022–2023.<sup>46</sup> Their differentiated education systems, compared with less selective systems, are more likely to lead to higher levels of inequity because they start to sort students by attainment very early in life. Empirical evidence indicates that sorting students at an early stage can increase inequity, particularly for minority students, because it often prioritizes those who have already gained various advantages in life from their parents. Sorting thus becomes an intergenerational transmission of social capital.<sup>47</sup>

Many historical inequalities and new societal challenges further contribute to the marginalization and disadvantages of minority students in China and Hong Kong. The first historical issue is regional disparity. The urban-rural income ratio gap in China has widened dramatically since it adopted a socialist market economy in 1992, which caused a growing gap in the provision of primary and secondary education between rural and urban areas and in the educational performance and achievement of students from urban and rural backgrounds.<sup>48</sup> For example, so long as they cannot get rid of their agricultural *hukou* (household registration), rural students have no access to the high-quality schools in urban areas. The regional disparity also significantly reduces educational provision for minorities. Eastern and coastal provinces in China tend to enjoy higher-quality educational resources, more modern equipment, better schools, and more qualified teachers than Western and Southeast China, where racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities traditionally live.

Interschool inequity (such as resource disparity between schools) is another historical issue. China has a long history of regional and social disparities in schools.

provide the required documents (for instance, birth certificate and *hukou*) necessary to enter these schools. Consequently, a majority of girls have to enroll in private and unlicensed migrant schools, and some do not enroll at all.<sup>49</sup> In Hong Kong, when racial, ethnic, linguistic, or cultural minorities are also children of migrant workers— for example, Filipinos and Indonesians often hold temporary status in Hong Kong as foreign domestic helpers— their school options are strictly limited, which basically equates to low school performance and high dropout rates.<sup>50</sup>

How to deal with refugees and asylum seekers is one relatively new societal challenge in China and Hong Kong. With China rising as a global power, more and more refugees (such as North Korean escapees and refugees from Myanmar) see China as a transit and destination country. However, over the past few decades, the Chinese government has provided little financial support to refugees, and very few provinces have allowed refugee children to attend schools. In 2004, Hong Kong courts changed the legal system to mandate consideration of asylum and torture claims. Since then, Hong Kong has witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of asylum seekers and torture claimants, especially from South Asian countries such as Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh.<sup>51</sup> Similar to China, school options for the children of refugees and asylum seekers in Hong Kong are very limited, thus leading to low school performance and high dropout rates.<sup>52</sup> The Hong Kong government only provides (often poor-quality) education for them through very limited channels, such as the government's subsidy schemes for ethnic minority students. Given the considerable delays in their access to mainstream schools (depending on the availability of places and chances), young refugees and asylum seekers can at best enroll in schools with a high concentration of non-Chinese speaking students, which can reinforce racial segregation and impede them from achieving high academic performance.

refugees. In Hong Kong— although numerous online resources and supports are provided by the Education Bureau and education companies like Hong Kong Education City— schools, teachers, students, and parents are still at the exploratory stage of online learning. Many students from low-income, racial/ethnic-minority, and migrant families report that they are particularly unprepared for online learning due to the digital divide, including having little or no experience of learning through virtual classes before the pandemic, and that they are not equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills, and values to succeed in online learning environments.<sup>56</sup> Teachers also report that they are less able to identify and support the diverse learning needs of students through online teaching, let alone adjust content and pedagogy to accommodate students' diversity. In this sense, compared with dominant-group students in Hong Kong, minority students have been hurt most by the pandemic.

**A**lthough China and Hong Kong have made progress toward educational equity in schools over the past few decades, especially in terms of expanded access to schools and a narrowing of the gender gap in educational opportunity and attainment, educational equity is still a serious challenge in both nations. Long-standing systemic and institutional contributors to inequity remain prevalent and have worsened in the context of China's changing political climate and the COVID19 pandemic. To better educate students from diverse groups, schools in China and Hong Kong should continue to reform their education systems both to support the academic achievement and social development of marginalized students and to empower teachers and students to recognize and address the systemic and institutional obstacles.

---

### about the author

Jason Cong Lin is Assistant Professor in the Department of International Education at the Education University of Hong Kong. He is the author of *National Education in Hong Kong in the New Era* (forthcoming 2025) and *Multiculturalism, Chinese Identity, and Education: Who Are We?* (2022).

## endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> National Bureau of Statistics of China, "2021 Population Census," 2021, <https://www.census2021.gov.hk/en/index.html>; and Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, "2021 Population Census," December 2, 2022, [https://census2021.gov.hk/en/main\\_tables.html](https://census2021.gov.hk/en/main_tables.html).
- <sup>2</sup> Jason Cong Lin, *Multiculturalism, Chinese Identity, and Education: Who Are We?* (Routledge, 2022).
- <sup>3</sup> Meira Levinson, Tatiana Geron, and Harry Brighouse, "Conceptions of Educational Equity," *AERA Open* (2022), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/23328584221121344>.
- <sup>4</sup> National People's Congress, "Education Law of the People's Republic of China," April 29, 2021, [http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_sjzl/sjzl\\_zcfg/zcfg\\_jy/202107/t20210730\\_547843.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/sjzl_zcfg/zcfg_jy/202107/t20210730_547843.html); and Hong Kong Education Commission, *Learning for Life, Learning Through Life: Reform Proposals for the Education System in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong Education Commission, 2000).
- <sup>5</sup> Stephen McDonnell, "Changing China: Xi Jinping's Effort to Return to Socialism," *BBC*, September 23, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-58579831>.
- <sup>6</sup> Hong Kong Education Commission, *Learning for Life, Learning Through Life*; and Education Bureau, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, "Primary and Secondary Education," November 30, 2022, <https://www.edb.gov.hk/en/about-edb/policy/primary-secondary/index.html>.
- <sup>7</sup> United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2021–22: Uncertain Times, Unsettled Lives: Shaping Our Future in a Transforming World* (United Nations Development Programme, 2022).
- <sup>8</sup> Jane Golley and Sherry Tao Kong, "Inequality of Opportunity in China's Educational Outcomes," *China Economic Review* 51 (2016): 116–128.
- <sup>9</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), "Results from PISA2018: Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu and Zhejiang (China)," 2019, [https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/about/programmes/edu/pisa/publications/national-reports/pisa-2018/featured-country-speci c-overviews/PISA2018\\_CN\\_QCL.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/about/programmes/edu/pisa/publications/national-reports/pisa-2018/featured-country-speci c-overviews/PISA2018_CN_QCL.pdf).
- <sup>10</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), "Results from PISA2018: Hong Kong (China)," 2019, [https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/about/programmes/edu/pisa/publications/national-reports/pisa-2018/featured-country-speci c-overviews/PISA2018\\_CN\\_HKG.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/about/programmes/edu/pisa/publications/national-reports/pisa-2018/featured-country-speci c-overviews/PISA2018_CN_HKG.pdf).
- <sup>11</sup> Meng Zhao and Paul Glewwe, "What Determines Basic School Attainment in Develop

mission (Hong Kong), Family Status Discrimination Ordinance (Cap. 527), November 21, 1997, last amended 2018; and Equal Opportunities Commission (Hong Kong), *Discrimination Legislation (Miscellaneous Amendments) Ordinance 2020: Guidance on Amendments to the Anti-Discrimination Ordinances*



- <sup>27</sup> Cong Lin, *Multiculturalism, Chinese Identity, and Education*; and Yiting Chu, "The Power of Knowledge: A Critical Analysis of the Depiction of Ethnic Minorities in China's Elementary Textbooks," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 18 (4) (2015): 469–487.
- <sup>28</sup> Jason Cong Lin and Liz Jackson, "Assimilation over Protection: Rethinking Mandarin Language Assimilation in China," *Multicultural Education Review* 13 (4) (2021): 338–361; and Jason Cong Lin and Liz Jackson, "Sinophobia in Hong Kong News Media," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 54 (5) (2020): 568–580.
- <sup>29</sup> Gulbahar H. Beckett and Gerard A. Postiglione, *China's Assimilationist Language Policy: The Impact on Indigenous/Minority Literacy and Social Harmony* (Routledge, 2013); and Cong Lin and Jackson, "Assimilation over Protection."
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.; and Jason Cong Lin and Liz Jackson, "Just Singing and Dancing: Official Representations of Ethnic Minority Cultures in China," *International Journal of Multicultural Education* 24 (3) (2022): 94–117.
- <sup>31</sup> Bhowmik, Kennedy, and Hue, "Education for All—but Not Hong Kong's Ethnic Minority Students"; and Bhowmik and Kennedy, *Out of School*."
- <sup>32</sup> Chu, "The Power of Knowledge"; Wei Wang, "Ethnic Minority Cultures in Chinese Schooling: Manifestations, Implementation Pathways and Teachers' Practices," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 25 (1) (2021): 110–127; Tao Wang, "Religion-Based Cultural Identity and Conflicts of Migrant Muslim Students in Northwest China," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 21 (6) (2018): 858–875; Rachel Sing-Kiat Ting and Louise Sundarajan, *Culture, Cognition, and Emotion in China's Religious Ethnic Minorities: Voices of Suffering among the Yi* (Springer, 2017); Meichen Lu, Manlin Cui, Yaojiang Shi, et al., "Who Drops Out from Primary Schools in China? Evidence from Minority-Concentrated Rural Areas," *Asia Pacific Education Review*

