

# **To what extent is the meritocratic system inequitable in the context of accessing higher education opportunities in China?**

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## **Abstract**

The rapid transformation of China's educational landscape since the 1980s, driven by market reforms and an emphasis on meritocracy, has sparked global attention. However, concerns have arisen regarding the equity of China's merit-based educational system, especially in the realm of higher education. This study aims to delve into the extent of inequities within China's meritocratic system, with a specific focus on the national higher education entrance examination, commonly referred to as the Gaokao. Employing thematic synthesis as the research method, this research scrutinises existing literature and identifies three overarching themes: Socioeconomic Status (SES), urban-rural disparities, and Gaokao policies. SES factors, such as family background and parental education, reinforce class-based privileges, contributing to inequities. Urban-rural disparities in school characteristics and available resources exacerbate these disparities, impacting access to higher education opportunities. Additionally, Gaokao and university admission policies give rise to regional inequalities, presenting further challenges. This study provides a valuable contribution by extending the examination of meritocracy to the collectivist-oriented Chinese society and addressing the need for context-based evidence within an Eastern context. It also sheds light on the potential reinforcement of inequity within meritocratic systems, challenging traditional functional-based notions of meritocracy. Future research should undertake a comprehensive exploration of these themes, employing a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of meritocracy on educational equity.

**Keywords:** China's education system; educational equity; meritocracy; Socioeconomic Status (SES); Urban-rural disparities