

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

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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.¹ 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.² 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

Protestantism. By 2022, the most popular religious groups in Hong Kong were Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Judaism.

Similar to many other societies, educational equity is a buzzword that is ill-defined in China and Hong Kong.³ Establishing an education system that provides students from diverse backgrounds the opportunity to get the support and resources they need to achieve their educational goals has been considered a core value and desirable goal in China and Hong Kong.⁴ However, the understandings of, constructions of, and approaches to educational equity often vary between China and Hong Kong, and even between different periods within each nation.

In China, given its authoritative political system and that most schools (including the top ones) are public institutions run by the government, educational equity is more often pursued through a government-initiated top-down approach that prioritizes political harmony and unity, instead of through a grassroots movement approach that relies on contestations, protests, and activism. In this context, the government discourse of educational equity has generally gone through three stages: 1) from the 1990s to the 2000s, prioritizing “universal access to education among all people,” 2) from 2012 to 2017, focusing on key targeted areas (such as special education) and groups (such as people in poor areas) to guarantee equal access to education, and 3) since 2017, emphasizing that China should pursue a higher level of educational equity: that is, “equity of quality.” But government statements do not ensure that policy will be implemented without distortion or that it is the only legitimate understanding of educational equity in China. The government discourse shows that the conceptualization of educational equity in China has increasingly shifted from equal opportunity and access to equal outcome. This shift is consistent with President Xi Jinping’s effort to return to socialism and his emphasis on “common prosperity.”⁵

Because of its colonial history, Hong Kong has a complex relationship with China. Under the guidance of “one country, two systems,” Hong Kong has enjoyed autonomy in designing its education system. Unlike China, which has a big government and socialist market economy, Hong Kong has minimal government and operates a capitalist market economy. In this context, Hong Kong schools largely provide a strong, elite education system in which excellence in academic performance is highly valued. The self-positioning of Hong Kong as an international financial center and the prevalence of marketization in society reinforce the commodification of educational provisions and push schools to produce elites and adopt business-like practices to cope with competition in the global marketplace. As a result, the education system in Hong Kong relies heavily on private schooling, and the types of both public and private schools are diverse. For example, some

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 equal opportunity (especially alleviating systemic and institutional barriers that impede minority students' education opportunities) than to a fair distribution of educational resources among different types of schools or equal achievement or outcome among diverse students.⁶

Both China and Hong Kong have made progress toward educational equity in the past few decades. According to the United Nations Development Programme's *Human Development Report 2021–22*, China's and Hong Kong's education systems have provided a high-quality education that benefits the whole population.⁷ The expansion of access to schools is an example: all school-age children in China enjoy the right to receive nine years of compulsory education. In urban China, there has been a narrowing of the gender gap in educational opportunity and attainment over time due to economic development, the improvement of parents' educational backgrounds and attitudes toward children's education, and higher expectations of the payoff of schooling.⁸ The results of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment showed that in four developed municipalities and provinces in China (that is, Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang), there is no significant difference between socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged students in reading, and girls outperform boys in reading, although the situation in other less-developed provinces could be different.⁹ The results also suggest that students in Hong Kong generally achieved high performance, and that gender, socioeconomic status, and immigrant status do not significantly impact performance.¹⁰ In fact, girls outperformed boys in reading, mathematics, and science, and immigrants outperformed nonimmigrants in reading.¹¹

On another indicator of educational equity – concerning the improvement of the learning environment – studies in relatively poor regions (such as Northwest and Southwest China) indicated that dropout rates have significantly declined and students' school performance has improved because of better school facilities and enhanced human resources in the past decades.¹² The government and schools in Hong Kong have also made great efforts both to remove obstacles that cause minorities to drop out of school and to integrate them into schools and society, such as providing bilingual teaching assistants to non-Chinese speaking students, allocating additional resources to schools admitting non-Chinese speaking students, and abolishing the “designated schools” system, whose high concentration of non-Chinese speaking students promoted racial segregation and reduced their motivation to learn Chinese and move into mainstream society.

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 2020.¹³ 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.¹⁴

In the name of enhancing educational equity, avoiding unnecessary competition, and reducing the burdens on students, the Chinese government banned for-profit private tutoring in 2019. In 2021, the Chinese government announced the Double Reduction policy to eliminate the demand for private tutoring by improving the public school system. Although the effects of the policy are controversial – elite parents can always find ways to give their children advantages – studies have revealed that it has enhanced educational equity in a few ways.¹⁵ For example, public schools are required to offer free after-school tutorials for students in need; minority students of disadvantaged background can make use of these opportunities to receive extra education and guidance without paying extra fees.

COVID-19 rapidly increased the reliance on technology in education, and having access to reliable technologies and facilities has become central for students. To address the problems of insufficient technologies, facilities, and guidance, the Chinese and Hong Kong governments have issued policies to make public facilities (such as libraries) available to students in need and provide guidance on how to make good use of them. To help minority students, the governments have also encouraged schools to put free-to-use educational resources online, and to regu-

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 development to teachers and augmenting training expenses for private schools to improve the overall quality of education in the private sector. Local education councils also work closely with universities and related institutions and social organizations to strengthen educational equity for all. For example, for ethnic and linguistic minority students, qualified individuals and social institutions are compensated for offering home education services. Meanwhile, routine professional development activities, tailor-made training, and professional development opportunities from universities and teacher training institutions are also provided to meet teachers' needs in effectively educating students from diverse backgrounds. Another experimental intervention in these cities is the creation of shared and quality curricula made free and available to schools in need. This has proved helpful for schools that do not have quality teachers and necessary facilities. By making full use of educational technology, shared curricula are made into video clips to build a video resource database, courseware library, and curriculum resource library.¹⁶ For students with limited access to the internet, the shared curricula were recorded onto CD-ROMs to ensure students could access them anytime and anywhere. Equity within schools in China and Hong Kong increases when teachers adapt their teaching styles to accommodate students' diverse needs and provide the necessary support for learning.

Despite the general environment that favors unity over diversity, some teachers in both China and Hong Kong still find ways to incorporate culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy in their teaching, turning students' diversity and related controversial issues into educational resources that all students can discuss and reflect on.¹⁷ This makes minority students feel seen and supported in class, and thus more willing to learn and participate in activities. Equity in education is also promoted when minority students can see recognized and positive examples of people from their own groups in schools. Some schools in China and Hong Kong have developed school-based curricula that intentionally include positive examples of minority groups. They have also invited recognized figures from minority groups to give lectures and speeches and to interact with minority students. This helps create an inclusive school environment that recognizes students' diverse backgrounds and reveals different possibilities for them.

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 COVID-19 pandemic intensified these dynamics. Since 2020, the Chinese government has proposed an initiative called School-Family-Community Operation, which highlights active parental involvement and societal support as crucial ways to improve educational equity. Under this initiative, many schools have taken steps to foster parents' participation and help them to support their children in schoolwork. For example, some schools improve communication with parents in disadvantaged homes to help develop home environments conducive to learning. Others directly address parents' worries about girls and students with religious beliefs attending school. And some schools initiate afterschool homework clubs for students with weak home support.

Similar strategies have been adopted in Hong Kong. Some schools in Hong Kong have engaged families in supporting students' online learning at school and home by focusing on the following four approaches: 1) converting existing and accessible resources across sectors in the local community into resources that can more effectively help students with insufficient digital access at home; 2) being flexible to support students' poor learning environment at home, such as opening schools for extra hours for a limited number of disadvantaged students; 3) empowering parents as partners; and 4) establishing emotional and empathetic relationships with parents by understanding and relieving their stress about online learning and worries about their children attending school.¹⁸

Despite some overall improvement, educational equity remains an urgent yet complex issue in schools in China and Hong Kong because several long-standing historical, systemic, and institutional problems remain unaddressed, justified, or denied. It is not possible to explore all these issues in detail here. But we can link the most significant cultural, political, and societal challenges to the related educational inequity in practice, elaborating on how factors such as socioeconomic status, political system, race, ethnicity, gender, and citizenship are interconnected in affecting students' access to educational opportunities.

Culturally speaking, although China and Hong Kong perceive themselves as multicultural, they remain fundamentally Chinese societies given their prioritization of Chinese culture, languages, values, and views on education. Take the views on education, for example: people in China and Hong Kong have long held a firm belief that education can change one's fate. This is particularly the case for minority students in rural areas who have low family income and regard education as

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.¹⁹

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 of education because marriage and family, rather than career and attainment, are what they should focus on, parents tend to invest less in the education of girls.²⁰ This gender bias is reflected in an old Chinese saying that "ignorance is women's virtue," and in the highly imbalanced sex ratios at birth under China's one-child policy. Ironically, the policy inadvertently reduced gender inequity in education, as female children from one-child households enjoy better intrahousehold status and receive more educational resources.²¹

In this cultural context, compared with men, the educational opportunities and achievements of women are more likely to be influenced by other factors, including whether they have siblings, their parents' educational level and socioeconomic status, whether they live in rural or urban areas, their current education stage, and their ethnicity.²² For example, persistence of the gender gap in educational opportunity and achievement shows no signs of dissipating in rural China because of the low economic development and prevalent gender biases.²³ Gender inequity is also a more serious issue at the senior secondary level than at the compulsory education level: the share of female graduates from upper-secondary schools in China in 2023, at just under 35 percent, was one of the smallest among OECD countries and partner economies.²⁴ Moreover, ethnic minority female stu-

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.²⁵ 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.²⁶

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.²⁷ 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.²⁸ For example, Mandarin and Cantonese are 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 contributed to the disadvantages and low school performance of ethnic minority students.²⁹

Under certain circumstances, Chinese culture reinforces the social hierarchy, prejudices, and discrimination against minorities, and thus intensifies educational inequity. For example, minority languages are often presented in educational materials in China and Hong Kong as associated with poverty and backwardness, and ethnic minorities are often associated with stereotypical behaviors (like distinctive singing and dancing).³⁰ In those cases in which racial/ethnic minorities are also linguistic and/or religious minorities – if their mother languages are not Cantonese or they are Muslim, for example – educational inequity is compounded by overlapping language hierarchy, racial/ethnic discrimination, and religious prejudices.³¹ As a result, racial, ethnic, and religious minority students often experience lower school performance, higher dropout rates, assimilation, and deculturation.³²

In addition to the easily measured inequalities, the Chinese cultural tradition creates a more hidden yet harder-to-address dilemma (that is, to compete or

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: *neijuan* (literally, rat race). Minority students facing the dilemma of "to compete or not to compete" in the race come out behind. Students from affluent families always have options to avoid or dismiss the rate race, such as by enrolling in international schools, studying abroad, or even immigrating to other countries, while minority students are often confined by cultural traditions and rarely get the chance to live freely. In this way, minority students can never truly "compete" with students with high socioeconomic status, intensifying educational inequity.

Politics significantly influences schools in China and Hong Kong and poses fundamental challenges to educational equity.³³ Given the one-party system, Chinese schools have always been a political tool for the government to promote its ideology and serve its interests. This is especially true since Xi Jinping became president in 2012. Under his leadership, schools implemented numerous nationalistic policies that reflect his emphasis on unity over diversity. For example, nearly all schools across regions in China are required to use national unified textbooks for three school subjects: history, Chinese language, and morality and the rule of law (in primary and junior-secondary schools) or moral and political education (in senior-secondary schools). This helps the Party maintain political legitimacy and ensure that students learn and believe what the government wants them to.³⁴ The government is also tightening control over international schools in China, especially those enrolling Chinese citizens. Consequently, international schools have become more like public schools, as many courses are required to deliver political messages and foreign curricula are forbidden at the compulsory education level.³⁵ In Hong Kong, since China implemented the National Security Law in 2020, the political intervention in and censorship

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.³⁶ 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.³⁷ 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.³⁸

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.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ 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.⁴² In addition, the teacher training that equips teachers with the necessary knowledge, skills, and values to recognize minority students' needs, identify systemic and institutional barriers to their educational opportunities and achievements, and address these barriers to improve educational equity for them is lacking. This status quo explains the disparity between school leaders' and teachers' beliefs that they already treat minority students "equally" (that they are color/religion/gender-blind) and how minority students feel.⁴³

At the societal level, China and Hong Kong are two populous and economically disparate societies. Their school systems have been widely recognized as competitive and differentiated. China had over 186 million students receiving education at the primary and secondary school level in 2022.⁴⁴ Given its sizable education system, providing equitable access to high-quality school education for all is a serious challenge.⁴⁵ By comparison, 333,551 students

were enrolled in primary schools and 321,162 in secondary schools in Hong Kong in 2022–2023.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷

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.⁴⁸ 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 that reinforces minority groups' disadvantages in schools. Schools in China are, officially or de facto, classified into different categories both at the national and city levels. This differentiation has led to significant disparities among various categories regarding funds, teachers, equipment, and buildings, although gaps also exist among schools within the same category. As most schools in China are managed by the government and are supposed to conform to its positions, schools tend to promote the dominant knowledge, skills, and values endorsed by the government. They also enroll students who are good at following majority-dominant game rules to keep or enhance the ranking and gain more resources. In this context, minority students stand a much lower chance of getting into high-ranking schools unless they are willing to play the majority-dominant game and can play it well.

Migrant status is also a long-standing societal issue that makes the children of migrants more vulnerable and likely to be affected by factors like gender and race. For example, in China, the female children of migrant workers from rural and urban areas face more difficulties than their male counterparts in accessing a decent education in urban areas. Migrant girls are less likely to attend state schools because male births are more often officially registered; therefore, more boys can

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.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰

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.⁵¹ 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.⁵² 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.⁵³

The COVID-19 pandemic has further worsened educational inequity for minority students. In 2020, as a response to school closures, China initiated the strategic plan of Suspending Classes Without Stopping Learning for online education. School closures and switching to a learning-from-home model negatively and disproportionately impacted the learning opportunities, social and emotional development, and academic achievements of different groups of students. For example, ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities in rural areas have been particularly disadvantaged by the lack of infrastructure for conducting online education in these areas, their unfamiliarity with online learning and teaching, and language issues.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, minority group disadvantages, such as less parental support and involvement, a lower level of parental education, poorer social and emotional skills, and fewer information resources and technological facilities at home, were amplified by school closures during the pandemic.⁵⁵ The pandemic helped make equitable formal education an unrealistic dream for school-age

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.⁵⁶ 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.

Although 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 COVID-19 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.

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ENDNOTES

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