

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0341

Reassessing the “Meritocratic Power” of Higher Education in Intergenerational Mobility in China

Qilyu Hong<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, United Kingdom*

**Research Domain:** Higher education policy (HEP)

**Abstract:** In light of the research findings that the intergenerational socio-economic persistence decreases with higher levels of education attained and even vanishes among college graduates, higher education is often seen as an important route for children of disadvantaged backgrounds to “counterattack” their better-off counterparts. However, such equalising effect is under intensive theoretical and empirical debate.

Using the most recent Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) data, this research reassesses the role of higher education in the intergenerational process, focusing particularly on whether it has the potential to break the link between family origins and socio-economic destinations. The multivariable-adjusted modelling is used to purge the selection bias not controlled for in some previous studies. Overall, the results show direct effects of social origins on destinations even among college graduates, implying a “glass ceiling effect” that prevents those from less advantaged backgrounds from achieving upward mobility.

This research provides higher policy implications for China as well as many other developing and post-revolutionist societies to promote meritocratic institutional reforms and reduce inequality of opportunities associated with disadvantaged family backgrounds.

**Paper:**

### Introduction

Education, and especially higher education, has been seen as one of the key drivers of intergenerational mobility. In light of some research findings that the intergenerational association of socio-economic status is generally weaker or even negligible among better-educated individuals, such as college graduates, than among those with lower levels of education, a long-standing proposition in the literature on education and social stratification argues that education can help to break the link between family origins and socioeconomic destination in the adulthood, thereby equalising the opportunities to success of otherwise different individuals and offering a ticket to meritocracy (Chetty et al., 2017; Gregg et al., 2013; Hout, 1988; Karlson, 2019).

However, the role of higher education in helping to erase the effect of social origin on socioeconomic destination is under extensive debate. Some have argued that the observed higher intergenerational mobility among well-educated population reflects only the selection effect, rather than the genuine causal meritocratic effect of education (e.g., Karlson, 2019). Researchers also contend that education

plays a dual role in the social production process (e.g., Witteveen & Attewell, 2020; Zhou, 2019). It is considered one of the prime vehicles for social reproduction, providing a venue for the transmission of status between generations. Moreover, empirical findings have shown a significant and persistent link between family origins and socio-economic destinations among those with the same educational levels, and even among education elites who have received tertiary education (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2018; Friedman & Laurison, 2019; Manzoni & Streib, 2019; Torche, 2018; Vandecasteele, 2016; Witteveen & Attewell, 2017).

Such inconsistency existing in the theoretical debate and empirical investigations suggests that it would be too hasty to hail higher education as the great equaliser (Zhou, 2019). This chapter thus aims at examining the role higher education plays in the intergenerational transmission process and exploring whether it could help to break the origin-designation link and function as the “leveller” that it has been hoped to be.

### **Theoretical framework**

Efforts to theoretically understand the transmission of socio-economic status from one generation to the next, and to identify the role of education underlying such process have been made in both economics and sociology. Blau and Duncan’s (1967) renowned status attainment model provides clues for understanding the compound role of education in promoting social mobility. It suggests that one of the ways in which families or parents maintain their advantageous social and occupational positions down through the generations is by ensuring children’s relative advantages amidst competition for educational opportunities (also see Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

The human capital model proposed by Becker and Tomes’ (1979, 1986) also places education as the principal mechanism underlying intergenerational transmission process. In this model, parents transmit certain characteristics to the child and make human capital investment subject to a family budget constraint; such disparities in parental investment then lead to different human capital development levels and individual socio-economic outcomes.

Overall, education is held as the most crucial mechanism through which parents pass their economic, cultural, and social advantages to the next generation. This can be illustrated using the so-called “Origin-Education-Destination (OED) triangle” (e.g., Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2018; Goldthorpe, 2014), which provides a concrete theoretical background for my research on analysing the transmission of status across generations and the role of education in promoting or hindering intergenerational mobility.

### **Data and methods**

The source of data in this research is individual-level data from Chinese General Social Survey, a nationally representative repeated cross-sectional database. I use the CGSS for the years 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2015, and 2017 to conduct a pooled analysis with a sample of 30683 respondents from both urban and rural areas in China. The multivariable-adjusted modelling is used to purge the selection bias not controlled for in some previous studies.

## Findings and discussion

Results show that there is a strong association of socio-economic status between two generations in China, with parental education being an important predictor of adulthood earnings. Moreover, an advanced educational degree (such as a college degree and a postgraduate degree) seems to be able to detach individuals from their social origins and help erase the influences of advantages possessed by parents, because when children's education level is taken into consideration, earning effects of parental education diminish substantially with the inclusion of own education level. However, there remain substantial and statistically significant direct effects of parental education among highly educated individuals. This means that attaining higher education does not eliminate all sources of background-related inequality, thus challenging the ideas of education-based meritocracy and of education as the great equaliser of opportunities.

## References:

Figure 1. The distribution of earnings by parental education

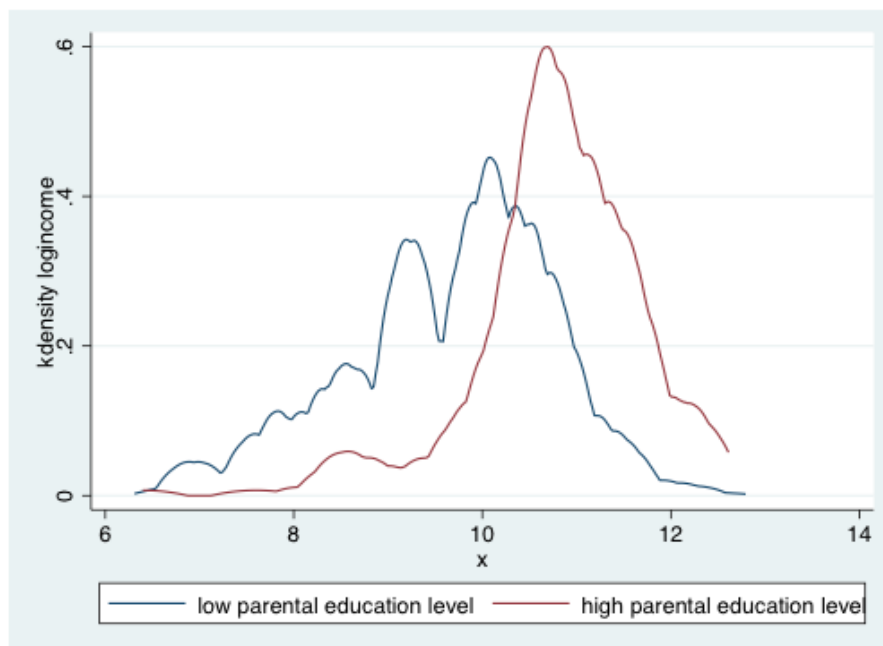
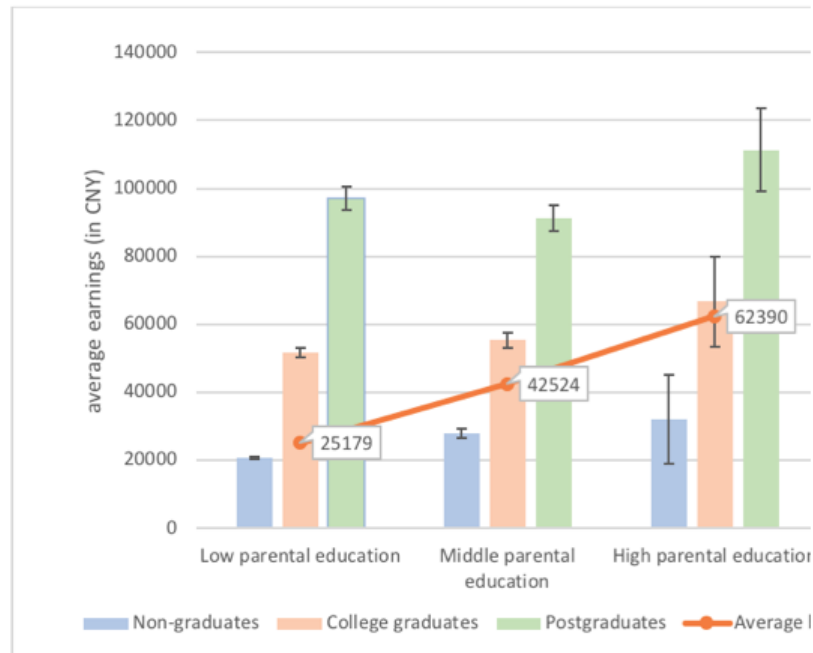


Figure 2. Average earnings of individuals with different education levels and from different family backgrounds.



Note: vertical lines represent 95% confidence intervals

Figure 3. Intergenerational association among men

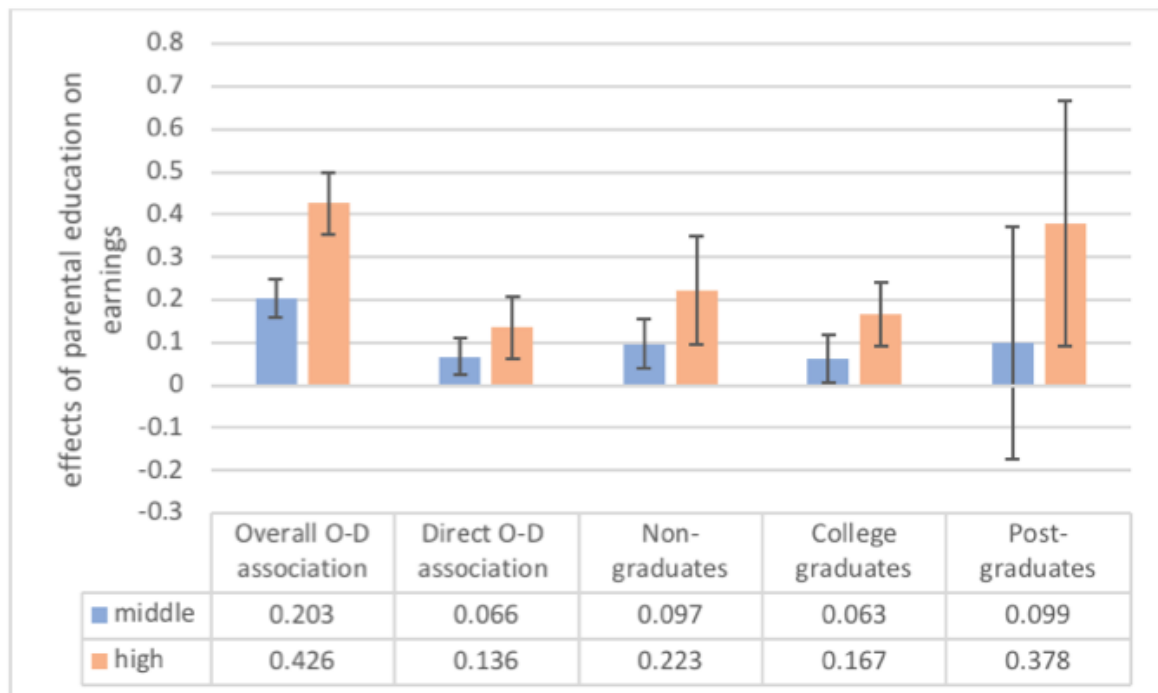
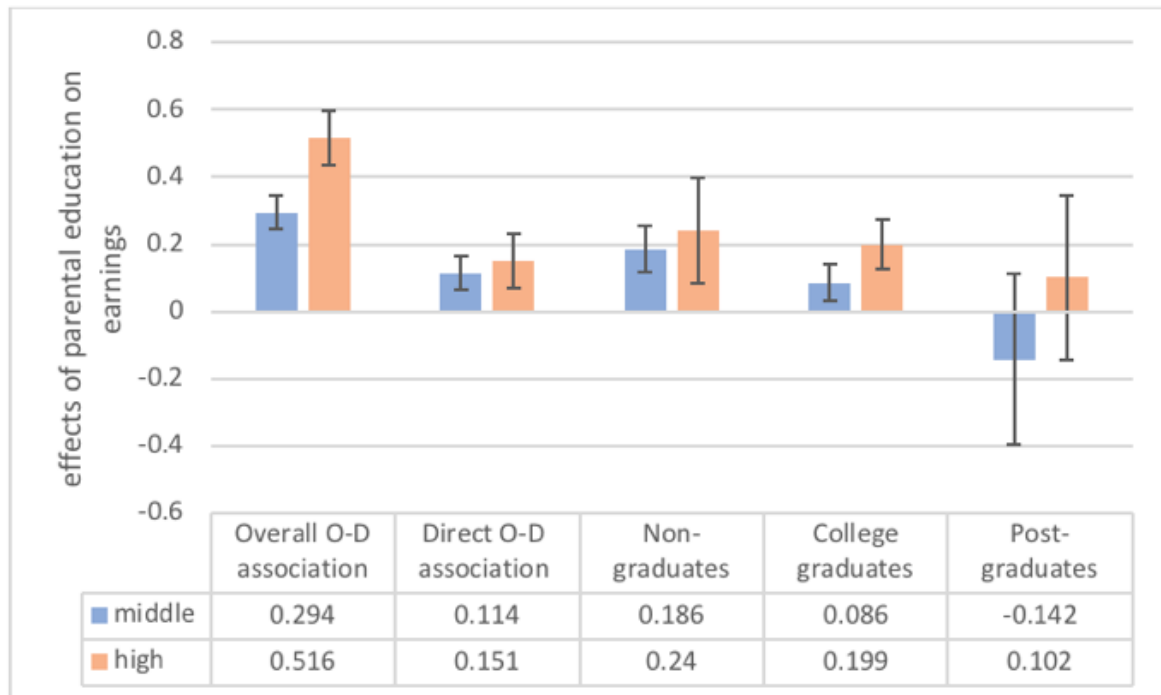


Figure 4. Intergenerational association among women



Becker, G. S., & Tomes, N. (1979). An Equilibrium Theory of the Distribution of Income and Intergenerational Mobility. *Journal of Political Economy*, 87(6), 1153–1189.

Becker, G. S., & Tomes, N. (1986). Human Capital and the Rise and Fall of Families. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 4(3), S1–S39.

Blau, P. M., & Duncan, O. D. (1967). *The American occupational structure*. Wiley.

Breen, R., & Jonsson, J. O. (2005). inequality of opportunity in comparative perspective: Recent research on educational attainment and social mobility. *Annual Review of Sociology; Palo Alto*, 31, 223–243. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.31.041304.122232>

Bukodi, E., & Goldthorpe, J. H. (2018). *Social Mobility and Education in Britain: Research, Politics and Policy*. Cambridge University Press.

Chetty, R., Friedman, J., Saez, E., Turner, N., & Yagan, D. (2017). *Mobility Report Cards: The Role of Colleges in Intergenerational Mobility* (Working Paper No. w23618; NBER Working Paper Series, p. w23618). National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w23618>

Friedman, S., & Laurison, D. (2019). *The class ceiling: Why it pays to be privileged*. Policy Press. <https://www.vlebooks.com/Vleweb/Product/Index/1223318?page=0>

Goldthorpe, J. H. (2014). The role of education in intergenerational social mobility: Problems from empirical research in sociology and some theoretical pointers from economics. *Rationality and Society*, 26(3), 265–289. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043463113519068>

Gregg, P., Jonsson, J. O., Macmillan, L., & Mood, C. (2013). *Understanding income mobility: The role of education for intergenerational income persistence in the US, UK and Sweden* (p. yuan) [Working Paper No.13-12]. Department of Quantitative Social Science, Institute of Education.

Hout, M. (1988). More Universalism, Less Structural Mobility: The American Occupational Structure in the 1980s. *American Journal of Sociology*, *93*(6), 1358–1400.

Karlson, K. B. (2019). College as equalizer? Testing the selectivity hypothesis. *Social Science Research*, *80*, 216–229. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2018.12.001>

Manzoni, A., & Streib, J. (2019). The Equalizing Power of a College Degree for First-Generation College Students: Disparities Across Institutions, Majors, and Achievement Levels. *Research in Higher Education*, *60*(5), 577–605. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-018-9523-1>

Torche, F. (2018). Intergenerational Mobility at the Top of the Educational Distribution. *Sociology of Education*, *91*(4), 266–289. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040718801812>

Vandecasteele, L. (2016). Social origin, education and socio-economic inequalities: Trends in the United Kingdom. In F. Bernardi & G. Ballarino (Eds.), *Education as the great equalizer: A theoretical framework*.

Witteveen, D., & Attewell, P. (2017). Family Background and Earnings Inequality among College Graduates. *Social Forces*, *95*(4), 1539–1576. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/sow109>

Witteveen, D., & Attewell, P. (2020). Reconsidering the ‘meritocratic power of a college degree’. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, *66*, 100479. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2020.100479>

Zhou, X. (2019). Equalization or Selection? Reassessing the “Meritocratic Power” of a College Degree in Intergenerational Income Mobility. *American Sociological Review*, *84*(3), 459–485. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122419844992>