



Title	On Educational Desire in China : Six perspectives
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Citation	Osaka Human Sciences. 2026, 12, p. 81-101
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://doi.org/10.18910/104199
rights	
Note	

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On Educational Desire in China: Six perspectives

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Abstract

This paper reviews existing research on educational desire in China. Educational desire refers to the phenomenon in which families and individuals seek better education, leading to intense competition for educational opportunities. The paper first examines the social context in China, while referring to the educational situations in Korea and Japan, drawing on definitions of “educational fever” from South Korea. The paper then reviews research related to educational desire in China, categorizing the studies into six perspectives: “cultural foundation,” “family background,” “rural areas and migrant workers,” “educational expectations of mothers,” “declining birthrate,” and “studying abroad.” It also discusses educational desire among ethnic minorities.

In July 2021, China implemented the so-called “Double Reduction Policy,” aimed at alleviating academic burdens on parents and children through homework reduction and regulations on extracurricular tutoring. This educational reform arose in response to the intense competition for educational success and social status, which has led families to invest heavily in education. However, recent research shows that educational desire among Chinese families still persists.

The review highlights that the historical tradition of competitive examinations, such as the imperial examination, underpins educational intensity in China. It also explores parental expectations and aspirations related to family backgrounds, as well as the educational aspirations of children from rural areas, who face access challenges related to the household registration system. Additionally, the paper discusses the impact of mothers’ educational expectations and the implications of the declining birthrate on education.

There is a growing body of research focusing on the implications of recent educational reforms like the Double Reduction Policy. Future studies may consider comparative research with similar phenomena in other regions, contributing to theories such as meritocracy and parentocracy. Furthermore, the globalization of education, including the trend of studying

This article is the English translation of the original one “Arai, R. and Otani, J. (2025). On Educational Desire in China: Six perspectives. *Bulletin of the Graduate School of Human Sciences, The University of Osaka*, 51, 111–130 (in Japanese)”.

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abroad, presents significant opportunities for further investigation.

Keywords: educational desire; education reform; China

1. Introduction

In July 2021, the People's Republic of China (hereinafter referred to as "China") introduced the so-called "Double Reduction Policy," which aimed to alleviate the academic burden on both parents and children by reducing homework in compulsory education and regulating extracurricular tutoring. The reform was implemented against the backdrop of intense educational competition, in which families made significant investments in education from an early stage because they sought success in university entrance examinations and the attainment of future social status.

This paper aims to provide an overview of existing research concerning educational desire in China. In compiling relevant studies, we refer to the phenomenon of "educational fever" as defined in the context of South Korea, to summarize research related to the intense pursuit of higher levels and quality of education in China.

This paper begins by outlining the social background in China, then examines the phenomenon of educational desire with reference to the cases of South Korea and Japan, and reviews studies on educational desire in China. Research in this area can broadly be categorized into six perspectives: (1) cultural foundation, (2) family background, (3) rural areas and migrant workers, (4) educational expectations of mothers, (5) declining birthrate, and (6) studying abroad. We provide an overview of studies related to educational desire from these six perspectives.

2. The Social Context of Educational Desire in China

China attempted to modernize the education system by primarily taking inspiration from Japan at the end of the 19th century, the United States in the early 20th century, and the Soviet Union after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (Zhuang 2001; Gu 2003). The first goal of basic education during the early years of its foundation was to improve literacy rates (Kojima 2001). Literacy education reached the public as a means of increasing productivity and as a symbol of the emerging new Chinese society (Wan 2020). After the completion of the First Five-Year Plan, efforts to develop an education system unique to China began in 1957 (Zhuang 2001; Kusuyama 2010).

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), primary and secondary education largely shifted to a full-time system, which resulted in a significant increase in enrollment rates (Kojima 2001; Minami, Makino, & Luo 2008). Conversely, higher education, including universities, experienced disruption, and the number of admissions drastically decreased during the decade of the Cultural Revolution (Zhuang 2001).

Following the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 and the subsequent shift toward reform and opening-up policies around 1978, China's education system entered a period of substantial transformation. After the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party promulgated the *Decision on the Reform of the Education System* in 1985, educational reforms began in earnest. In 1986, the Compulsory

Education Law was enacted, followed by a series of education-related laws throughout the 1990s, such as the Vocational Education Law and the Higher Education Law (Jin 2021).

After the decade-long Cultural Revolution, the university entrance examination was reinstated in 1977. Throughout the 1980s, the number of higher education institutions increased. In the 1990s, China's higher education system underwent qualitative transformations, including reforms in administrative structures and curriculum, with the increase of student enrollment which marked the beginning of the massification era of higher education (Otsuka 2004). Additionally, with the introduction of a market economy, marketization occurred within the education sector. Particularly since the 1990s, there has been a rapid increase in privately run primary and secondary schools, accompanied by the development of legal frameworks for privatization management (Shinohara 2009). Moreover, against the backdrop of the late-1990s Asian financial crisis, the marketization of higher education further accelerated (Sonoda & Shinbo 2010), and China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 sped up the shift toward transnational higher education (Nanbu 2014).

In response to these changes in the education system and policies, there were also shifts in society. With the introduction of the market economy, society transitioned from an era of "relying on the government" to an era of "relying on oneself," reflecting a process of individuation, in which individuals were expected to take personal responsibility for their own lives and confront the consequences of their own choices (Ong & Zhang 2008). Within this neoliberal trend, obtaining a "good education," namely achieving a high level of academic qualification, became synonymous with success and was regarded as a means to "change one's destiny" (Kipnis 2011; Howlett 2021). In addition to this trend, multiple factors contributed to the emergence of an overheated educational expectation, often referred to as "educational desire," where the only child shoulders all expectations from their parents. These factors include improved household economic capacity, mainly in urban areas, because of economic development; the implementation of the family planning policy known as the "one-child policy" in 1979; and the generation that was unable to realize their dreams during the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution becoming parents (Shinohara 2009). This educational desire intensified the competition for entrance examinations and education at schools to pass them, leading families to continue making significant investments in education, such as sending their children to private tutoring and cram schools (Kusuyama 2010).

Amid these developments, in 1993 the State Council issued the *Outline for Education Reform and Development in China*, which sought a shift from "examination-focused education," aimed at passing examinations to enter higher education within a selective track, to education designed to enhance the overall quality of the nation's citizens. In addition, the State Council promulgated the *Opinions on the Implementation of the Outline for Education Reform and Development in China*, which emphasized reducing students' academic burden and comprehensively improving students' "quality" in physical, psychological, and emotional dimensions to enhance education quality¹⁾. Since then, the term "quality education" has been widely used in opposition to "examination-focused education" (Miyoshi 2001). Subsequent legal reforms, including the *Revised Compulsory Education Law* of 2006, which was the

first legislation to use the term “quality education,” aimed to promote the comprehensive development of students’ quality, emphasizing the enhancement of practical social abilities and implementing reforms in university entrance examinations (Otsuka 2007; Jin 2021)²⁾. However, despite these reforms, over-competition in examinations persists, with practices such as supplementary lessons becoming normalized, which shows that the ideal of thoroughly implementing “quality education” remains far from realization (Suwa 2008).

In this context, in July 2021, the General Office of the State Council issued the *Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-Campus Learning for Students in Compulsory Education* and implemented the so-called “Double Reduction Policy,” which aimed to reduce both homework and off-campus learning, such as cram schools, during the compulsory education stage. This policy represents an attempt to further enhance “quality education” and to reform the examination-focused education system (Mao 2021). As a result, private off-campus learning institutions, including cram schools, faced tighter regulations. According to Han (2022), although the need to reduce students’ burdens and the future prospects of such reforms are acknowledged within schools, tangible changes have yet to be felt. However, Han (2022) also reveals there are indications of a decline in educational desire, evidenced by a decrease in participation in free lessons offered by cram schools. On the other hand, intense competition for university and high school entrance exams remains prevalent, and some studies point to ongoing parental dissatisfaction and anxiety, citing issues such as inability to let children take supplementary lessons before high school entrance exams, and increased burdens on parents because of longer home study hours (Ming et al. 2022; Zeng et al. 2024; Xue & Zhang 2024). These findings show that educational desire has yet to be fully overcome.

3. What is Educational Desire?

Educational desire refers to a social phenomenon characterized by very high levels of parental investment in children’s education in terms of both cost and time, accompanied by extremely high educational expectations for children. This phenomenon has been observed and studied in various regions, including South Korea, where terms such as “education fever” (*gyoyuk yeol*) are commonly used. Notably, these expressions are often adopted as-is in other regions that use Chinese characters, such as Japan and China.

In Japan, however, the term “education fever” appears to have been used relatively early. According to the archives of the National Diet Library, the term appears as early as 1893 in an issue of *Kyōiku Hōchi* (August 5, 1893), where the expression “industrial education fever” is used. In the context of how Japanese observers viewed the Chinese educational situation, Kōzō Futamura, an employee in the Social Affairs Division of the General Affairs Department of the South Manchuria Railway, remarked on the state of education in Nanjing in his 1925 travelogue *Impressions of China Travel*. He observed the flourishing of “natural sciences” and “physical sciences” and commented on the “education fever of the bourgeoisie,” stating that “it is astonishing how middle-class and upper-class Chinese are so

passionate in education” (Futamura 1925: 18). On the other hand, it was not until around the 1970s that the phenomenon of educational fever began to receive widespread attention in Japan as a global social issue. In 1979, the news magazine *Sekai Shūhō*, published by Jiji Press, ran a series titled “Education Fever Around the World,” which introduced the educational circumstances of eleven countries and regions, such as China and Hong Kong.

The growing interest in education fever outside Japan can be understood as stemming from the intensification of educational competition within Japan itself. In the 1950s, the media began to feature terms such as “psychology mothers,” which referred to mothers who tried to raise their children strictly according to child psychology books. In the 1960s, the expression “education mothers” became widespread, describing overprotective and overly education-focused parenting attitudes (Lee 2005). These developments reflect the increasing social attention directed toward highly education-conscious parents.

In South Korea, the expansion and subsequent massification of higher education beginning in the 1980s gave rise to a situation in which “everyone came to seek higher academic credentials as a means of attaining social status.” This development led to a widespread belief in meritocracy, emphasizing individual ability and effort. Consequently, the phenomenon of “education fever,” characterized by a strong orientation toward high academic achievement, emerged (Kim 1998: 23–24).

Kim, Lee, and Lee (2005), based on a survey of 20 experts in the field of education, examined how the concept of “education fever” is understood. They found that education fever is primarily attributed to parents and is characterized by parental investment in their children’s education and a strong desire for their children to achieve high educational attainment. Moreover, such behavior is not only an expression of support for education or a reflection of love or natural parental desire; rather, it often includes a strong economic motivation, specifically, securing a livelihood through academic success. It is also seen as behavior rooted in the social system, reflecting a drive to attain higher social status through education.

Parental attitudes toward education, especially among mothers, often reflect a strong awareness of competition with other parents. To ensure their children succeed in educational competition and ultimately gain admission to prestigious universities, these mothers tend to model their behaviors, such as choosing schools or enrolling their children in cram schools, after those of other parents with high-achieving children (Moon 2015). In this context, early study abroad programs for young children, including those at the elementary school level, have also emerged, effectively turning education into a “job” for parents (Ryu 2015). Moreover, this “fever” for education is further intensified by academic credential competition and wage disparities in the labor market. These factors lead to psychological anxiety among parents, including tendencies toward group conformity and materialism, which have also been linked to declining birthrates (Kim & Bae 2020).

In both South Korea and Japan, discussions about education fever often focus on parents’ high expectations for their children’s education. In contrast, academic studies and media discourse in Chinese³⁾ often use terms such as “education fever,” “overheated education,” and “education boom.”

More commonly, expressions that attach the characters for “fever” or “boom” to specific subjects are frequently used. For example, in relation to the “Double Reduction Policy,” the term “supplementary lesson fever” refers to the popularity of cram schools and after-school tutoring. Similarly, the expression “study abroad fever,” which results from domestic education competition, is also frequently observed.

In English scholarship, the term “educational desire” is sometimes used (cf. Kipnis 2011), although it does not directly correspond to any specific Chinese expression. Instead, it refers to what we could describe as the aspiration for education among Chinese people who seek higher academic qualifications. Chen et al. (2021) argue that “education fever” in China is driven by intense labor market competition, marketization and unequal educational opportunities, and a Confucian-influenced aspiration to achieve social mobility through education. Their study also shows a positive correlation between children’s academic performance and parental life satisfaction. The dynamics outlined in this research show considerable overlap with the phenomenon of “education fever” observed in South Korea.

Arguably, one of the most frequently cited studies on this subject is that of Andrew Kipnis. According to Kipnis (2011), during his fieldwork in Shandong Province, when he asked parents whether they wanted their children to attend university, most of them, regardless of whether they lived in rural or urban areas, reacted with visible shock, as if he had posed an entirely self-evident question. Kipnis analyzes this “educational desire” as having both political and cultural dimensions. Politically, it is reinforced by external factors, such as state ideology, policy, and political discourse. Culturally, he argues that Chinese society has long had conditions conducive to the formation of a strong desire for educational attainment, rooted in historical forms of rule that emphasized education as a means of governance.

A distinctive feature of “educational desire” in China is that it is not limited to parents’ expectations for their children’s education but is also closely tied to individual efforts at self-improvement, which is referred to as self-development in Chinese. The state’s developmentalist ideology intersects with people’s growing emphasis on individual competence, so national development and personal capacity-building are often discussed within the same framework (Howlett 2021). Kipnis (2011) also shows that China’s educational practices, which are characterized by learning through modeling and repetition, reinforce this connection. Within what is believed to be a meritocratic system of selection, individuals emulate successful figures, thus transforming individual achievement into a collective ideal (Wu 2016). Therefore, educational desire in China extends beyond academic performance to include morally driven actions, such as university students’ participation in volunteer work and entrepreneurship, which are seen as efforts to cultivate moral character (Hizi 2019).

In this way, the phenomenon of educational fever in China includes not only parents’ expectations for their children, but also individuals’ own aspirations for self-development through education.

4. Studies on Educational Fever in China

This section provides an overview of academic research on educational fever in China. We structure the

analysis around six key perspectives: (1) cultural foundation, (2) family background, (3) rural areas and migrant workers, (4) educational expectations of mothers, (5) declining birthrate, and (6) studying abroad. The studies examined within these six perspectives primarily focus on the Han Chinese population. However, it is important to note that China officially recognizes 55 ethnic minority groups, some of which follow educational systems that differ from the mainstream. Therefore, this section concludes with supplementary discussion on perspectives concerning ethnic minority groups.

4.1. The Cultural Foundations of Education

Confucianism and the imperial examination system are frequently cited as the cultural foundations that underpin the societal pursuit of education. The most significant effect of the imperial examination system on Chinese society was the establishment of a value system centered on academic credentials. The system divided intellectuals into two groups: those who passed the standardized examinations and became “people of higher status”, and those who failed and became “people of lower status” (Gu 2003). This binary continues to echo in contemporary perceptions of entrance examinations. According to Ding (2021), modern entrance exam-focused education is fundamentally driven by what may be described as a “status complex of the literati,” in which individuals seek to transcend their class origins by obtaining academic credentials. The logic is that by passing competitive exams and attaining educational status, one can become a “literati,”⁴⁾ a figure historically respected in society, occupying a sort of blank space in the social hierarchy. This pursuit reflects a desire to escape the rigid stratification system by securing a position of social esteem, similar to that achieved through educational attainment in premodern Chinese society.

4.2. Family Background and Educational Desire

Investigating the relationship between family background, such as parents’ educational attainment and income, and children’s educational outcomes is a well-established approach in educational research. A notable feature of such studies is their frequent reliance on quantitative methods.

According to a study by Zhang Jian (2021) involving high school students, the higher the parents’ occupational class, educational level, and household income, the more likely students are to aspire to attend a four-year university. Furthermore, educational aspirations are influenced by policy. For instance, educational marketization policies in Jinan City have contributed to widening the gap in educational aspirations between upper- and lower-class families.

According to a survey conducted by Tomita (1997) targeting mothers of young children in Shanghai, there is a strong correlation between the educational background of the respondents (that is, the mothers) and that of their own parents, indicating the intergenerational transmission of cultural capital. Furthermore, the surveyed parents expressed a desire to pass this cultural capital on to their own children. On the other hand, economic disparities were not directly linked to differences in educational strategies.

Hou’s (2015) study supports this result. Hou categorizes parental educational strategies into

“financial support strategies” and “cultural capital transmission strategies,” further dividing the latter into “cultural reproduction strategies” and “cultural mobility strategies.” In this way, Hou analyzes the educational strategies parents choose in order to achieve their children’s educational attainment. Since the onset of marketization, the possibility of “financial support strategies,” such as paying “school selection fees,”⁵⁾ has increased. However, overall, the “cultural capital transmission strategies,” which involve passing on cultural resources, are considered more effective.

There are also studies that focus on economic aspects. For instance, Liu Nan (2014) investigated paternal child-rearing behaviors by examining whether the father had a fixed income. In households where the father had a fixed salary, mothers tended to be more involved in their children’s upbringing, and the rate of enrollment in key senior high schools⁶⁾ was higher. Mothers in this group placed strong emphasis on university entrance and held the belief that “good grades → good university → good job → social success” (2014: 37). In contrast, children whose fathers did not have a fixed salary were more likely to be enrolled in regular high schools. However, the expectations placed on these children to improve their academic performance were described as “beyond desperate—an intense, even harrowing level of expectation, as the fate of the entire family line rests on their success” (2014: 37). This group predominantly held rural household registration, and because of relatively low parental educational attainment and income, parents gave instructions regarding their children’s daily lives in hopes of better academic performance. Nevertheless, they largely relied on formal schooling for education itself, with the underlying notion that “results depend on their [the child’s] own efforts” (2014: 38).

In a study by Zhang Chunlan (2003) investigating the relationship between high school ranking, specifically between key schools and non-key schools, and students’ educational aspirations, it was found that over 90% of students, regardless of school rank, hoped to pursue higher education. However, students attending higher-ranked schools were more likely to aim for more advanced levels of education. According to Makino and Luo (2013), since the 1990s, the hierarchical pyramid structure with key universities at the top has been further reinforced, and gaining admission to a key university via the track from key secondary schools has become a major aspiration, and pressure, not only for students and their parents, but for extended families as well. The higher the parents’ economic and cultural capital, the more likely their children are to gain admission to key secondary schools. It was also shown that intense competition among parents seeking access to high-quality educational resources was already affecting students by the middle school level.

With regard to school choice, several studies have also addressed private schools. According to Bao (2002), the most common reason students enroll in private higher education institutions that have relatively high social prestige, such as second-tier colleges and private institutes, is the opportunity to obtain a university degree. However, these institutions often serve as fallback options for those who, for various reasons, were unable to gain admission to public universities. In contrast, in vocational and technical colleges, specialized institutes, and vocational schools, many students choose to enroll for more proactive reasons, such as acquiring qualifications or professional skills to gain a competitive edge in the labor market. In a study on private middle schools in Shanghai, Ma Fangfang (2013) notes

that families with greater economic and educational capital are more likely to “escape” from public schools within their designated school district and opt for private schools instead.

Furthermore, various forms of higher education have served as alternative avenues to meet the demand for higher education, such as adult education (Yan & Xue 2019), short-term higher education (Huang 2000), and distance higher education (Huang 1995).

Several studies have also examined the relationship between post-graduation career paths and family background. According to Wang Jie (2005), parental education level has a greater effect than household income on students’ aspirations to continue their studies. Students from top-tier universities tend to show stronger intentions to pursue further education and to study abroad (Wang 2005; Li 2006). However, a high proportion of postgraduate students from top-tier universities come from low-income households. Factors such as degree inflation, household registration status, and the fact that their parents belong to the “educated youth” generation, who tend to have strong aspirations for their children’s educational achievement, have been identified as underlying causes (Li 2006). In a study on career awareness among students enrolled in full-time professional graduate schools, Wang Jia (2019) found that “social status,” “job stability,” and “reputation and influence” were key factors. At the same time, students were also conscious of their “parents’ expectations,” which shows that “family circumstances and conditions” were considered when making career decisions.

These studies reveal a close relationship between family background and educational fever. In families with cultural and economic capital, there is a tendency to aim for high educational attainment, including the intergenerational transmission of such capital, which also influences school choice. Furthermore, regarding future career paths, these students are more likely to aspire to pursue higher education or study abroad, and, even in the case of employment, place high value on social status. On the other hand, low parental education and income levels, or having an agricultural household registration, do not necessarily correlate with lower expectations for education. In fact, the desire for children’s academic success tends to be even more intense and urgent in such contexts.

4.3. Rural Areas, Migrant Workers, and Education

It is often pointed out that children whose parents have higher educational backgrounds and incomes tend to achieve higher educational attainment. However, this does not mean that people from rural areas in China lack enthusiasm for education.

In rural areas, the dropout rate at the junior high school level is high. Commonly cited reasons include socio-economic factors within families, social circumstances such as migration to urban areas for work, and cultural factors such as the belief that “reading is useless,” which suggests that if the prospects of advancing to senior high school or higher education are slim, continuing to attend school is seen as pointless by farmers (Liu 2017). However, Liu and Tsubota (2019) found that among middle school students in certain rural areas of northeastern China, as many as 97% reported feeling expectations from their parents, indicating that educational aspirations in rural areas are not necessarily determined by parental education or occupation. Regarding the “reading is useless” theory, economic circumstances

or the lack of schools in the village are the actual reasons for dropout. Many parents choose schools carefully even at the elementary level in pursuit of better educational environments (Zhan 2009). Furthermore, Minami and Luo (2006) reported that a survey in rural Zhejiang Province found high educational aspirations across all income levels, with the proportion of household expenditure on education being higher in low-income groups. Many parents had also received adult education.

For migrant workers who hold rural household registration but work in urban areas, education is also an important issue. Originally, children of migrant workers faced complicated procedures to enroll in public schools in cities and had to pay fees, such as “school selection fees” and “borrowed study fees.” Although there are ways to qualify for high school and university entrance exams in urban areas, in principle, taking exams outside one’s registered household area is not permitted (Uemura 2018). There is also the phenomenon of “left-behind children,” who remain in rural areas to attend school. In urban areas, private elementary and junior high schools specifically for children of migrant workers have emerged as educational venues for those who cannot meet admission criteria for public schools (Kanatsuka 2005; Uemura 2018). Despite the barriers to accessing education in cities, Kanatsuka (2005) shows that both the educational expectations of migrant workers and the educational aspirations of their children are high. However, because quality education advances, not only school education but also extracurricular education, such as private lessons, have become more prominent in urban areas. Economically and culturally disadvantaged groups, such as migrant workers, fall behind in awareness and investment compared to higher socioeconomic classes (Ma 2017).

While people from rural backgrounds also display expectations for education and high educational aspirations, there remains a significant gap in access to education when compared to those from urban origins.

4.4. Educational Expectations of Mothers

In China, where mothers often bear the primary responsibility for childrearing, it is important to focus on mothers’ attitudes toward education when considering educational desire. According to Liu’s (2014) survey conducted in Shanxi Province, families in which fathers have fixed salaries tend to show higher maternal involvement in the child’s daily life. In contrast, in families of farmers and temporary workers without fixed salaries, there is a tendency to maintain traditional paternal roles and patriarchal authority.

Saihanjuna (2014), in a study of Chinese mothers in international marriages living in Japan, pointed out that in Japanese society, where childrearing is even more commonly entrusted to mothers than in China, these mothers often adopt educational strategies aimed at social mobility through assimilation into Japanese society.

Piao (2015) analyzed posts on parenting websites and examined the mindset of mothers who choose to become “full-time mothers” in order to be “good mothers.” According to Piao, these full-time mothers emphasize early childhood education and invest both time and money so as not to “lose at the starting line” (2015: 78). Women themselves participate in the construction of the “maternal myth,” which is an ideal of the “good mother” who raises children excelling both mentally and physically, and

is built by male intellectuals and the state (2015:79).

Research has also examined women's roles as mothers in education, considering not only social class but also specifically focusing on the role of mothers.

4.5. Declining Birthrate and Educational Desire

Yu (2018) pointed out that, because of the one-child policy implemented alongside the reform and opening-up policy, high educational expectations were placed on the single child. This created a situation in which parents spared no effort to help their children advance to higher-level schools amid competition involving schools and society. In other words, "one of the most important needs arising from low birthrates is parental investment in their children's education" (2018: 139). Accompanied by the spread of the consciousness of "eugenics/healthy-birth and good-upbringing" (bearing excellent children and raising them in excellent environments) alongside the progress of the family planning policy, children's education has become the highest priority for parents in a highly competitive society. Furthermore, Yu also mentions the two-child policy, stating that unless the education environment at home improves, and anxieties about the costs of child-rearing are resolved, it remains uncertain whether an increase in birthrate can be expected.

This is similar to the connection identified between Korea's "education fever" and declining birthrates; however, in China, state policy has artificially created the low birthrate in a top-down manner, which is distinctive. Further research is expected from the perspective of educational desire amid rapidly advancing population aging and declining birthrates.

4.6. Studying Abroad

Amid the desire for better education and the intensifying competition within China, middle-class and higher-income families increasingly chose to avoid domestic university entrance exams by opting to study abroad, leading to what is called a "study abroad fever" (Fong 2004; 2011). Studying abroad with the intention of immigrating has also increased, influenced by the household registration system that restricts internal movement by distinguishing urban and rural residency. Furthermore, domestic difficulties in finding employment have contributed to the increase in Chinese students studying abroad (Otani 2016).

As mentioned earlier regarding family background, students at higher-tier universities are more inclined to study abroad (Wang 2005; Li 2006). Zhang Huan (2017) pointed out that the motivations for studying abroad among former Chinese students in Japan include difficulties with university entrance exams and employment in China, as well as the goal of obtaining a degree. He also noted that these students tend to view their study abroad experience as cultural capital for individualistic social mobility. Other studies also focus on the expectations for economic and social status improvement, and connections to employment after studying abroad (Takiyama 2001; Li & Ishikawa 2019; Dou, Matsushita, & Sato 2019). Li and Ishikawa (2019), in their research of Korean Chinese who studied in Japan, noted that the Korean ethnic minority group "seeks to enhance competitiveness in the labor

market and increase social mobility through education” (2019: 26). In short, studying abroad can also be regarded as one aspect of the phenomenon of educational desire.

4.7. *Ethnic Minorities*

In China, education for ethnic minorities differs from the education system experienced by the Han Chinese, who comprise 91% of the total population⁷. In some regions with large ethnic minority populations, courses to learn the languages of each ethnic group are provided in primary and secondary education. Consequently, the university admission process differs from that of the Han Chinese, with admission destinations concentrated in certain fields, such as ethnic language and literature or ethnic universities, particularly for those who received primary and secondary education in minority languages (Clothey 2005; Ma 2014). Therefore, some ethnic groups must consider university admission under conditions different from those faced by the Han Chinese. Moreover, compared to areas inhabited mainly by the Han Chinese, ethnic minority regions often have limited educational resources. In some cases, even after university admission, ethnic minorities face disadvantages in employment compared to the Han Chinese. This has led to observations that aspirations for higher education may actually decrease among these groups (Shinbo & Ako 2016).

On the other hand, it has been pointed out that an increasing number of ethnic minority students are choosing primary and secondary education conducted in Chinese (Mandarin) in order to advance to university (Ogawa 2001; Yin 2005; Baatar 2009; Masut & Otani 2011; Ablimit & Otani 2014; Arai & Otani 2016). Regarding the aspirations of ethnic minorities for higher education, expectations such as securing employment, increasing future income, and improving social status are often mentioned (Ogawa 2001; Baatar 2009; Yamada 2015; Ma 2019), as well as the influence of discourse about “advanced Han Chinese and backward ethnic minorities” (Tobin 2015; Yang 2017; Leibold & Grose 2019). Furthermore, according to the study of Korean ethnic minority students conducted by Li & Ishikawa (2019), there is an awareness among these students to survive as a distinct ethnic group while simultaneously seeking high social mobility through education. There are also studies addressing more personal and psychological factors, such as the hopes and anxieties of ethnic minority students attending boarding schools in Han-majority urban areas (Yuan & Zhu 2021), and the frustration caused by a lack of understanding of their ethnicity by Han Chinese peers at university, which becomes a motivation for taking postgraduate entrance exams (Xu & Yang 2019).

Because geographical, economic, linguistic, cultural, social, and political conditions differ among ethnic groups, and their education systems also differ, it is difficult to generalize attitudes toward education among ethnic minorities. On the other hand, we can consider the educational aspirations of ethnic minorities from the perspectives of ethnic identity, nationalism, and the socio-cultural foundations of each group.

5. Conclusion

This paper has summarized the phenomenon of educational desire in China from six perspectives. It has been pointed out that the cultural foundation of competitive selection, which has continued since ancient times, including the imperial examination system, underlies this educational desire. Research has also been conducted on family background, parental educational expectations, and children's aspirations. Studies have addressed the educational aspirations of parents and children from rural areas and those with rural household registration, as well as issues related to access to education because of the household registration system. Attention has also been given to mothers' educational expectations and the relationship with declining birthrates. Furthermore, research has been conducted on overseas study and the phenomenon of "study abroad fever" as one of the choices for children's educational and career paths, against the backdrop of educational desire.

Regarding research on educational desire in China, it is necessary to conduct timely investigations and studies while paying close attention to recent educational reforms, such as the "Double Reduction Policy." At the same time, we should continue to consider comparative studies with similar phenomena in other regions. Contributions to theories such as meritocracy and parentocracy are also highly possible. Moreover, from the viewpoint of globalization of education, further development of research on the desire for transnational education, exemplified by the "study abroad fever" described in this paper, is expected in the future.

Notes

- 1) The State Council of the People's Republic of China, Document No. 3, Zhongfa [1993].
- 2) On the other hand, the ideological nature of the discourse surrounding "quality education" (*suzhi jiaoyu*), specifically the ideology that a strong nation can be built by enhancing the "quality" (*suzhi*) of individuals, has been identified as a means of legitimizing social and political hierarchies. It does this by framing the idea that individuals with "higher quality" can attain greater wealth, influence, and fame than those with "lower quality" (Kipnis 2006). Additionally, the characteristics that are valued as "quality" tend to be more easily acquired by students in urban and economically advantaged areas, whereas students from underprivileged backgrounds, such as rural areas, are expected to overcome these disadvantages through "effort." However, because evaluation in quality education is affected by various social factors, including cultural capital, we must note that such a system risks reinforcing existing social hierarchies (Howlett 2021).
- 3) In this paper, we conducted searches using keywords such as "educational desire," "overheated education," and "education fever," as well as related terms (for example, "cram schooling") on the following platforms: National Center for Philosophy and Social Science Documentation (<https://www.ncpsd.cn/>), China National Knowledge Infrastructure (<https://cnki.net/index/>), Xinhua Net (<http://www2.xinhuanet.com/>), People's Daily Online (<http://www.people.com.cn/>), and China

News Service (<https://www.chinanews.com.cn/>).

- 4) The term “literati” (*dushuren*) originally referred to “imperial scholar-officials” (*shi daifu*) in Chinese and generally denotes scholars, intellectuals, or, more broadly, “learned individuals.”
- 5) “School selection fee” refers to fees paid when a student wishes to attend a school outside their assigned school district, or when a student whose entrance exam score does not meet the standard still wishes to enroll in a particular high school. Additionally, when a student attends a school other than the one where they are officially registered, this is called “borrowed study” (*jiedu*), which may also require the payment of “borrowed study fees.”
- 6) Although the key school system was officially abolished in most regions by the early 2000s, school rankings remain clearly delineated, and significant disparities continue to exist between key and non-key schools.
- 7) Based on the Seventh National Population Census (2020).

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