**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# Meritocracy, *Suzhi* Education and the Use of Live-Streaming Technology in Rural Schools in Western China

Miao Li[1] (ID) and Qiang Zhang[2]

[1]School of Philosophy and Social Development, Shandong University, Jinan, China and [2]School of Preschool Education, Shandong Yingcai University, Jinan, China
**Corresponding author:** Qiang Zhang, email: zhangqiang@sdycu.edu.cn

## Abstract

Many rural youths in China receive a poor-quality, strict and exam-oriented education. In everyday and professional discourses, incorporating live-streaming technologies in rural schooling is tied to promises of improved educational quality and a narrowed urban-rural education gap. Reflecting a dystopian ideology of meritocracy, this article investigates how live-streaming technologies transmit *suzhi* (human quality) education and downplay the exam-oriented education with which rural students and teachers are familiar. The authors argue that the two educational vehicles for meritocracy work together to channel students to a seemingly meritocratic pathway of social mobility but funnel rural students to an inferior educational track according to their rural registration and lower-class backgrounds. The online version of *suzhi* education complicates and even exacerbates the already fierce educational competition that rural students face. Rural students' low aspirations and their teachers' apathy towards live-streaming classes challenge the purportedly transformative effects of live-streaming technologies in China's rural schooling.

## 摘要

很多中国农村青少年接受着质量较差的、严格的应试教育。日常和专业话语认为，将直播技术引入农村教育有望提高教育质量、缩小城乡教育差距。本文借鉴反乌托邦意识形态的精英主义视角，分析了直播技术是如何在中国西部的农村学校中传播素质教育、贬低农村学生和教师们熟悉的应试教育的。本文认为，作为支撑精英主义体制运作的两项教育工具，素质教育和应试教育协同运作，将中国学生们引至一条看似选贤举能的向上流动路径，然而却将农村学生们分流到了由其农村户籍身份和较低的社会经济地位塑造的、较差的教育轨道上。网络版的素质教育复杂化甚至加剧了农村学生们面对的本就十分激烈的教育竞争。农村学生们的低教育抱负和农村教师对直播课程的冷漠态度挑战了那些声称直播技术能够改变中国农村教育的言论。

**Keywords:** rural education; rural youths; live streaming; meritocracy; *suzhi* education; western China
**关键词:** 农村教育; 农村青少年; 直播; 精英主义; 素质教育; 中国西部

In late May 2018, at Blue Star High School in rural Yunnan province, Teacher Zhao closed the curtains, turned off the lights and kept exhorting his students to carefully look at a large screen hanging above the blackboard. The screen showed an English class live-streamed from a well-known urban high school that was approximately 800 kilometres away from Blue Star's poverty-stricken county. Almost all of the students dozed off. The few who stayed awake did homework to pass the time. A student named Zhifei expressed the profound intellectual shock she experienced because of the use of live-streaming technology in rural schooling, stating, "English is merely a test subject for us. We never conceive of it as a language through which people converse. When taking live-streaming classes, we were astonished that the teachers spoke in English during the whole session and students answered questions in English. We didn't understand what they talked about. Today, they even played an English drama. Live-streaming classes cultivate

[human] quality (*suzhi* 素质). Instead, our [previous] classes focus on exams." Her classmates nodded in agreement.

This opening vignette presents the glaring disparity between rural and urban education and highlights the socially disadvantaged positions of rural students. Both rural students and urban students are broad and inclusive concepts when viewed through the lens of social class as there are rural students from high socio-economic backgrounds and there are urban students from low socio-economic families. However, it is widely acknowledged that China's long-standing division between its rural and urban sectors has limited opportunities for many rural students over the course of their lives. This division translates into significantly fewer welfare benefits, such as healthcare, housing and education, for rural students. To close the urban-rural education gap, educational authorities and practitioners are keen to adopt information and communication technologies (ICTs) within education; they argue that ICTs will make an immediate difference. Exemplifying this endeavour, China has implemented (offline and online) computer-assisted learning programmes to provide remedial learning resources as a supplement to traditional classroom instruction.[1] In April 2018, the Ministry of Education issued the "Action Plan for Education Informatization 2.0" (*jiaoyu xinxihua 2.0 xingdong jihua* 教育信息化 2.0 行动计划), in which the rapid development of online education based on the "Internet+Education" (*hulianwang+jiaoyu* 互联网+教育) platform was proposed. The ministry believed that the use of ICTs would provide schools with high-quality educational resources to diminish time and space limitations so that rural students could obtain equal opportunities to excel in the Chinese education system.[2] Notably, in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, this educational intervention that China has engaged in has developed into a global phenomenon in which many schools have transitioned to providing instruction online. As a result, a series of endeavours have been made to replace traditional face-to-face lecturing with distance education.[3] Among an array of web-based delivery methods lumped together as distance education, satellite broadcast instruction is viewed as a cost-effective and viable educational intervention for remote sites because it enables a group of students in one venue to watch live videos and interact with instructors. Scholars present live video streaming as "multicasting where streams are effectively 'broadcast' to many viewers simultaneously" or "institutionally-provided 'shared' forms of technology use."[4] Existing studies extol the effectiveness of the delivery methods of distance education.[5] However, some scholars have questioned the conventional wisdom that simply exposing students to technology improves student performance.[6]

In the Chinese context, as a result of long-standing urban-biased education policies, rural education has become an unfavourable social space characterized by an urban-oriented education system, dilapidated classrooms, less-qualified teachers, high dropout rates, low academic achievement and low retention rates of rural students.[7] In 2005, China adopted a "two exemptions and one subsidy" (*liangmian yibu* 两免一补) policy that provided rural students with free textbooks, tuition and subsidies to attend boarding schools.[8] The material conditions of many rural schools have greatly improved, but those that are located in mountainous, poverty-stricken areas still lack funds and qualified teachers.[9] To address the issue of instructor shortages, in 2006 the Ministry of Education implemented the Special Teaching Post Plan (*tegang jihua* 特岗计划) to recruit rural teachers from newly graduated college students. While this subsidy scheme promises to significantly

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1 Bai et al. 2018.
2 Collaborative Innovation Center for Chinese Rural Education 2020.
3 Livingstone and Sefton-Green 2016.
4 Shephard 2003, 297; Selwyn et al. 2017, 289.
5 Guo et al. 2022; Kaidbey et al. 2023.
6 Abdous and Yoshimura 2010; Philip and Garcia 2015; Shatto 2016.
7 Postiglione, Kong and Hannum 2018; Rao and Ye 2016.
8 Lou and Ross 2008.
9 Du 2018.

upgrade the rural teaching force, low income, low morale and a directionless career path create daunting challenges for young teachers to work indefinitely in rural schools.[10]

Although many studies stress the importance of introducing ICTs in rural education, to date few studies have examined the schooling practices by which students and teachers in rural schools make sense of live-streaming classes. Thus, this study addresses the following two main research questions: (1) How do rural students and their teachers engage with the incorporation of live-streaming technologies in day-to-day school practices? (2) How do live-streaming classes contribute to the disruption or reproduction of educational inequalities? The answers to these questions can provide a critical perspective on the impact of ICTs on educational equity, and the worldwide application of remote teaching during and after the COVID-19 pandemic further enhances the importance of our academic inquiry. In this article, we make the following arguments: we find that live-streaming technologies expose students to *suzhi* education, which ruptures and contests their familiar test-based education. In particular, students view *suzhi* education as being less conducive to their immediate goal – scaling the social ladder to success in the National College Entrance Examination (*gaokao* 高考). Given the students' ubiquitous disengagement and low aspirations, live-streaming technology use in rural schools potentially perpetuates educational inequalities between rural and urban areas. "[N]otwithstanding their generative and transformative power, technologies working within an order of the normal are implicated in the (re)production of the asymmetries that they and it seek to undo."[11] Enlightened by this account, we suggest that live-streaming technologies impose upon rural students the burden of exhibiting high *suzhi*, and live-streaming classes intensify the educational competition faced by these students under the workings of meritocratic education in contemporary Chinese society.

The remainder of this article first examines the literature about the linkages and conflicts of educational objectives between exam-oriented education and *suzhi* education in contemporary China and the difficulties that are encountered in the promotion of *suzhi* education in rural communities. Next, we introduce the logic and workings of educational meritocracy underlying the enforcement of exam-oriented education and *suzhi* education, and we examine how meritocracy, as a dystopian ideology and mechanism, replicates social hierarchy and alienates the educational experiences of rural and urban students. Finally, we analyse ethnographic data gathered from 14 months of fieldwork (from October 2017 to June 2018, from April to June 2019, and from May to June 2021) with rural high school students and teachers in rural Yunnan province.

## Exam-Oriented Education and *Suzhi* Education

Chinese education is highly exam-oriented, characterized by rote memorization, cramming and teacher-centred pedagogies. In this system, a student's place in a particular school can only be guaranteed if they score well in standardized exams. In this ideology of "numeric capital," exam scores become cases in which "a number comes to stand in for a person."[12] Dating back to the Sui dynasty (581 to 618 CE), exam-oriented education originated from the imperial meritocracy-based examination system that still governs contemporary Chinese society. Theoretically, in this system high-performing students are selected and channelled into a higher social status in an efficient and fair way. Despite recent curriculum reforms, rote learning is still utilized in rural schools, where students can rarely relate the official, urban-oriented curriculum to the reality of their everyday lives.[13] Under mounting pressures to boost student achievement rates, rural high schools are run like military boot camps, training students for the *gaokao* around the clock. A high school in Hengshui 衡水 city in Hebei province employs and propagandizes this brutal approach, using the so-called "Hengzhong model" (*hengzhong moshi* 衡中模式). Maotanchang 毛坦厂 High School in Anhui

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10  Ibid.
11  Moser 2006, 373.
12  Woronov 2015, 14.
13  Li, Tan and Yang 2020.

province, a test-prep factory for approximately 20,000 students, is another notorious example.[14] As such, rural high school students suffer through an alienating, monotonous school life.[15] By strategically appropriating the instrumental value of impressive scores, these students can realize a bright future, bring their families honour and achieve personal freedom and independence.[16]

Although societal and parental attention to students' test scores has never truly wavered, the eighth curriculum reform that began in 2001 was a deliberate response to the call for *suzhi* education. In an attempt to extricate Chinese education from the shackles of a test-based mentality, *suzhi* education calls for transforming a subject-defined, knowledge-fact-centred curriculum into an interdisciplinary, comprehensive and student-centred curriculum.[17] Over the past several decades, the manufacturing sector that established China as the world's factory has grown rapidly. *Suzhi* education exemplifies the neo-liberal Chinese project of economic development, modernization and human capital accumulation, with the aim of cultivating citizens who are better able to compete in the global economy and the information age. The education sector identifies the skills that are needed in China's workforce to raise the country's national strength and global competitiveness. Creative thinking, innovative ability and practical skills are considered to be the main focus of formal schooling.[18]

Notably, the translation of *suzhi* into "(human) quality" in the Anglophone literature fails to convey the rich sociocultural meanings that the term carries in the Chinese context.[19] *Suzhi* not only refers to particular human qualities in physical, intellectual and moral respects but also serves as an all-powerful criterion by which to evaluate an individual's all-round competencies.[20] Referring to students' *suzhi* can mean their test scores, their manners at school, their physical and psychological condition, their social consciousness or even their upbringing.[21] In the prevailing public and intellectual discourse in China, the *suzhi* of the Chinese people is portrayed as being very low (the so-called "demographic crisis") and that of the rural Chinese is understood to be among the lowest. Against this backdrop, rural-origin citizens are frequently stigmatized as uncivilized, lazy, irrational and ill-mannered.[22] In recent years, the burden of demonstrating high *suzhi* has been imposed upon all rural-origin families.

Since 2010, *suzhi* education has been enforced in rural schools. However, a heavy focus on examinations in day-to-day rural schooling diminishes the importance of *suzhi* education on the ground. As a result, the educational experiences of rural students continue to be structured around teacher-centred pedagogies and subject-defined curricula. Some rural teachers relegate and resist *suzhi* education due to its irrelevance in rural education, where qualified teachers, parental involvement in education, after-school lessons and extracurricular activities are considered to be luxuries.[23] Since the exam-based assessments have not changed, *suzhi* education is merely a new bottle filled with the old wine of a rote-based curriculum.[24] At the same time, students from families with the most resources attend the best schools and can afford private tutoring and after-school lessons to foster *suzhi*.[25] The strategic prioritization of *suzhi* education over test-based education provides students from higher socio-economic backgrounds with class-specific privileges in the academic race. Meanwhile, the overemphasis on the exam scores of rural students deprives them of opportunities to advance further in the Chinese education system.

14  Larmer 2014.
15  Chung 2012.
16  Xiang 2018.
17  Woronov, 2008.
18  Ibid; Lou 2011.
19  Dello-Iacovo 2009; Huang 2016; Jacka 2009.
20  Kipnis 2006.
21  Woronov 2008.
22  Anagnost 2004; Chan and Enticott 2019; Sigley 2009; Thøgersen 2003.
23  Wu 2012.
24  Lou 2011; 2022.
25  Vickers and Zeng 2017.

## Meritocracy and Increasing Educational Competition in Contemporary China

Young measures the progress from aristocracy and seniority to "meritocracy," which he describes as "a far-reaching redistribution of ability between the classes in society," and predicts that the rise of meritocracy will lead to the perpetuation of inequalities.[26] In an ideal meritocratic society, people of varying social positions have equal chances to receive scarce resources such as educational opportunities, career opportunities and rewards on the basis of their individual merits, and these merits can be achieved via individual talent and effort.[27] However, meritocracy serves as a mechanism through which elites justify their own social status while unfairly attributing blame to the disadvantaged for their perceived "failure." Contemporary China offers a timely opportunity to examine the workings of meritocracy and its (un)anticipated consequences.[28] First, meritocracy in the sense of governing society based on achievement leads to an obsession with high-stakes testing and an intensification of educational competition among Chinese students.[29] Moreover, the intersection of social class with urban-rural inequalities to create structural and school-based obstacles that impede rural students from achieving their goals of upward social mobility is highlighted in the meritocratic education in China's remote rural areas.[30] Ultimately, this intensely competitive meritocratic tournament offers an interesting window into the dynamic interplay between educational provision, such as the incorporation of ICTs in rural schooling, and students' prospects of social mobility. This dynamic works at a time when national endeavours towards the removal of the urban-rural education gap coexist with increasing educational competition resulting from pervasive parental anxiety over losing the academic race.[31]

In contemporary China, the intergenerational transmission of socio-economic status has received considerable attention in the meme of the "poor second generation" (*qiong erdai* 穷二代) and the collective lamentation that "impoverished families can hardly nurture exceptional kids" (*hanmen nanchu guizi* 寒门难出贵子). Many empirical studies indicate that the ascribed attributes of rural students, such as the meagre income of rural parents and/or rural households (*hukou* 户口), have negative impacts on their academic performance,[32] chance of getting into university,[33] choice of college majors,[34] first job offers after graduating from college,[35] wages in the urban job market[36] and parental involvement.[37]

Notably, the gulf between how people envisage meritocratic education and how it actually works explains the stagnant or downward social mobility of rural students from poor and low-income families. Scholars agree that meritocratic schooling and selection replicate hierarchical structural relations by placing rural students in a decidedly disadvantaged position. For instance, this systematic exclusion works through the decades-long implementation of *suzhi* education,[38] students' inferior cultural capital[39] and the absence of shadow education in rural schooling.[40] Seen in this light, meritocracy is a dystopian ideology that effectively legitimizes the existing social hierarchy and

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26  Young 2017 [1958], 179.
27  Goldthorpe 2003.
28  Bell 2015; Cao 2004.
29  Liu 2016.
30  Lou 2011; 2022.
31  Chen et al. 2020; Kipnis 2011.
32  Wang et al. 2020; Zhao and Bodovski 2020.
33  Liu 2013.
34  Hu and Wu 2019.
35  Li et al. 2012.
36  Lyu and Chen 2019.
37  Xie and Postiglione 2016.
38  Murphy 2004.
39  Chen 2020.
40  Vickers and Zeng 2017.

disguises structural flaws as personal failures.[41] In sharp contrast, others endorse the role of meritocratic hierarchy as an organizing principle of society.[42]

Most notably, fierce educational competition triggered by meritocratic education distorts the learning experiences of both urban and rural students in China. Chinese parents have been associating the educational success of their children with their own life satisfaction and familial happiness for centuries.[43] Nonetheless, recent decades have witnessed astonishing levels of parental investment in education due to stronger desires for their children's educational success in the aftermath of the one-child policy, the marketization of education and the national campaign aimed at cultivating children's *suzhi*.[44] For example, an internet meme of "chick-babies" (*jiwa* 鸡娃) went viral in 2019. The term refers to children whose leisure time is completely occupied with miscellaneous training courses in academic learning, art and sport. Affluent and anxious parents pressure their children into grasping every minute of their lives to learn so that they can compete with their peers.[45] In sharp contrast, without intensive parenting and a quality education, many rural students who ace the *gaokao* and enrol in university end up being labelled as "small-town swots" (*xiaozhen zuotijia* 小镇做题家). They can utilize extreme cramming methods to perform well in the gruelling exams, but their dearth of the necessary social and cultural capital prevents them from succeeding at university and in the labour market.[46]

## Research Methods

Having discussed the conceptions that frame this research, we now describe our ethnographic field site and the methods that we used. The authors conducted 14 months of fieldwork at Blue Star High School (a pseudonym), which is located in a small, poor rural county in eastern Yunnan province. The Yunnan Statistical Yearbook states that the gross high school enrolment rate is 76.05 per cent, which is far below the national rate of 88.3 per cent.[47] As part of this weak educational system, Blue Star comprises 1,273 students from seventh to ninth grades in 21 classes and is led by 74 teachers and staff members. The 239 high-performing students in six classes at Blue Star (two live-streaming classes per grade; approximately 40 students per class) watched real-time lectures from several exemplary classes at Sunflower High School (a pseudonym) during their classroom time from 7.10 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. As Principal Song of Blue Star explained, only some of the school's classrooms can be equipped with electronic screens and broadband networks because of financial constraints. He ultimately decided to experiment with the new instructional method among high-scoring students to achieve positive effects. In the live-streaming classes, real-time courses replaced all face-to-face lectures, and rural teachers were not expected to teach. The other Blue Star students were still enrolled in traditional lecture classes, bifurcated into fast and slow tracks.

Sunflower High, an urban school, provided live-streaming courses for Blue Star students. It is one of the most prestigious high schools in China because of its very high student performance in academic achievement and *suzhi* cultivation. The school cooperated with a private company to live-stream courses for approximately 76,000 rural students via expensive satellite trucks. With the aim of cultivating critical thinking and creativity among students, Sunflower High advocated the central role of students in all school practices and offered them more than 100 elective and 60 activity classes per semester. In addition to achieving enviable results in the *gaokao*, the school provided International Baccalaureate and Advanced Placement courses to position students in the

41  Young 2017 [1958].
42  Bai 2019; Bell and Wang 2020.
43  Kipnis 2011.
44  Anagnost 2004; Kuan 2015; Woronov 2008.
45  Zhang and Bray 2018.
46  Cheng 2019; Xie and Reay 2020.
47  Yunnan sheng tongji ju 2018.

international academic arena. As a result, more than 200 students accepted offers from top-tier Western universities in 2018 and 145 students won gold medals in global competitions.

To gather our research data, we conducted participant observations and in-depth interviews with 35 students in live-streaming classes and ten students from traditional classes at Blue Star, along with 15 rural teachers and school administrators. The student participants were 15–18 years of age, and most of them were from the Hani 哈尼 and Yi 彝 ethnic groups. During fieldwork, we spent a total of 217 days observing the live-streaming classes and student–teacher interactions both in class and during intervals. We conducted both one-on-one and focus group in-depth interviews with Blue Star students in familiar locations such as classrooms, roadside noodle bars and cheap barbecue stalls. In other cases, we made use of the instant messaging app QQ to interview students and teachers. In addition, eight students and seven teachers at Sunflower High were interviewed when we visited their school.

We completed all one-on-one interviews in Mandarin Chinese, a widely spoken language among rural and urban students in both settings. A total of 368 hours of audio-recordings of interviews were transcribed verbatim in Chinese and, together with our fieldnotes, were translated into English selectively so that the findings could be presented. To maintain confidentiality, we removed all identifying information and assigned pseudonyms to the research participants. Throughout the fieldwork, we made notes, analytic memos and observational comments and wrote summaries of observations and interviews to compose the field logs. Guided by traditional qualitative analysis techniques,[48] we read all coded and segmented logs many times to obtain a holistic view of the overall data. In addition, we developed diagrams to visualize the intricate links between the emerging coding categories. To maintain confidentiality, we removed all identifying information and assigned pseudonyms to research participants.

### "Depressing," "boring" and "inferior"

Throughout the interviews, many students described the all-day live-streaming courses as "depressing" (*yayi* 压抑), "boring" (*wuliao* 无聊) and "inferior" (*zibei* 自卑). In the six live-streaming classes, the teachers closed the curtains and turned off the lights to ensure that the live-streaming equipment worked optimally during the daytime. Staring at the large screen in the murky room, the students easily became bored and tired. They blamed themselves for dozing off and contrived coping strategies to stay awake, including applying essential oil to their temples or foreheads, spinning pens and pinching themselves. In addition to the oppressive classroom ambience, they faced depression triggered by the sense of being left out of teacher–student interactions in the live-streaming courses. As the students explained, Sunflower High teachers delivered curricular knowledge mainly tailored to the interests and needs of their own students, and they only occasionally reminded viewers to pay attention to important knowledge points. The lack of participation in the learning process dismayed Blue Star students, who were fully aware of their marginalized status that obstructed them from obtaining direct help and support from the online instructors.

Blue Star's live-streaming classes rigidly followed the class schedule of Sunflower High, and the webcast did not stop even during class intervals. Physically, the rooms for these six classes were separated from those of other regular classes, as they were located on the highest floor of a four-storey building. Taking advantage of this segregation, the teachers in the live-streaming classes dissuaded their students from befriending students in the regular classes to "shield them from the negative influence of others" (in the words of Teacher Zhao, the dean of studies). During recess, we regularly observed students in the regular classes clustering together around their classroom doors, teasing, making fun and yelling loudly at one another. The classrooms of the live-streaming courses, by contrast, were startlingly quiet as the majority of students slept on their arms at their

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48  Goetz and LeCompte 1984.

desks. Under pressure from the teachers, the students avoided socializing with their peers outside of their classes, and thus these peers denigrated them as arrogant brats and were reluctant to talk to them. The students in the live-streaming classes felt depressed that their friendships with their peers had faded away. At the same time, they were torn between ambivalent feelings of being superior to other Blue Star students but simultaneously inferior to those from Sunflower High. Yuanbo vented as follows:

> When walking around on campus, you immediately hear others' comments about you: "He is from the live-streaming class, [so] he is very good [at getting good grades on exams]." I am proud of getting this compliment, but they don't know that we feel inferior to Sunflower High students when taking live-streaming courses. Our relationship with them [Sunflower High students] is similar to that of fans and idols. We are among the twenty thousand people who view their classes every day. They are an important part of our lives, [but] our lives have nothing to do with theirs.

By likening Sunflower High students to entertainment idols, Yuanbo insinuated that this idol worship incurred low self-esteem among rural students who felt distant from the learning experiences of their urban peers and viewed their academic excellence as an unattainable goal. Moreover, similar to many rural schools, Blue Star allocated students in a tracking system according to their grades. Although the students from the live-streaming classes occupied advantaged, enviable positions in tracking within their school, they recognized that they had difficulties competing against urban students.

More notably, despite being exposed to live-streaming classes connected to the outside world, Blue Star students endured highly isolated and disempowering educational experiences, all while being constantly under (self-)surveillance. The idea of meritocracy, proposed as a solution to social inequality, possesses a dystopian nature as it effectively justifies various forms of inequality, leading to the transformation of "those who would have been enemies of the established order" into "its strongest defenders."[49] Consequently, Blue Star students, particularly high-scoring individuals, recognized and conformed to the system of meritocratic education and the meritocratic society it underpins. As Young laments, the elites have managed to strike an alliance of the lower classes, resulting in society being "held in an always delicate equilibrium" between stratified classes.[50] Instead of blaming the victims, our intention is to shed light on the underlying vision of this education. Such meritocratic schooling estranges both rural and urban students from the inherent value of learning, while the highly competitive educational environments created within the meritocratic system place rural students at a disadvantaged position due to their limited access to quality education.

### "Could not keep up:" voices of rural students facing two educational vehicles for meritocracy

The depression, boredom and inferiority expressed by Blue Star students could be attributed to one salient fact: they "could not keep up" (*gen bu shang* 跟不上) with the learning activities prescribed for Sunflower High students. However, throughout the interviews, Sunflower High teachers mentioned that the students who participated in the live-streaming courses were not their best ones. In reality, the top students won championships in international competitions. Rather than shooting for the *gaokao*, they aspired to attend Ivy League universities. In other words, these online teachers intentionally lowered the difficulty of the curriculum so that rural students could comprehend and follow along.

Although Sunflower High teachers may have had the best intentions, Blue Star students articulated disappointment with the sharp incongruence that they perceived between their familiar

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49   Young 2017 [1958], 152.
50   Ibid., 153.

test-based education and the pursuit of *suzhi* in their live-streaming classes. They recognized the tremendous knowledge gap between the Sunflower High students and themselves in the acculturation process towards high *suzhi*. As a result, the students resented the *suzhi*-oriented education that potentially directed them towards academic failure. Bingchen stated how *suzhi* education collided with the previous exam-oriented education in his daily life. He enunciated:

> For better or worse, I am used to the traditional method of teaching and learning. In line with the textbooks, we practised many times to memorize all knowledge points needed for exams. This is basically a memory exercise. Live-streaming courses unite quality resources, but [they] promote a different type of education. They spend much time on some knowledge outside the exam scope of the *gaokao*, which is completely unusable to us. These courses are suitable for people who already have the capacity to obtain high scores. My knowledge base is too poor to reach that threshold … Approximately ten people in my class are seriously considering quitting, [and then] transferring to the rocket class [the highest-track regular class]. The remaining people are hanging in there.

In addition to these observations by Bingchen, other students insightfully noted that the purpose of the *suzhi* education that Sunflower High transmitted in the live-streaming courses was to build individuated abilities such as practical skills in applying textbook knowledge, thinking creatively and critically, and acting as world citizens in international communities. As illustrated in the opening vignette of this article, for instance, many Blue Star students confided to us that they "could not keep up" with the live-streaming English classes because the Sunflower High teachers were devoted to honing the students' skills of public speaking and script-writing for English drama. In contrast, rural schools such as Blue Star stuck to textbook knowledge and merely required students to cram obscure grammar rules and stereotyped writing dogmas that were necessary for acing the *gaokao*. All of the students we interviewed at Blue Star deemed that none of their teachers could speak English as proficiently as the Sunflower High teachers did. Moreover, urban teachers incorporated problems tested previously in national and international competitions to extend textbook knowledge with the aim of cultivating innovative talent. Although Sunflower High students viewed searching for solutions to such problems as routine, their rural counterparts were indifferent, which was embodied in Bingchen's comment that such pursuits were "outside the exam scope of the *gaokao*" and "unusable to us."

At the same time, implementing live-streaming courses at Sunflower High was an active response to the call of China's eighth curriculum reform to increase curricular content about world citizenship. Compared to the Blue Star students who were trained to recite news information to do well on tests, their urban peers attended to and acted upon plights facing all countries in the increasingly interconnected world. As the highest-scoring student at Blue Star, Mingzhe was selected to spend one semester at Sunflower High as an exchange student. As he recalled, Sunflower High supported students in organizing supplementary activities under the theme of the cultivation of world citizenship. For instance, to address the negative aftermath of global warming, students conducted scientific research in urban settings and volunteered in non-governmental organizations. These activist experiences, which they share in the live-streaming classes, were alienating to their rural peers. Additionally, enabling students to compete for educational opportunities in the global education market strengthened their sense of being world citizens. Sunflower High students frequently talked about their academic trips to foreign countries and blurted out plans of "going abroad" (*chuguo* 出国) after the completion of high school, whereas Blue Star students rarely ventured out to adjacent neighbourhoods. Tianming reflected that he had never heard of the term "*chuguo*" until starting live-streaming courses. The idea of it surprised Blue Star students, who perceived the *gaokao* as the only path for mobility.

Schools of different social-class backgrounds define what counts as curricular knowledge in strikingly distinctive ways.[51] In China's case, Sunflower High cultivated students' high-*suzhi* attributes, including practical skills, creative thinking and innovation. In sharp contrast, Blue Star enforced an exam-oriented education that positions textbook knowledge as static and unquestionable canons and treated rural students as silent compliers with the purported ideal of fairness promoted by high-stakes testing. As two educational vehicles for legitimizing meritocracy and the existing hierarchical structure of Chinese society, exam-based education and *suzhi* education work together to channel students towards a seemingly meritocratic pathway of social mobility while separating them into different tracks according to their class backgrounds. For rural students, their schooling and low-income families direct them to veer off the educational track of cultivating high *suzhi*. Unsurprisingly, in this case, Blue Star students found themselves lagging behind their urban peers from middle-class backgrounds in demonstrating the merits required by *suzhi* education.

By contextualizing the workings of meritocracy in the interplay between rural and urban schooling, our case study reveals some important social facts. First, for rural students the *suzhi* discourse not only works along social-class lines but also systematically makes stark *suzhi* distinctions between ruralites and urbanites. In other words, the *suzhi* discourse stigmatizes both people of lower socioeconomic status and those of rural origin as low-*suzhi* populations and marginalizes them in social hierarchy. Hence, rural students in China are placed in a double bind: meritocratic education seems to promise that they can improve their *suzhi* by performing well on exams. However, the identity of rural origin still imposes upon them the original sin of exhibiting lower *suzhi*. Second, when Blue Star students attribute possible school failure to their individual deficiencies (i.e. their own poor knowledge foundation), the seemingly neutral *suzhi* education successfully disguises the structural and ideological barriers that it creates and legitimizes the perpetuation of inequalities faced by rural-origin people in larger society.[52]

Third, facing intensified educational competition, higher-income parents in cities strategically juxtapose the two forms of meritocratic education. Our observations are consistent with arguments in existing studies.[53] Throughout our interviews with Sunflower High students, they revealed that their parents hired private tutors and paid for after-school programmes to improve their grades so that they could keep up with the *suzhi* education in school. In other words, exam-oriented education is a prerequisite for *suzhi* education. However, this proposition is not intended to laud exam-oriented education, which has long been criticized; indeed, millions of rural students suffer from toxic levels of academic stress.[54] Instead, the above-mentioned fieldwork data evince the perpetuation of class structure and the urban–rural educational gap that ensues. Ultimately, any examination of the government's ambition to use ICTs as an equalizer to compensate for "deficiencies" originating from students' ascribed status should be considered with caution. Through the live-streaming classes, the antagonistic juxtaposition of exam-oriented education and *suzhi* education intensifies the educational competition that rural students face. Notably, multiple social forces drive this phenomenon. The most salient force is the ongoing race for status attainment among students from different family backgrounds whose parents commonly perceive education as an authentic route to realizing social economic mobility. It is likely that this intensification of educational competition will maintain or even exacerbate the educational dilemma of rural students by imposing upon them the burden of demonstrating high *suzhi*, such as critical thinking and problem-solving skills, which has been stifled by their previous exam-oriented schooling.

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51  Anyon 1981.
52  Huang 2016; Thøgersen 2003.
53  E.g. Vickers and Zeng 2017.
54  Chung 2012.

## Narrowing the urban–rural education gap? The roles of rural teachers

In contemporary China, the ideology of meritocracy legitimizes and perpetuates exam-targeted education in rural schools and *suzhi* education in urban communities. In contrast to the good intentions of the educational authorities, Blue Star students found themselves trapped in the predicament of the two educational vehicles that contribute to the dystopia of meritocracy in China, and the concomitant intensified educational competition fails to give rural students an equal opportunity to climb the social ladder. Among Blue Star students, there was widespread scepticism and discontent about the value of live-streaming classes. However, an important question remains: how do rural teachers engage in this process of teaching and learning?

At Blue Star, the majority of rural teachers made no attempt to intervene in the instructional activities of Sunflower High. Adopting a laissez-faire approach, they usually stood at the back of the classrooms, woke up the dozing students and urged languid students to carefully watch the live videos. Unsurprisingly, these rural teachers all believed in the centrality of test-based education and teacher-centred pedagogies and therefore held pessimistic attitudes towards the application of live-streaming technologies in rural schooling. Teacher Chang, the homeroom teacher of the ninth-grade live-streaming class, expressed his sentiment in the following way:

> Speaking in private, I am not optimistic about the live-streaming classes. I have taught in this school for 25 years. We created the best *gaokao* admission records among all high schools in the county. The most effective way to improve grades is regular classroom instruction. When students receive encouragement and guidance from teachers, they learn better. These students are subjects of this experiment in an online course. If it fails, students and parents must pay the price. It will take years to determine whether online instruction is good or bad. This will have an impact on the destinies of several generations.

Teacher Chang and the majority of the Blue Star teachers resisted the live streaming that replaced traditional lecturing and hence behaved passively in the process of knowledge transmission. In the absence of support and intervention from local teachers, many students felt increasingly depressed, bored and inferior in live-streaming classes.

Throughout our fieldwork, many rural teachers expressed that live-streaming classes could not improve the academic achievement of rural students. In this sense, live-streaming classes lead to a very large waste of public resources and students' time and energy. Moreover, in this experiment of live-streaming technologies within rural schooling, rural teachers believed that the Sunflower High teachers should take responsibility for the academic performance of Blue Star students, and this perception legitimized their laissez-faire approach. As a result, some rural teachers did not even show up in class and/or self-study sessions. Teacher Luo, an English-language teacher in a seventh-grade live-streaming class, clarified the dialectical relationship between exam-oriented education and *suzhi* education for local rural schools. She explained:

> Our students receive exam-oriented education during their whole school life. Public schools in cities are not daring enough to implement exam-oriented education. Under policy pressures, they must enforce *suzhi* education. [Urban] students rely on cramming courses to improve their grades. *Suzhi* education in live-streaming classes is something we cannot imagine. We don't have these resources. We don't have these great teachers. And, we don't have time to deal with it. If there is something positive [that live-streaming classes provided] for my students, I think they are able to know about the outside world. It is wonderful but filled with competitions. To live in that world, they need to first succeed in the *gaokao*.

As the two educational vehicles for meritocracy, exam-oriented education and *suzhi* education connote strikingly different meanings for rural students. In Teacher Luo's opinion, *suzhi* education

broadens students' horizons by allowing them to glimpse the outside world and strengthens their determination to achieve social mobility. Although exam-oriented education is monotonous and alienating, ironically it provides rural students with the singular feasible route to approach "that world."

Noticeably, the authority of classroom teachers at Blue Star was diminished. Students did not hesitate to voice their disrespect towards rural teachers because these teachers barely taught them anything. According to the students, most teachers stood by when they had difficulties in understanding live-streaming classes. In addition, our observations indicate that rural students usually did not view rural teachers as their role models. In contrast, they perceived their teachers as the less ambitious ones who remained in impoverished counties rather than migrating to cities to find higher incomes. As such, the lack of educational intervention initiated by rural teachers in live-streaming classes further undermines their already weak authority of rural students.

Only a few optimistic teachers at Blue Star, usually those with a Special Teaching Post Plan, took actions to bridge *suzhi* education in live-streaming classes and exam-based education in practice. Teacher Chen's English-language class was an example of this. In live-streaming classes, Sunflower High teachers and students wrote or spoke authentic English sentences that seemed problematic according to the rigid grammar rules that Blue Star students memorized thoroughly. Teacher Chen introduced the idea that the fundamental way of thinking in English was to link the language with its situated social and cultural contexts. In particular, she regarded "culture" and "history" as the two mutually constitutive building blocks for any language. In actuality, the two concepts give students tools to re-evaluate what they know about English. In focused group discussions, students commented on how the pleasant learning experience urged them to think about changing their life circumstances. A student named Haoxi remarked: "There are so many excellent people living with us in this world. We can survive without high ambition. However, our mode of living [*huofa* 活法] is surely different from theirs." Other students echoed her viewpoint. Unfortunately, Teacher Chen quit her job one month after this research was completed. Her reassignment was not unusual. A survey reveals that 90.7 per cent of Special Teaching Post Plan teachers in Yunnan province consider changing jobs.[55] In short, this example of Teacher Chen highlights that the Special Teaching Post Plan cannot effectively upgrade the rural teaching force.

To the dismay of the educational authorities, this study reveals how the way that rural teachers perceive and cope with live streaming in rural schooling has a decisive impact on the effectiveness of the delivery method of distance education. In other words, although there is no simple solution to the improvement of rural education and the removal of the urban–rural education gap, this research sheds valuable light on the important role of rural teachers in effectively introducing quality educational resources to remote rural sites via ICTs. When structural constraints remain intact, rural teachers could perhaps help their students attain upward social mobility by seeing more clearly what is truly tested in the *gaokao*. During our interviews, many teachers mentioned that Yunnan province plans to implement China's New Gaokao policies in 2025. These policies aim to grant students greater freedom of choice by eliminating the division between humanities and sciences, allowing them to independently select their exam subjects. However, these teachers perceive that this reform will have minimal impact on the content of the *gaokao*. They believe that the *gaokao* will continue to prioritize the testing of rigid, subject-specific textbook knowledge in the foreseeable future.

## Conclusion

It is widely believed that technology use, rather than challenging ossified institutional arrangements, brings new hope of social and educational equality.[56] Indeed, live-streaming technologies enable selective curricula to transcend geographical boundaries, equipping marginalized students with

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55  Wang, Su and Gou 2017.
56  Livingstone 2012.

an opportunity to enjoy educational resources that were previously unavailable to them. Delving deeper into this aspect of educational opportunity, we examined how live-streaming courses deliver *suzhi* education and direct rural students in a poor rural county in China's Yunnan province to cope with the two educational vehicles for meritocracy, which in this case are exam-oriented education and *suzhi* education. We argue that as a tool for achieving the goal of *suzhi* cultivation, live-streaming technologies complicate the picture of the exam-oriented schooling of rural students, and the belief in the effectiveness of this technology use disguises and leaves unchallenged the deep structural constraints that shape their limited life chances. In his satirical work on the rise of meritocracy, Young holds that individual merit is not solely attributed to personal talent and effort but is shaped by class-specific advantages/disadvantages that pervade in schooling.[57] Rural students have putative incompetency in achieving merits related to high *suzhi* because the dynamic between power and education within and outside of schools places them in an inferior position compared to urban middle-class students at the beginning of and during the educational competition.

Although this ethnographic research delineates the frustrating interactions of the majority of rural students with live-streaming courses, it is possible that some will receive higher education. This success at school can be ascribed to two reasons that do not involve the introduction of live-streaming courses. On the one hand, plagued by rampant middle school dropout rates, attendance at high school demonstrates the willingness and strong determination of these rural students to excel in the *gaokao*. Live-streaming courses in rural schools usually recruit the highest-scoring students who are already ahead of the learning curve. On the other hand, since 2012 the Chinese government has launched a national special enrolment programme to increase the enrolment quotas of rural students. It is estimated that more than 10 per cent of the students enrolled at key universities in China are from rural and poor backgrounds.[58] This article suggests that live-streaming technologies are merely tools for enforcing *suzhi* education and that a belief in technology for its own sake simplifies and contributes to a misunderstanding of the complicated school processes on the ground. In addition, we speculate that experimenting with live-streaming courses among rural elementary students may ensure a lesser degree of collision between exam-oriented education and *suzhi* education, even though this topic is beyond the scope of this article. Thus, by studying the day-to-day engagement of rural students and teachers with intensive live-streaming classes, this research complicates our understanding of the workings of ICTs within rural schooling and their impact on educational equity in contemporary China.

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57 Young 2017 [1958].

58 Zou 2022.

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**Miao LI** is a professor in the Department of Sociology, School of Philosophy and Social Development, at Shandong University, Jinan, China. Her research interests include new media and education, youth culture and schooling of rural-origin students. Her articles have also appeared in *Information, Communication & Society*, *Journal of Cultural Economy*, *Journal of Chinese Governance*, and *Journal of Research on Technology in Education*.

**Qiang ZHANG** is an associate professor at the School of Preschool Education, Shandong Yingcai University, Jinan, China. His research interests include the use of information and communications technology (ICT) in education, technology integration and mixed-method research design.