

Credentialism in Mainland China's Education System: Manifestations and Social Role

Hanli Guo

University of Leeds, Philosophy,
Religion & History of Science
Email: applyghl@163.com

Abstract:

This study examines the manifestation of credentialism within mainland China's education system and labour market, tracing its historical, institutional and cultural origins while assessing its contemporary impact. Integrating theories of social closure and reproduction with a human capital perspective, the study analyses 'degree inflation', 'discrimination based on first degree' and the Gaokao-centred selection mechanism, revealing how academic credentials have become a dominant and exclusionary signal of capability. Through literature review and Sino-British comparative analysis, this study finds that the expansion of Chinese higher education has reinforced the screening function of academic credentials while exacerbating educational stratification, social anxiety, and resource competition—particularly when degree requirements exceed practical skill demands. In contrast, the UK's adoption of diversified assessment and competency-based practices in admissions and recruitment partially mitigates excessive reliance on academic qualifications. This study argues that China urgently requires dual reforms in both institutional frameworks and prevailing attitudes: on the one hand, broadening admission and employment criteria while elevating the status of vocational education; on the other, rebalancing the relationship between academic credentials and practical competencies. Only through such measures can the legitimate screening function of academic qualifications be preserved while mitigating their exclusionary effects, thereby advancing educational equity and social mobility.

Keywords: credentialism, diploma inflation, first-degree discrimination, Gaokao, social closure, social mobility, vocational education, competency-based hiring, educational stratification

1. Introduction

In recent years, China's higher education system has continued to expand, with master's degree programs maintaining exceptionally high popularity among applicants. According to Ministry of Education statistics, the number of applicants nationwide for master's programs reached a record high of 4.74 million in 2023, yet the admission rate remained below 25%. Although the number of applicants has since declined, the "postgraduate fever" remains one of the primary strategies for university graduates to navigate employment pressures (Deng, 2023). For many individuals, pursuing graduate studies is not only a path to enhance academic capabilities but also a crucial strategy to overcome employment barriers and gain a competitive edge. Simultaneously, the phenomenon of "educational qualification thresholds" in the job market has become increasingly prominent. While some companies avoid explicitly stating "only 985/211 graduates" in job postings, they often screen out applicants from non-elite undergraduate institutions during resume screening. Even those holding master's or doctoral degrees from prestigious universities struggle to secure interview opportunities. This "first-degree discrimination" is particularly pronounced in sectors like finance, consulting, and internet technology, transforming academic credentials from mere proof of ability into a key label for allocating social resources (Zheng, 2011). These two seemingly independent phenomena point to the same underlying social logic—credentialism. Credentialism refers to society's excessive reliance on and reverence for formal academic credentials, treating them as the core standard for measuring individual capability and social status (Collins, 1979). Whether in university admissions or job recruitment, formal diplomas are often regarded as the primary criterion for assessing ability and allocating opportunities. Delving into the manifestations and functions of credentialism within mainland China's education system holds significant importance for understanding the current challenges facing education and social development.

2. Literature Review

Credentialism, as a sociological and educational concept, first gained prominence in the West. Conflict theorists such as Randall Collins contend that the proliferation of educational credentials primarily serves social closure and the preservation of vested interests, with diplomas functioning as tools for the reproduction of the elite rather than serving as an accurate measure of human capital (Collins, 1979; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). According to this perspective, academic credentials are imbued with

significance far exceeding their actual skill content within the labor market, functioning more as a mechanism for selection and exclusion than for enhancing productivity. In contrast, functionalist human capital theory emphasizes that formal education enhances workers' skills, with credential inflation to some extent reflecting increased demand for highly skilled personnel driven by technological complexity (Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011). However, mounting evidence indicates that when the educational qualifications required for positions continually rise without a corresponding increase in the actual skills demanded for those roles, a phenomenon known as 'diploma inflation' or 'credential inflation' emerges (Dore, 1976). Concurrently, some studies have found that the correlation between educational attainment and actual job performance is weakening (Xie, 2016), suggesting that the relentless pursuit of higher qualifications is not the optimal path to enhancing productivity.

3. Historical and Institutional Roots of Credentialism in China

Owing to China's unique tradition of imperial examinations and the rapid expansion of higher education following reform and opening-up, scholars frequently examine the phenomenon of the credential society from a perspective that integrates historical and contemporary contexts (Pan, 2018). To comprehend contemporary China's credentialism, one must trace its profound historical and cultural roots alongside its institutional evolution. China's imperial examination system constituted the world's longest enduring and most far-reaching official talent selection mechanism, embedding the notion that 'those who excel in learning shall enter public service' deeply within the collective consciousness. This value system laid the psychological and cultural foundations for modern credentialism. During China's early modernization phase, traditional notions of scholarly merit intertwined with Western-style academic credentials, further reinforcing society's reverence for diplomas (Chen, 2019). The contemporary national higher education entrance examination system, to some extent, perpetuates the imperial examination's spirit of 'selecting individuals based on scores,' with its rigorous selection mechanism bolstering the authority of academic qualifications in the public consciousness. Amidst the uneven distribution of educational resources, degrees from elite universities became scarce commodities, imbued with symbolic significance transcending their educational value (Li, 2012). Against the backdrop of the one-child policy, families invested heavily in their children's education, widely believing advanced

qualifications to be the sole pathway to a prosperous life, thereby intensifying society's reverence for academic credentials. In summary, historical and cultural traditions (the imperial examination ethos of merit), institutional arrangements (the Gaokao and university hierarchy), and demographic and familial factors collectively cultivate the fertile ground for contemporary Chinese credentialism.

4. Social Functions and Negative Consequences of Credentialism

Credentialism, as a social phenomenon, possesses both functional rationality and distinct psychological and societal effects. From a societal operational perspective, academic credentials serve a vital screening function. Within modern labor markets and bureaucratic organizations, educational qualifications are regarded as convenient indicators of competence and training levels. Employers are deemed to achieve significant cost savings by filtering candidates through educational thresholds (Trow, 1973). Concurrently, credentialism partially fulfils the demands of social division of labor for specialization and skill certification. Thus, the fundamental screening function of qualifications holds rationality in modern society. However, the issue arises when this screening mechanism is excessively promoted and abused, generating adverse effects concerning social equity and cultural psychology (Dore, 1976). Firstly, there is the elevation of employment thresholds and academic discrimination. Driven by credentialism, many positions set increasingly higher educational requirements, sometimes far exceeding the actual skill levels needed (Deng, 2023). The result is the distortion of academic thresholds: qualifications, originally a rational screening tool, have evolved into a standard for judging human worth. Secondly, credentialism profoundly impacts social mobility and class differentiation. On one hand, educational qualifications were originally envisioned as a "social filter" mechanism to facilitate upward mobility: by opening educational pathways, children from lower strata could enter higher education through merit, thereby achieving class advancement (Li, 2012). Yet conversely, as societal demands for qualifications escalate, new competitive pressures and anxieties emerge. A particularly profound consequence is the symbiotic relationship between educational involution and credentialism (Chen, 2019). This transforms education—which should focus on children's holistic development—into a competitive tool centered on examinations and diplomas. In essence, credentialism profoundly shapes contemporary Chinese society through both institutional influences and psychological effects.

5. International Comparison: The Case of the UK

The phenomenon of credentialism exerts a profound influence not only in China but also in Western developed nations, with the United Kingdom serving as a particularly representative example. Compared to Chinese society, British society, while equally valuing academic qualifications, places greater emphasis on the diverse values of education and varied pathways for personal development (Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011). Culturally, the British education system champions 'gentlemanly education' and 'well-rounded development.' While academic qualifications remain important, practical skills, professional experience, and social capital hold equally significant weight in the job market. Beyond cultural perspectives and societal psychology, China and Britain also exhibit substantial differences in their educational systems and pathways to higher education (Trow, 1973). Access to higher education in China primarily relies on the national Gaokao examination system, where exam results largely determine admission to prestigious universities. In contrast, UK universities employ a "distributed" admissions mechanism, where A-Level grades serve as the primary reference, but applicants must also submit comprehensive materials including personal statements, reference letters, and interview performance. Such arrangements afford British students greater opportunities to demonstrate their comprehensive qualities, while also mitigating society's fixation on academic qualifications as the sole measure of merit. Both China and the UK face challenges with academic inflation, though their responses differ (Dore, 1976).

6. Discussion

Through the above comparison, China may draw upon the UK's experience in addressing a society dominated by credentialism in the following areas: employing diversified admissions and assessment methods, enhancing the appeal of vocational education, and strengthening competency-based recruitment (Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011; Pan, 2018).

7. Conclusion

In summary, the manifestation and function of credentialism within mainland China's education system exhibit a complex duality. On the one hand, it establishes a unified social screening standard through academic credentials, providing an efficient talent selection mechanism for the labor market. On the other hand, excessive credentialism

has led to the abnormal elevation of educational thresholds, uneven distribution of educational resources, and heightened social anxiety and inequality (Deng, 2023; Chen, 2019). From historical origins to contemporary institutions, from familial psychology to societal structures, credentialism has become deeply embedded within the operational logic of China's education system and society. Compared to Western nations such as the United Kingdom, Chinese society still exhibits deficiencies in offering diverse pathways and institutional inclusivity. Moving forward, China requires dual reforms in institutional design and societal attitudes: maintaining the positive role of academic qualifications as a reasonable screening tool while gradually diminishing their excessive symbolism and exclusivity (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011). Only thus can education return to its essence of cultivating genuine abilities and diverse values, and social mobility be genuinely established upon foundations of fairness and diversity.

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