

# ***Comparative Study on the Impact of Education Preferential Policies for Minorities in U.S and China***

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**Abstract:** This paper reviews former studies on education preferential policies for minorities in the U.S. and China based on a comparative perspective. The study aims to provide possible suggestions for improvements in these policies in terms of increasing their impact on minority social groups and eliminating the disparity. It mainly focuses on Affirmative Action in the U.S. and the Marking Adding policy for minorities in China. By comparing similar policies' effects in different countries, this study shows the difference between their effect on education levels, economic conditions, and the long-term development of minorities. The possible causes include economic disparity, implicit discrimination, and lack of flexible curriculums. To improve the outcome of these education preferential policies, measures such as increasing the policy's focus on economic disparity, introducing regulations to prevent discrimination, and providing a more de-centered curriculum should be taken. Although the two policies have been discussed repeatedly in different studies, not many studies have applied the comparative approach to investigate the similarities and differences of the impact of these policies. This paper fills in the gap by comprehensively comparing these policies and suggesting possible improvements.

**Keywords:** Education preferential policy, Affirmative Action, Minor Ethnicity, Racial inequality

## **1. Introduction**

Higher education attainment has long been regarded as one of the most important indicators to measure the poverty rate and future potential of a social group, as it plays a vital role in a person's long-term development. The statement is especially true in developing countries. It is estimated that completing middle school education reduces the likelihood of poverty by 54.8% in Pakistan. For a bachelor's degree, the figure rises to 97%.[1] Therefore, providing accessible and adequate education resources is essential to help disadvantaged groups out of poverty and promote equity. To increase minorities' access to high-quality education, educational preferential policies are implemented in many countries to address the problem of inequality between people with different economic statuses, educational backgrounds, and races.

The United States is among the first countries to implement education preferential policies for minorities. In the 1950s, a series of events including the Court's decision to rule segregation in public schools unconstitutional set off a wave of fairness for minorities. Many demanded corrective measures to end the centuries-long discrimination and compensate for the long-underrepresented

groups. At that time, there exist huge educational and economic disparities between white and black Americans. It's estimated that only 33% of black Americans graduated from high school, while 61% of their white counterparts did. The disadvantage of black students had reached a significant 28 percentage points.[2] Economically, black men earned only 58% of white men's wages on average in 1960.[3] In 1961, President John F. Kennedy's Executive Order (E.O.) 10925, which was proposed to ensure racial fairness in federal-funded employment, first used the word Affirmative Action to emphasize the equal provision of opportunity for people of all races, genders, ethnicities, religions, and national backgrounds.[4] The Civil Rights Act of 1964 further ensured the enforcement of Affirmative Action. This results in many colleges applying racial quota systems to achieve statistical parity instead of opportunity parity for minorities, which stirred a heated debate on whether it constituted 'reverse discrimination' for equally qualified white students. In the case of *Gratz v. Bollinger* (2003), the racial quota system in college admission was officially ruled unconstitutional.[5] Though less prominent, race is still considered a single part of the holistic review process in college admission in the U.S.

Similarly, the People's Republic of China (PRC) is also a multi-ethnic country that faces educational and economic inequality between different ethnicities. Apart from the majority of Han ethnicity, 55 other ethnicities live in the country, which accounts for 8.89% of the total population [6]. Unlike the practices in the U.S., the educational preferential policies for minorities had been proposed ever since the founding of the PRC in 1949. According to the statistics in 1950, over 80% of the minority population is illiterate or semi-illiterate [6], and no formal higher education institute for minorities had been established before the founding of the PRC. Economically, the States Council determined that 46.0% of all counties below the poverty line were in minority areas [7]. The huge disparity between ethnic minority areas and other regions prompted the central government to apply educational preferential policies. The policy evolved through several stages. From the Year 1949-1955, it was described as 'Equal grades, priority admission.'; in 1978, to provide more opportunities to minority students in disadvantaged regions, the Ministry of Education stated that the admission criterion should be appropriately lowered for minority students living in minority-clustered areas; In 2002, the Ministry further specified the policy, stating that the mark addition for minorities in the National College Admission exam should be no more than 20 points. Currently, the educational preferential policies for ethnic minorities include the addition of marks in the National College Admission exam (Gaokao), setting up special preparatory programs, and establishment of higher education institutes (Minzu universities) that mostly enroll minority students [8].

Both countries apply education preferential policies to increase the representation of minorities in higher education and help decrease the poverty rate. Despite these similarities, the policies differ in origins, forms, and effectiveness. Though some researchers investigating education preferential policies in China had described them as the Chinese version of Affirmative Action, little research has been conducted to comprehensively compare and evaluate the impact of these policies. The present research fills in the gap by applying the comparative method to evaluate the specific impact of two policies under different circumstances.

This paper comparatively reviews the topic of the impact of education preferential policies in China and the U.S., as eliminating the inequality between races and ethnicities has been the most recognized intention of these preferential policies. The evaluation would be focused on the two most representative policies: Affirmative Action and Mark Adding policy in China's National College Entrance Exam. By investigating and evaluating the effects of such education preferential policies, we could find ways to improve such practices and better resolve the problem of inequality between different social groups.

## 2. Impact Analysis

### 2.1.1. Affirmative Action: Solution to the Long-standing Inequality?

Before Affirmative Action was implemented, the proportion of 22-28-year-old black males completing college was just above 3%. During the 1960s, when Affirmative Action took place, the rate increased to over 5% [9]. The effect of Affirmative Action on minorities' access to higher education could be further explored after the abolition of many practices. It's estimated using theoretical models that college attendance of black and other colored students drops by 35% after Affirmative Action is proscribed. For different types of higher education, race diversity decreases most dramatically at the most prestigious universities. The ban on Affirmative Action also increases average SAT scores and family income for black students admitted, which suggests that black Americans' access to high-quality education has been reduced [10].

Real historical data also confirmed this conclusion. University of California (UC) has admitted a high percentage of minority students by exception (which lowers the threshold of high school GPA and scores on standardized tests for the applicants) before the abolition of Affirmative Action. In 1996, 23% of black students were admitted by exception, while only 2% of Asian and White students were. However, after the Board of Regents of the University of California decided to abolish practices of Affirmative Action from the 1998 cohort, the acceptance rate for black students in the most selective UC campuses (e.g., UCB, UCLA, UCSD) fell by over 20 percent in 3 years [11].

However, the increased presentation of minorities brought concerns over the actual benefits of these preferential policies to minorities. The mismatch theory was first proposed by Thomas Sowell, a world-renowned economist who taught at Cornell University in the 1960s. Through observation of racial preference admission at the Ivy elite university, he concluded that the Affirmative Action students tended to struggle with academic work due to insufficient preparation in high school. These students scored a higher SAT than the national average, meaning they should have better academic performance in less selective institutes. Mismatching them with one of the most competitive schools only caused them to lose confidence and abandon their initial career plans [12]. They might even choose to leave Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) majors due to fierce competition at school [13]. However, findings also suggest that the hypothesis wasn't necessarily correct under all circumstances. After investigating a sample of 4000 students in 28 elite universities, Massey concluded that Affirmative Action barely affects minority students' academic performance on the individual level. However, on the institutional level, Affirmative Action students who had a lower SAT than the institute's average tended to have a lower Grade-Point Average (GPA) at college [14]. A lower GPA may hinder their career and pursuit of higher education.

Despite the policy's success in increasing the proportion of minority students in higher education, the minority population remains in an educationally disadvantaged position. In 2016, only 30.8 percent of Black adults had college degrees compared to 47.1 percent of White adults. The present education attainment rate of Black people is even lower than that of White people thirty years ago [9]. Therefore, the policy's effect on eliminating the disparity between races should not be considered enough. More measures should continue to be taken.

### 2.1.2. Mark Adding Policy: The Conflict of Interests and Ideologies

Before the founding of the PRC, ethnic minorities in China faced a difficult educational environment due to wars, poverty, and natural geographical limitations. In the 1950s, the percentages of minority students in universities, occupational schools, and lower educational institutes are only 0.9%, 0.4%, and 2% respectively, compared to 6% of the total population [4]. China began to extensively apply educational preferential policies after the restoration of the National College Entrance Exam in 1977.

Between 1982 and 1990, the number of college graduates increased by 120.70% in 8 multi-ethnic provinces. The illiteracy of adults among ethnic minorities also decreased from 44.45% in 1982 to 30.81% in 1990. 17 ethnic minorities including the Korean and Mongol nationality had an illiteracy rate lower than the national average [6]. The prolonged education years had a great impact on eliminating inequality between Han nationality and minor ethnicities. It's estimated that one additional year of education could increase the income of minorities by 26.3%-28% on average. [15] Among all education preferential policies provided for ethnic minorities, the Mark Adding policy is among the most direct and effective ones. In most provinces in China, the National College Entrance Exam score is the only factor determining whether the applicant is admitted. Therefore, it's easier to evaluate the direct impact of the policy on minority students. In 1985, the minimum mark required to be admitted to Tibet University was only 170 for minority students; however, for Han nationality students, the mark required was 400 [16]. As the number of mark addition is independently determined by individual provinces, it normally ranges from 5 to 20 points. The addition could reach 50 depending on the condition. The huge difference in academic threshold had sparked debate among the mainly-Han population in China. Provinces including Tianjin, Anhui, and Shandong have already abolished the Mark Adding policy for minorities.

Except for general education, education in religions and languages also plays an important role in minorities' education. The Chinese Communist Party promotes atheistic ideologies, which means religious content would not be included in the curriculum of state schools. The boarding schools constructed by the state also don't allow students to participate in religious activities.[17] As most minority families have religious beliefs, they might be unwilling to send children to a state school and receive formal education. Moreover, the language barrier also hinders minority students' development. There are about 10000 bilingual schools that offer courses in both Mandarin and minority languages, satisfying the educational need of 6 million students.[18]

Another drawback of state education is the application of the unified national curriculum throughout the country. Though there exists huge variation in cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs, living conditions, histories, and local customs between Han nationality and minorities, a unified curriculum and series of textbooks are used in every school in the country. The irrelevance to local traditions, culture, and histories may result in minority students feeling isolated and neglected and hinder their long-term development.[17]

### 2.1.3. Comparative Analysis

Education preferential policies in both countries have shown a great impact on the number of minority students admitted to college. However, the current educational disparity between races in the U.S. is much more prominent than that between Han nationality and ethnic minorities in China. The reasons might include economic disparity and implicit discrimination. Everson's model proves that there exists a strong correlation between family income and a child's SAT scores. On average, for white students who live in poor families, their SAT scores are 44.2 points lower than those of children in middle-income families. In contrast, for black students, the disparity reaches 77 points.[19] Currently, there still exists significant income disparity among races. Black males on average only earn 80% of what white males earn. [20] In comparison, despite the continued disparity in education years and life expectancy between Han nationality and minor ethnicities, there exists no significant divide regarding the average household income according to a study conducted in rural Ningxia, China.[21] In the study, the researcher suggested that the main reason is that minor ethnic youth would migrate to more developed areas and earn a higher income. It's possible to infer that the discrimination against ethnic minorities in the job market might not be as significant. Due to the Chinese government's measures to promote Mandarin among minor ethnicities over the years, most ethnic minorities are fluent in Mandarin. As no distinctive difference exists between the appearance of Han and minor ethnicities,

it's much more difficult for people to tell whether the person is a minor ethnicity. This may result in them experiencing less implicit discrimination compared to African Americans.

Though education preferential policies in China have a significant impact on increasing minorities' education years and income, its Han-centered curriculum may cause harm to the preservation of minority culture, customs, and languages. Comparatively, Affirmative Action didn't set a strict and unified standard curriculum for black Americans, which means students have more freedom in the subjects they choose to study. Allowing students to investigate what's interesting and relevant to their lives, the flexible curriculum might have a positive impact on students' long-term development. However, both policies face the criticism of 'mismatch' as they lower the academic threshold for minorities to be admitted to some extent. Findings had been proposed against the theory [22], but the hidden implication of underprepared education before college should still be taken into consideration.

### 3. Conclusion

By analyzing different situations in China and the U.S., this paper identifies the differences between the education preferential policies, including their effect on the education levels, economic conditions, and long-term development of minorities. For education levels and economic conditions, the Mark Adding Policy in China has reduced the gap between the majority and the minorities more obviously. The economic condition and education year of ethnic minorities in China have dramatically improved over the years, while African Americans remain in a relatively more disadvantaged position both educationally and economically. The possible reasons include the economic disparity and implicit discrimination toward African Americans. However, due to the majority-centered curriculum in China, most ethnic minorities can't pursue minority-centered studies in college. The irrelevance of curriculum may hinder their learning outcome and the preservation of minority culture. Based on the current situation, it's suggested that more policies focusing on eliminating the income disparity between races should be introduced, as well as regulations to prevent discrimination in workplaces. For the Mark Adding Policy in China, it's suggested that the policy should also consider factors other than ethnicity, including economic conditions, geographical locations, and ethnic cultural identities as these factors also influence people's access to high-quality education. In addition, more de-centered or minority-centered curriculums should be provided to give minority students more flexibility.

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