

To give more students access to higher education, the government has increased its investment in the sector five fold since 1997. The number of universities has nearly doubled. In 1998 46% of secondary-school graduates went on to university. Now 88% of them do. about 7m people—roughly one-third of those aged between 18 and 22—now gain entry to some form of higher institution each year.

????????????????1997????????????5????????????1998???46%????????88%?????????
00????18?22????????????

China's universities offer more opportunity for social mobility than those in many other countries, says James Lee of Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. But the social backgrounds of those admitted have been changing. Until 1993, more than 40% of students were the children of farmers or factory workers. Now universities are crammed with people from wealthy, urban backgrounds. That is partly because a far bigger share of young people are middle-class. But it is also because rural Chinese face bigger hurdles getting into them than they used to.

?????????.????????????????????????????????????1993????????????????????
????????????????????????????????????

The problem lies with inequality of access to senior high schools, which take students for the final three years of their secondary education. Students from rural backgrounds who go to such schools perform as well in the university entrance exams as those from urban areas. But most never get there. Less than 10% of young people in the countryside go to senior high schools compared with 70% of their urban counterparts. The result is that a third of urban youngsters complete tertiary education, compared with only 8% of young rural adults.

??
7?????????????????????????????????????---????????8%????

One reason is that junior high schools in the countryside are far weaker academically than urban ones. Local governments invest less in them per student than they do in cities. Urban parents tend to be better educated and thus better able to help children with their studies.

??

Expense is a huge deterrent for many. Governments cover the costs of schooling for the nine years of compulsory education up to the age of around 15. But at senior high schools, families must pay tuition and other expenses; these outlays are among the highest in the world (measured by purchasing-power parity). Many students drop out of junior high school—which is free—because rising wages in low-skilled industrial work make the prospect of staying at school even less attractive. Millions enter the workforce every year who are barely literate or numerate?

????????????????????????????????15????????????????????????????????
??

ince the 1990s more than 200m people have moved from the countryside to work in cities. Many have left their children behind because of the difficulty of getting them into urban schools: the country's system of hukou, or household registration, makes it hard for migrant children to enjoy subsidised education in places other than their parents' birthplace.

????90????2????????????????????????????????????

Unnatural selection

??????

Children from poor backgrounds who do make it as far as the gaokao face another difficulty: competition with better-prepared candidates from 700 or so feeder (usually known as “keypoint”) schools. These receive more funding per student than average schools, have better teachers and plusher facilities. They are supposed to train the brightest students, but many get in with the help of money and connections.

????????????????????????????????????700??
????????????????????????????

Hoping to make the system fairer, some feeder schools now allocate places on the basis of pupils’ proximity. Inevitably, this has sent local house prices skyrocketing, reinforcing the schools’ privileged intake by a different means.

??

Some of the feeder schools channel their pupils into the best universities via an alternative route to the gaokao. The Ministry of Education introduced this in 2003 to reward people with “special talents” that are tricky to assess through standardized tests, such as innovative thinking, creativity, or skills in sport or art. This was supposed to make the types of students attending university more varied. Instead it has increased inequality, by giving advantages to those who have benefited from the superior facilities of key point schools.

????????????????????????????????2003????????????????“????”????????????????????????????????????
????????????????????????????????

The government is trying to reduce other unfairnesses, too. But it has been tough going: those who benefit from unequal opportunities are unsurprisingly reluctant to cede their privileges. This was evident from the outcry that followed an announcement last month that 12 provinces and cities would have to reduce quotas for local students at their universities. These allow universities to accept local students even though they may have lower gaokao scores than those from elsewhere. The news triggered protests in three cities by parents who worried about losing a precious advantage for their children.

??12????????????????????????????????????
??