Teresa Contreras-O'Reilly and Isaiah Mason
Professor Pan
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Does Affirmative Action Mean Social Equity? An Analysis of Affirmative Action Policies in China and the United States and Recommended Next Steps

Educational inequity is a problem in the United States and China, which policymakers need to address given racial disparities in educational opportunities and the racial wealth gap. To offset the ascription of deficit perspectives to racial and ethnic minorities achieving equal access to educational attainment, the United States and Chinese governments have implemented systems of affirmative action to increase the diversity of college populations.

The demographic makeup of the United States is estimated to be 60.4 percent white, 13.4 percent black, 5.9 percent Asian, and 18.3 percent Hispanic or Latino (US Census Bureau, 2018). The demographic makeup of college classrooms in the United States is 66.1 percent white, 13.4 percent black, 6.1 percent Asian, and 12.1 percent Hispanic or Latino (US Census Bureau, 2017). In China, the Han Chinese make up approximately 91 percent of the total population and the 55 ethnic minorities make up the remaining 9 percent. Meanwhile, Hannum and Wang (2012) used mid-census survey data from 2005 to reveal that 16 to 21-year-old Chinese ethnic minorities were approximately one-third as likely as Han students to complete nine years of compulsory schooling and are overall less likely to enroll at the tertiary level (Yang et al., 2015). Affirmative action policies address racial and ethnic disparities in schooling by allowing a greater margin of minority students to access colleges and universities that may have previously been inaccessible along racial and socioeconomic lines.

We aim to interrogate the implementation and outcomes of affirmative action policies in the United States and China that impact the social status of and opportunities for racial minorities. By engaging in an analysis of policy papers, data on affirmative action

implementation and outcomes, and the existing literature on affirmative action in both countries, we will explore the barriers to implementation in the United States and whether it is comparable to implementation in China. Then, we will examine how affirmative action may impact the social status and life outcomes of racial and ethnic minorities. Lastly, we will suggest policy initiatives that both countries could implement to improve their social equity efforts.

Affirmative Action Implementation in China

The reality of affirmative action implementation is confounded with the presence of 55 ethnic minority groups within China. The central government has to contend with geographic barriers, as affirmative action practices are directed at increasing the representation of rural students in universities. The state council asserts that a principal goal of the administration is creating special policy to increase the postgraduate universities and colleges in ethnic autonomous areas (2008). While minorities only make up 9 percent of the population, 44 out of the 55 ethnic minorities are only located in the west (Zhu, 2010; Ding et al., 2017). This demographic trend informed the decision of the central government to allow provincial governments to implement affirmative action with respect to the ethnic makeup of the individual regions. This stratifies the impact of affirmative action according to province, as each province does not create policies that acknowledge each of the ethnic minorities.

The government prescribes that the prominent method of affirmative action is the addition of points to the Gao Kao, a nationally administered test for college applicants, of students from ethnic minorities. With respect to the Chinese value in education as a method of achieving social mobility, the educational tract is regarded more highly. The amount of bonus points awarded is recalculated each year and allows minority students to access subsidies that assist with managing the cost of universities (Sautman, 1998). A minority student has an equal or higher chance of admission to a university with a score that is equal to or higher than a Han

student, causing tension within the Han community. Ethnic colleges created a patchwork solution that focuses on a liberal arts education and ethnic minority preparatory classes at colleges and universities nationwide (Zhu, 2010). From 1953-2005, Table 1 (Zhu, 2010) indicates that the percentage of minority students enrolled in colleges and universities increased from 2.56 to 6.10 percent, which can be attributed to affirmative action policies.

Table 1

Number of Ethnic Minority Students in Higher Education and Ethnic Minority/National Population Ratios (Unit: 10,000)

	Ethnic minority enrollment in higher education	Ethnic minority percentage of higher education students nationwide	Ethnic minority population	Ethnic minority percentage of nationwide population
1953	0.55	2.56	3,401	5.89
1964	2.00	3.24	3,988	5.77
1982	5.39	4.65	6,643	6.62
1990	13.79	6.60	9,057	8.01
1997	21.68	6.83	10,731	8.98
1998	22.63	6.64	–	–
1999	24.77	6.00	–	–
2000	31.73	5.71	10,643	8.41
2001	40.97	5.70	–	–
2002	52.39	5.80	–	–
2003	65.52	5.90	–	–
2004	75.59	5.70	–	–
2005	95.32	6.10	12,333	9.44

Sources: China Education Yearbook (1949–1981, 1982–1984, 1990, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006); *China Population Statistics Yearbook* (2001); *China's Ethnic Statistical Yearbook* (1949–1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2006).

Note: The National Census of China was taken in 1953, 1964, 1982, 1990, and 2000.

Educational & Labor Market Outcomes in China

Table 2 (Ding et al., 2017) represents the effects of a bachelor's degree on lifetime earnings with comparison between a member of an ethnic minority and a member of the Han majority. The designations indicate treatment effects of obtaining a bachelor's degree: ATE (average treatment effect of obtaining a bachelor's degree), ATET (average treatment effect when minority member obtains degree), ATENT (average treatment effect for a minority member without a bachelor's degree). The treatment effects for minority groups are lower for all treatments, relative to ATE under homogeneity. Importantly, this is with the point of reference established as high school graduates. Additionally, for minorities who obtain a bachelor's

degree, the results of the analysis were only significant from zero when attending a school ranked “good.” Compared to the Han majority with the same treatment, this suggests higher returns from a bachelor’s degree for minorities when attending a school ranked “good."

Nevertheless, researchers search for other sources of ethnic inequality beyond differences in educational attainment. Tang et al. (2016) argue in favor of a belief that language barriers restrict minority attainment of jobs and other opportunities. As local and regional governments are given the freedom to direct bilingual policies, the national emphasis on Mandarin language proficiency functions as an obstacle for minority groups like the Uyghur, a Muslim minority within the Xinjiang Uyghur autonomous region (Tang et al., 2016). Figure 1 (Tang et al., 2016) indicates that linguistically distinct Uyghurs are far less proficient in Mandarin than members of the Han majority, which increases in relationship with years of schooling. This conclusion suggests that the current affirmative action model overlooks issues with bilingual policy and that a potential solution would be to implement Mandarin education in a manner that is not culturally invasive to regions with a high ethnic minority population.

Table 2 The returns to a baccalaureate degree for minorities in China treatment effect parameter estimates

	ATE (OLS)	*ATE* (Heckit)	*ATE* (Heckit|Minority)	*ATET* (Heckit|Minority)	*ATENT* (Heckit|Minority)
Treatment effect:					
Outcome: Log of annual earnings					
Control group: high school graduates					
Treatment:					
Graduated from college	.426 (.026)[a]	.322 (.145)[b]	.394 (.188)[b]	.362 (.246)	.405 (.172)[b]
Minority	−.044 (.062)	−.067 (.059)	−.094 (.084)	−.094 (.084)	−.094 (.084)
λ		.052 (.085)	.033 (.226)	.033 (.226)	.033 (.226)
Numberof observations:	3779	3779	3779	3779	3779
Graduated from college: (Rank = very good)	.452 (.073)[a]	.713 (.298)[b]	.827 (.283)[b]	.104 (.513)	.857 (.288)[b]
Minority	−.038 (.079)	−.071 (.090)	.394 (.430)	.394 (.430)	.394 (.430)
λ		−.155 (.145)	−.149 (.263)	−.149 (.263)	−.149 (.263)
Number of observations:	2930	2930	2930	2930	2930
Graduated from college: (Rank = Good)	.452 (.038)[a]	.456 (.169)[b]	.533 (.183)[b]	.695 (.313)[b]	.514 (.174)[b]
Minority	−.042 (.074)	−.082 (.076)	−.100 (.077)	−.100 (.077)	−.100 (.077)
λ		.004 (.088)	.111 (.237)	.111 (.237)	.111 (.237)
Number of observations:	3136	3136	3136	3136	3136

Standard errors in parentheses
[a]**Significant at the .01 level**
[b]**Significant at the .05 level**

Affirmative Action Implementation in the United States

In the United States, affirmative action policies are often discussed and viewed through an education lens. Fisher v. University of Texas, 2016 captures the well-known affirmative action dilemma: black and brown students steal the spots that "rightfully" belong to white students. Abigail Fisher believed that she was racially disadvantaged in the college admissions process because she was born white, not black or brown. Fisher viewed her skin color, not her average SAT score or average GPA, as the basis for her rejection. Katznelson (2005) pushes back on the narrative that minorities reap the largest benefits of affirmative action policies in his book, "When Affirmative Action Was White." Katznelson reveals that affirmative action policies existed before the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The G.I. Bill functioned as "affirmative action for whites, the path to job placement, loans, unemployment benefits, and schooling was tied to local VA centers, almost entirely staffed by white employees, or through local banks and both public and private educational institutions" (Katznelson, 2005, p. 149). Meanwhile, blacks faced racial discrimination and were discouraged from securing benefits (Katznelson, 2005, p. 149). Race-conscious affirmative action policies today are often met with criticism and are challenged in court.

The United States Supreme Court has weighed in on five key college affirmative action cases since the 1970s. In Marco DeFunis Jr. v. Odegaard, 1974, Marco DeFunis, a white man, believed he was denied admissions to the University of Washington Law School because the school prioritized admitting unqualified, minority students. DeFunis argued that the school's admission practices violated the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause, but the case became moot and the Supreme Court did not address the issue. White medical school applicant, Alan Bakke argued in Regents of the University of California v. Bakke, 1978 that UC Davis's affirmative action policy of reserving 16 out of 100 spots for qualified minorities violated the

Equal Protection Clause. The Supreme Court ruled that racial quotas violated the Fourteenth Amendment, but that race could be used as a criterion in admissions decisions. Grutter v. Bollinger, 2003 had a similar outcome as the Supreme Court ruled that schools can use race in their admissions decisions to help bolster their diversity. In Gratz v. Bollinger, 2003 the Supreme Court found that the University of Michigan's admission office's point system of adding 20 extra points to minority students' application was unconstitutional and violated the Equal Protection Clause. In Fisher v. University of Texas, 2016 the Supreme Court ruled that the Equal Protection Clause permits the consideration of race in undergraduate admissions decisions.

The most recent affirmative action battle was between Students for Fair Admissions, an anti-affirmative-action advocacy group, and Harvard University. Edward Blum leads the advocacy group. He argued that Harvard's race-conscious admission policies discriminated against Asian American applicants. Blum also played a role in the Fisher v. University of Texas, 2016 lawsuit. In October 2019, a federal judge ruled that there was no evidence of explicit bias toward Harvard's Asian American applicants. Admissions practices do violate the Equal Protection Clause when they provide preferences for all racial minorities, rather than providing individual consideration to each racial minority.

Kurtulus (2015) explains that in the 1980s, the Reagan Administration attempted to reverse affirmative action by rescinding the Executive Order 11246, or the Equal Employment Opportunity, which failed (p. 4). Reagan did succeed in weakening affirmative action enforcement as the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs "rarely issued sanctions for noncompliance, and the number of employment-discrimination lawsuits plummeted" (Kurtulus, 2015, p. 4). Affirmative action enforcement improved with when George H. W. Bush became president in 1989 and strengthened when Bill Clinton took office in 1993.

In recent years, states have placed their own bans on affirmative action policies. The list of states includes California (1996), Washington (1998), Florida (1999), Michigan (2006), Nebraska (2008), Arizona (2010), New Hampshire (2012), and Oklahoma (2012). Texas was included in the list until its ban was reversed in 2003, by Grutter v. Bollinger.

Educational, Health, & Labor Market Outcomes in the United States

Kane (1998) and Long (2004) conducted studies to estimate racial and ethnic differences in admissions and measure the effect of affirmative action policies. Kane (1998) does not find a significant effect of affirmative action on minority students' admissions to universities ranked below the top quintile. Long (2004) identifies a small effect of affirmative action on admissions to universities ranked below the top quintile—the share of admitted minority students rose by 10 percentage points or less. Both studies found significant effects of affirmative action on minority students' admissions to elite schools. Long (2004) reveals that affirmative action policies increased the share of minority students at schools ranked in the top quintile by over 25 percent and over 40 percent in the top decile of schools. These findings illustrate that the absence of affirmative action in admissions practices would drastically decrease the presence of minority students on elite college campuses.

Venkataramani et al. (2019) found that college affirmative action bans contribute to poorer health outcomes for minority adolescents in the United States, suggesting that "health behaviors respond to changes in socioeconomic opportunities driven by changes in social policy." Rates of cigarette smoking by underrepresented minorities, between the ages of 19 and 30, increased by 1.8 percentage points after exposure to affirmative action bans during their late high school years (Venkataramani et al., 2019).

Table 2 (Kurtulus, 2015) reveals the impact of affirmative action on federal contracting from 1973 to 2003. On average, black women's employment share increased by 0.041 percentage points and Native American women's employment share increased by 0.008 percentage points. Affirmative action resulted in a 0.122 percentage point decrease in the employment share of white women on average. Affirmative action increased black's men employment share by 0.040 percentage points, increased Native American's men employment share by 0.014 percentage points, and increased white men's employment share by 0.09 percentage points on average.

Table 2 The Effects of Federal Contractor Status on Employment Shares by Gender and Race during 1973–2003

Panel A: Women

	Dependent variable				
	% White female	% Black female	% Hispanic female	% Asian female	% Nat. Am. female
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Fed	−0.00122***	0.00041**	−0.00018	0.00009	0.00008**
	(0.00035)	(0.00019)	(0.00016)	(0.00008)	(0.00004)
Firm controls	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Year dummies	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Industry X Year dummies	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Region X Year dummies	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Constant	0.34915***	0.04662***	0.02378***	0.00440***	0.00199***
	(0.00101)	(0.00049)	(0.00036)	(0.00021)	(0.00013)
Observations	1,011,729	1,011,729	1,011,729	1,011,729	1,011,729
Number of firms	123,511	123,511	123,511	123,511	123,511
Adjusted *R*-squared	0.0522	0.0370	0.0729	0.0683	0.0012

Panel B: Men

	Dependent variable				
	% White male	% Black male	% Hispanic male	% Asian male	% Nat. Am. male
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Fed	0.00090**	0.00040**	−0.00058***	−0.00003	0.00014***
	(0.00037)	(0.00018)	(0.00022)	(0.00009)	(0.00005)
Firm controls	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Year dummies	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Industry X Year dummies	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Region X Year dummies	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Constant	0.45980***	0.06198***	0.04272***	0.00643***	0.00314***
	(0.00104)	(0.00045)	(0.00043)	(0.00022)	(0.00015)
Observations	1,011,729	1,011,729	1,011,729	1,011,729	1,011,729
Number of firms	123,511	123,511	123,511	123,511	123,511
Adjusted *R*-squared	0.1001	0.0157	0.1021	0.0464	0.0007

NOTE: Robust standard errors clustered by firm are in parentheses. * significant at the 0.0 level; ** significant at the 0.05 level; *** significant at the 0.01 level.

Comparison Analysis

With the case of affirmative action implementation, we observe marked improvement in the status of minorities in both countries. In the United States given that they have increased minorities presence in elite universities and have increased the employment share of minorities in the workplace (e.g. federal contracting), as is the case in China where the percentage of minority students increased from 2.56 percent to 6.10 percent. Meanwhile, there is evidence of

some increased health risk behaviors among minorities between the ages of 19 to 30 after exposure to state-level bans affirmative action bans on college admissions. Similar ban evidence has not surfaced in the Chinese literature, as affirmative action is a core policy for the central administration. This key difference in both nation's fundamental structure helps explain marked differences in the pathways of affirmative action implementation.

For decades, affirmative action policies in the United States have been challenged when people of color are the beneficiaries. The U.S. government must acknowledge that white men have benefited the most from affirmative action policies (e.g., GI Bill and college admissions). Admissions trends show that most undergraduate programs employ a gender quota to maintain a fifty-fifty balance between men and women, although men apply at lower rates than women (Mank, 2011). The stigma surrounding affirmative action has motivated many state governments and employers to limit their social efforts for minorities. In China, the beneficiaries of affirmative action policies have always been ethnic minorities, as the government noticed a disparity in educational outcomes. Moreover, the experiences of ethnic minorities in China are different than people of color in the United States because their identity is wrested in cultural background, allowing affirmative action to proceed without the intervention of litigation.

Conclusion

Beyond increasing access to higher education for racial and ethnic minorities, affirmative action policies in China should perform a dual action of increasing occupational outcomes in correlation with the level of education obtained. This relationship should imply that a subsection of the minority populations in the United States and in China should perform just as well socioeconomically to achieve social equity, which is gradually becoming apparent within data about employment with a bachelor's degree.

It may be beneficial to adjust the existing curriculum of ethnic colleges and universities to put graduates on par with other institutions. This could aid to assuage Han worries of individual liberty being taken away while applying for colleges and universities without preference, as well as improve educational equity for more ethnic minority students. There is not necessarily a political coalition in China that would advocate for this type of intervention, and the outcomes would be hard to determine due to existing infrastructure and the fact that a high proportion of ethnic minorities are concentrated in rural, high-poverty areas. A shift in the curriculum of ethnic colleges and universities in autonomous minority regions would entail pairing the liberal arts education on the cultural aspects of life in urban China with a Mandarin education to help counter the language gap between certain minorities and the Han majority.

In the United States, many of China's affirmative action policies would be deemed unconstitutional. Policies such as the government adding 20 extra points for all ethnic and racial minorities' SAT or ACT scores would be quickly challenged in court, based on the public's previous response to affirmative action in college admissions. However, the United States should build off of China's framework to make higher education more accessible.

In 2019, the College Board launched its "adversity score," a supplemental score to the SAT verbal and math scores to reflect test takers' socioeconomic backgrounds. The score would range from 1 to 100 and would capture each test taker's average senior class size, the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunches, overall academic achievement in Advanced Placement classes, along with regional crime levels, the median family income, and family stability (Sanchez, 2019). The College Board abandoned its "adversity score" in August 2019 because families were concerned that universities would discriminate against their application if

a student had a high adversity score while other families were concerned that universities would have preferences for students who have higher scores (Allyn, 2019).

We believe that the government should enact the "adversity score" as a supplemental feature on the SAT and ACT. Given the black-white test score gap, race is an important factor to consider in parallel to the way China considers minority status. To protect students from being discriminated against or preferred by college admission officers, each test taker's adversity score should be multiplied by two and distributed between their math and verbal scores. Our logic behind this scoring is the 177-point black-white gap in SAT scores, as black SAT test-takers score on average 946, compared to 1123 for white test-takers (Jaschik, 2018). We believe that this equitable scoring practice falls in line with the Supreme Court's decisions to support race-conscious college admissions practices. The scoring promotes diversity and does not discriminate against certain applicants. These points are not a handout but acknowledge that economic and social status are a privilege. Privilege does not work against a test taker, unlike adversity in life. We must protect affirmative action policies in the United States because racial and ethnic minorities face systematic discrimination daily but have yet to collect benefits from the government, comparable to that of white Americans.

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