

# The Causes, Impacts and Governance Approaches of the "Gaokao Migration" Phenomenon in China

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**Abstract:** *This study investigates the phenomenon of "Gaokao migration," whereby candidates strategically shift household registration and school records across provinces to gain advantageous access to college admissions. Anchored in institutionalism, educational equity theory, and capital theory, the research employs a qualitative multi-case design based on systematic retrieval and comparative analysis of published academic cases (2000–2025). The study conceptualizes Gaokao migration, identifies its mobility patterns, examines its policy, socio-economic, and cultural-psychological drivers, and evaluates its impacts on procedural and substantive fairness, local educational ecologies, and individual candidates. Building on multi-center governance theory, it proposes a multi-level governance framework integrating national macro-regulation, inter-provincial coordination, school-level self-discipline, and social oversight. The findings aim to enrich theoretical understanding and inform policy reforms promoting fairness and justice in higher education admissions.*

**Keywords:** Gaokao migration; Educational equity; Gaokao system; Case study; Governance path.

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## 1. Introduction

Gaokao, which is as the largest and most influential national education test in China, is not only a crucial turning point in the lives of millions of students, but also an important mechanism for maintaining social mobility and safeguarding educational fairness. Since its restoration in 1977, the Gaokao system has played an irreplaceable role in selecting talents and promoting social fairness (Cheng & Hamid, 2025). However, with the rapid development of the society and the intensification of regional imbalances, a special social phenomenon known as "Gaokao migration" has emerged. "Gaokao migration" refers to the behavior of students who in order to avoid the highly competitive Gaokao in their place of residence and gain an advantage in admission opportunities, take advantage of the current policies of dividing the number of admissions by provinces, setting admission lines by provinces, etc., and through abnormal academic record migration and moving to other places for household registration to transfer their household registration and academic records to provinces with lower admission scores and higher admission rates (Cao, 2020). As early as the Ming and Qing dynasties, there were cases of people using others' place of origin to take the imperial examinations across different regions (Zhang & Zhang, 2007). In a sense, the imperial examinations could be regarded as the equivalent of today's Gaokao. Therefore, this was actually an early form of Gaokao migration. This phenomenon is not an isolated event, instead of that, it involves complex connections among institutional design, resource allocation, social psychology and family strategies. It not only poses a challenge to the fairness of the Gaokao system, triggering widespread controversy among students, parents and the public in both the receiving and sending areas, but also reflects the deep-seated

structural contradictions in China's education sector, such as the uneven distribution of high-quality higher education resources and the interweaving of the household registration system and educational rights (Kan, 2013). Therefore, conducting a systematic academic study on the "Gaokao migration" phenomenon is a matter of great theoretical value and practical significance.

This study aims to construct an integrated "Gaokao migration" conceptual model to clarify the causal mechanisms and conditions that drive migration behavior, assess its multi-dimensional impacts, and propose a comprehensive governance approach based on the multi-center governance theory, in order to enhance fairness, justice, and policy consistency.

## 2. Literature Review

The existing literature has conducted a comprehensive analysis of the definition, legal grey areas, and operational mechanisms of "Gaokao migration", and identified the main flow patterns and their necessary conditions. This study has organized them into four theoretical perspectives. The first is institutionalism and policy design. This perspective focuses on the institutional environment that shapes the phenomenon of "Gaokao migration", such as the core admission system based on provincial quotas (Pu, 2020). At the same time, the "coupling" and "decoupling" between policies (such as unintended consequences of talent policies and education policies) have also been the focus of researchers (Miao et al., 2022). The second is the theory of educational equity. This theory provides a core benchmark for evaluating the impact of "Gaokao migration". Research usually distinguishes between procedural equity (whether the rules are consistently implemented) and substantive equity (whether the results are fair). Gaokao migration may damage procedural equity by violating existing registration rules, or erode substantive equity by exacerbating the inequality in access to high-quality educational resources among different groups, thereby undermining meritocratic legitimacy (Wang, 2010). The third is the capital theory. Pierre Bourdieu demonstrated that society is not solely determined by economic relations, but rather a complex space composed of various fields. In these fields (such as the art field, academic field, and political field), people compete for resources and dominance, and the "weapons" or "chips" they use are various forms of capital (Brown & Lloyd, 2024). Family capital becomes a tool for families to secure competitive advantages for their children in the process of "Gaokao migration". The fourth is the governance theory. It emphasizes that the need for diversified governance entities requires going beyond single government control (Soares Furtado Oliveira et al., 2023), namely it requires the collaboration and cooperation of multiple entities such as the state, localities, universities, and society to form a policy network and jointly address complex public issues, providing ideas for solutions to the "Gaokao migration" phenomenon.

Existing empirical studies, based on case analysis and policy analysis, have summarized the driving factors, practical situations, and impacts on local systems and individuals, revealing the specific operational mechanism of "Gaokao migration", the factors influencing family decisions, and the separate impacts of this phenomenon on the education systems of the inflow and outflow areas, as well as the effects on individual migrants. However, existing research still has the following shortcomings. Firstly, there is a lack of systematic cross-comparison and integration of multiple typical cases (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). Secondly, the theoretical model that effectively connects macro institutional characteristics with micro individual behavioral responses is not complete (Powell & Werum, 2004). Moreover, there is insufficient attention to the dynamic games and unexpected consequences during the policy implementation process. Additionally, in terms of research methods, there is a lack of triangulation verification that combines qualitative depth with quantitative breadth (Plano Clark, 2017; Risjord et al., 2002).

Based on the above literature review, this study raises the following core questions:

Research Question 1: How can "Gaokao migration" be conceptually defined, and what are the main migration patterns based on empirical cases?

Research Question 2: What are the underlying reasons that drive the phenomenon of "Gaokao migration" in terms of policy systems, social economy, and cultural psychology?

Research Question 3: What are the multiple impacts of "Gaokao migration" on educational equity (both procedural and substantive), local social ecology, and individual immigrants?

### **3. Methodology**

The methodology of this study is a qualitative case study, which involves systematically reviewing, analyzing and comparing the cases recorded in existing academic literature to achieve the goal of theoretical construction (Baskarada, 2014). To construct the "case library" for this study, we conducted a systematic literature search. The search platforms mainly included China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), Google Scholar and other academic databases. The search time range was set from the past twenty-five years (2000-2025), covering the key periods of the development and evolution of this phenomenon. The literature screening criteria were the "four qualities", namely relevance, typicality, academicity and diversity of perspectives. Meanwhile, the data analysis process is the core of theoretical construction, mainly including two processes: case internal analysis and cross-case synthesis. The first process is to conduct text interpretation for each selected typical case, sorting out the specific policy background, key event nodes, main participants' behaviors, social reactions, and main viewpoints of the literature authors, and in this process, using the pre-set theoretical perspectives (such as institutionalism, capital theory, fairness theory) to extract the causes, impacts, etc. that are manifested in the case. The second process is to juxtapose and compare all selected individual cases, seeking common patterns and significant differences among them. From the specific case phenomena, extract more universal theoretical categories and relationships, and ultimately construct an integrated analytical framework to systematically expound the multiple causes, multi-dimensional impacts, and comprehensive governance paths of the "Gaokao migration" phenomenon.

### **4. Concept, Model, Causes and Effects of "Gaokao migration"**

Based on the above case study method, this research has made the following findings.

#### **4.1 Definition and Mobility Patterns of "Gaokao migration"**

Although the academic community has varying definitions of "Gaokao migration", the core elements are highly consistent. It specifically refers to the behavior where candidates, with the aim of pursuing a more practical academic path, change their legal identity information such as their household registration or school records, and strategically move from regions with intense competition and high admission scores (the departure area) to regions with relatively less competition and lower admission scores ("the arrival area") to register and take the Gaokao, in order to gain unfair competitive advantages (Cao, 2020). The core feature lies in the purely instrumental nature of the "migration" motivation, that is, to utilize institutional differences to obtain better admission opportunities, rather than the natural educational needs arising from actual family work or life relocation. This behavior operates on the fringes of the policy, and its "legality" and "reasonableness" have sparked significant controversy both within the academic community and in society.

Through the analysis of cases, this study has identified the following four main "Gaokao migration" patterns. The first is the policy-driven influx type. This pattern is exemplified by Tianjin. With its status as a municipality directly under the Central Government and relatively generous Gaokao admission resources, Tianjin has long attracted much attention. After the "Hehe Talents" action plan significantly lowered the settlement threshold in 2018 (Kim & Allen, 2018), it triggered a phenomenon-like "migration" application wave in a short period of time. Case analysis shows that the lack of effective coordination between talent introduction policies and education policies has objectively created a huge "policy funnel". The second is the speculative type from remote border areas. Some families obtain local household registration and school enrollment qualifications through purchasing properties in these areas, obtaining false employment certificates, or "emptying school records" (Ho et al., 2024), namely having school records at the school but the student does not actually study there. The third is the "Gaokao factory" accompanying type. This pattern is closely related to "super schools" such as Anhui Maotangchang Middle School and Hebei Hengshui Middle School (Tian et al., 2016). These schools attract national students. During their studies, some students may transfer their school records to Gaokao advantageous regions through the school or intermediary agencies. This pattern reflects the complex connection between the extreme exam-oriented educational ecology and the advantages of admission policies. The fourth is the "Yidi Gaokao" type: The national implementation of the "Yidi Gaokao" policy was originally intended to protect the rights and interests of children who follow their parents. However, the admission conditions set by some provinces (such as a certain period of school enrollment and parents' social security) are relatively lenient. To some extent, this has also been exploited by "Gaokao migration", who achieve the transfer of examination locations by meeting the minimum threshold rather than truly integrating (Kan, 2013).

#### **4.2 Multidimensional Causes of "Gaokao migration"**

"Gaokao migration" is the result of the combined effect of various forces. Its causes can be explained from the following three theoretical dimensions.

First, the policy and institutional roots. The provincial quota admission system and the household registration barriers constitute the most fundamental institutional causes. High-quality higher education resources in China are highly concentrated in a few provinces, while the college admission process is not uniformly scored nationwide but follows the "quota admission by province" system (Pu, 2020). This directly leads to the "gap" in the admission rates of first-tier universities and prestigious schools among different provinces. Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, and other provinces have become "highlands", while provinces with large populations such as Henan, Shandong, and Guangdong are "valleys". This pattern naturally triggers the rational behavior of individuals (parents' families) seeking "institutional arbitrage". Therefore, the household registration system, as an additional "qualification certification" system attached to the Gaokao, is both an obstacle to arbitrage and a target to be broken through. Second, social and economic motivations. "Gaokao migration" is not a path that all families can choose. It significantly depends on the capital owned by the family. According to the capital theory of French sociologist Bourdieu (Brown & Lloyd, 2024), families will use their economic capital (paying for house purchases), social capital (seeking connections to handle household registration) and cultural capital (long-term strategic planning for the education system) to help their children gain competitive advantages. Therefore, "Gaokao migration" is to some extent a reenactment and reinforcement of social capital inequality in the field of education. It enables some advantaged families to pass on intergenerational advantages through non-academic abilities, thereby potentially exacerbating class stratification. Third, cultural and psychological driving forces. In today's "credential society", the diploma from top universities is generally regarded as the most important credential for obtaining a

decent career and higher social status (Gaddis, 2015). This collective value orientation has given rise to widespread and profound educational anxiety. When parents perceive that their children face extremely high admission pressure or even "no hope of admission" in their home provinces, they will seek "shortcuts". Therefore, under this psychological context, "Gaokao migration" are regarded as an effective "release channel". Moreover, the herd mentality also plays a promoting role. The "successful" cases of relatives or peers around will have a strong imitation effect.

#### **4.3 Impacts Caused by "Gaokao migration"**

The phenomenon of "Gaokao migration" has negative impacts on the educational ecology, social equity, and individual development.

The loss of the core principle of educational equity has affected educational equity at two levels. One of that is the violation of procedural fairness. The original intention of the Gaokao system was to provide all candidates with a competitive platform based on scores, which was relatively fair. However, "Gaokao transfer" seriously violates the principle of procedural fairness of the exam, infringing upon the legitimate rights and interests of local candidates and frequently triggering social conflicts and public opinion incidents between "locals" and "transferees" (Li, 2018). Another is the distortion of substantive fairness. Educational equity not only includes formal equality of opportunities but also should focus on the fairness of results. The phenomenon of "Gaokao transfer" makes the distribution of higher education opportunities more closely related to family background and economic strength rather than the efforts and talents of students themselves. This is contrary to the fundamental purpose of socialist education in promoting social fairness.

Moreover, "Gaokao migration" also have negative impacts on the local educational ecology and social order. The sudden influx of a large number of "migrants" will greatly change the enrollment and academic advancement competition patterns of local high schools, reducing the opportunities for local students to advance. At the same time, it will also give rise to a gray industrial chain centered on "migrant processing" (such as intermediaries, fraud, etc.), disrupting the social management order, and even some people may challenge legal and moral boundaries. Meanwhile, the "migrant" candidates themselves also face many risks (such as the sense of loneliness caused by leaving their hometowns), and their academic performance will be affected by this. In recent years, policies targeting "exam migrants" have been dynamically changing in different regions and have become increasingly strict (Gong, 2016). If the policies suddenly change, it may cause them to be unable to return to their original hometowns or stay in the destination areas, and they will also become victims of policy games.

### **5. Limitations and Future Prospects**

This study, by constructing a multi-dimensional theoretical analysis framework, aims to reveal the complex causes and impacts of the "Gaokao migration" phenomenon. The limitations of this study stem from its methodological choices, theoretical perspectives, and even the formulation of the research questions themselves. The future prospects also arise from the reflection on these limitations.

The limitations of this study are mainly reflected in three aspects. Firstly, there is the prescriptiveness of the theoretical perspective and the boundary of explanatory power. This study selected institutionalism, capital theory, educational equity theory, and multi-center governance theory as the core analytical tools. Although these theoretical lenses are powerful, they also constitute a screening mechanism that makes researchers tend to see structural, macro and meso factors, while possibly filtering out those irrational, accidental or individual elements that cannot be encompassed by these

theories. Secondly, the static structural analysis is insufficient in grasping the dynamic evolution process. This study focused on analyzing the stable composition of the phenomenon at a certain time point, such as the defects of the system, the logic of capital, and the paradox of fairness. However, "Gaokao migration" itself is a constantly flowing, evolving and adapting "living" system. So there is a lack of diachronic tracking and presentation of the "life history" of this phenomenon itself. Finally, there is the constructed nature of the research data and the gap between "truth" and "reality". All the secondary literature relied on in this study is a reproduction of the social fact of "Gaokao migration" within a specific narrative framework, academic paradigm and social context. What the study analyzes is actually the "texts" and "discourses" about "Gaokao migration", rather than the phenomenon itself. This gap from the true state of the "life world" is one of the most fundamental limitations of all literature-based theoretical research.

Given these limitations, future research can break away from the existing framework and deepen and expand in the following three directions in order to gain a more comprehensive, vivid and profound understanding of the "Gaokao migration" phenomenon. The first is to conduct longitudinal research on the policy process and phenomenon evolution. Future research should adopt longitudinal tracking (Ludlow et al., 2011) and process tracking methods to depict the flow picture of the "Gaokao migration" phenomenon. The second is to initiate cross-national and cross-regional comparative studies. "Gaokao migration" is essentially a "voting with feet" against regional educational injustice, and there are many similar cases worldwide. Future research can conduct comparative studies of domestic regions and international experiences. The third is to conduct research on policy evaluation and implementation networks. To ensure the implementation of governance suggestions, future research should conduct policy evaluation and implementation studies, analyzing the implementation effect, deviation from goals, and unintended consequences.

## 6. Conclusion

"Gaokao migration" is a product of China's specific education system and the current stage of social development. Its essence is a reflection of the intense social competition caused by the scarcity of high-quality higher education resources and the imbalance in their distribution. This article adopts the qualitative case study method based on secondary literature to sort out and analyze the typical cases and theoretical viewpoints in the existing academic achievements. It constructs an explanatory framework for its causes from three dimensions: policy systems, social economy, and cultural psychology. It also analyzed its impact on the procedural and substantive aspects of educational equity, including its influence in the local social ecology and individual immigration, providing theoretical suggestions for this complex issue of educational governance. Additionally, its limitations also pointed out the direction for future research, such as conducting in-depth qualitative interviews to track the decision-making process of immigrant families. In the future, researchers can achieve a more comprehensive, dynamic and in-depth understanding of the "Gaokao migration" phenomenon.

This study holds that the reform and implementation of a multi-faceted collaborative governance model is the fundamental solution to the problem of "Gaokao migration". In the short term, strict management of household registration and student records, strengthening regional cooperation, and cracking down on the gray industry chain can effectively prevent the disorderly expansion of "Gaokao migration". In the long term, in order to completely eliminate the utilitarian impulse of "Gaokao migration", we must rely on top-level national planning and firm determination, optimize the spatial layout of higher education resources, gradually narrow the gap in student admission and enrollment among regions, and deepen the comprehensive reform of the Gaokao. Maintaining the fairness, authority and scientificity of the Gaokao system is the necessary path to make education return to its essence, namely

to return to the cultivation and development of human beings. Only in this way can each student have fair opportunities and strive and create a beautiful future based on their own talents, efforts and personality.

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