


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Administrative Burdens in Chinese Public Services: A Case of Selective Affinity

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Abstract

The non-take-up of public services has the potential to undermine civil rights and deepen social inequality. Looking at the case of the Youth Community College Programme in China, an innovation in governance to facilitate community integration of the migrant population by providing free education, this study finds that the targeted disadvantaged groups are systematically excluded due to the disproportionate imposition of various administrative burdens on them. We propose that an interaction mechanism – which we term “selective affinity” – between the policy process and individuals’ human capital leads to this unintended outcome. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the causal mechanisms underlying vulnerable people’s non-take-up of public services, while highlighting an example of dysfunctional state–society interaction and a mechanism for the reproduction of social inequality under authoritarianism in China.

摘要

未接受公共服务可能会损害公民权利，扩大社会不平等。本文研究了中国的一个青年社区学院项目：它本是一项治理创新的尝试，冀通过提供免费教育来促进外来人口的社区融合，但由于各种管理负担过重，作为此项公共服务目标的弱势群体却被系统地排除在服务之外。本文提出，这是由于政策过程和个人人力资本之间的“选择性亲和”互动机制导致了这个非意图性的结果。此研究有助于深化解弱弱势群体未接受公共服务的因果机制，同时凸显了“国家-社会”互动的一种失调机制，以及中国威权主义体制下社会不平等的一种再生产机制。

Keywords: administrative burden; non-take-up of public services; migrants; selective affinity; inequality; China

关键词: 管理负担; 未接受公共服务; 外来工; 选择性亲和; 不平等; 中国

The provision of public services is beneficial for the protection of citizens’ rights and the promotion of national prosperity,¹ but may also worsen social inequalities.² The experience of China since reform and opening up is one potential demonstration of this dual impact: on the one hand, the country has achieved rapid economic development and improved the quantity and quality of public services; on the other hand, social inequalities have been increasing.³ The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has recognized this; in a report to the 19th National Congress in 2017 it was stated that

1 Smith 1977.

2 Sen 2000.

3 Premier Li Keqiang mentioned at the closing press conference of the Third Session of the 13th National People’s Congress on 28 May 2020 that “China is a developing country with a large population, and our per capita annual income is 30,000 yuan, but 600 million people earn only 1,000 yuan a month.” “Li Keqiang: Zhongguo you 6 yi meiyue shouru 1000 yuan yiqing guohou minsheng weiyao” (Li Keqiang: there are 600 million people in China with a monthly income of 1,000 yuan. After the epidemic, people’s livelihood is the most important thing), *House.china.com.cn*, 30 May 2020, <http://house.china.com.cn/1653088.htm>. Accessed 23 August 2021. By comparison, the average monthly wage income (before taxes) in Z City in 2020 was 6,036.81 yuan, based on data compiled by Xinchou (<https://www.xinchou.com>).

“socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era, and the main contradiction of society has transformed into the contradiction between the people’s growing need for a better life and unbalanced and insufficient development.”⁴ Is the widening of social inequality associated with active government provision of public services in China? This study examines one local government programme that tried to innovate in governance by bypassing the household registration (*hukou* 戶籍) system to counter institutional discrimination against migrants in the hope of enhancing social equality and harmony by providing them with free and equitable community education. We find, however, that the actual outcomes of the policy deviated from the goals, as those who took up the service were mainly better educated local *hukou* holders, while less educated migrant groups were significantly excluded. A public policy aimed at improving social integration through reducing educational inequality ironically widened the inequality between locals and migrants.

Existing studies of the non-take-up of public services in China have examined the causes mainly from the perspectives of formal institutions, such as the *hukou* system, and culture, for example, anti-migrant stigma and discrimination,⁵ but much less so from the perspective of public administration.⁶ In recent years, academics have paid increasing attention to “administrative burden” to explain the non-take-up of public services, a factor behind increasing inequality. These studies argue that administrative burdens are both consequential and distributive.⁷ They affect the effectiveness of public services⁸ and impact the exercising of “basic citizenship rights”;⁹ meanwhile, they affect some groups, who usually are the vulnerable, more than others, and in so doing they “often reinforce existing inequalities.”¹⁰ Based on this theoretical perspective, this paper proposes an interaction mechanism – which we term “selective affinity” – between the policy process and individuals’ human capital that leads unintendedly to disproportionately heavy administrative burdens on the disadvantaged, to explain their non-take-up of public services, thereby contributing to growing social inequality.

Literature Review: Non-take-up of Public Services from the Administrative Burden Perspective

On the issue of non-take-up of public services, the focus of academic approaches has undergone a process of change: moving from institutionalism to the policy process, and then to individuals’ experiences.

In the literature on public policy “targeting” specific groups in society, most studies focus on the governmental and individual behaviours involved in the policy process from the perspective of organisational behaviour.¹¹ However, these studies have difficulties explaining why the outcomes in the provision of a particular public service vary greatly under the same institutions and policies.¹² Janet Currie offered the following critique: “Historically, economists have paid much attention to rules about eligibility and virtually no attention to how these rules are enforced or made known to participants.”¹³ Therefore, factors outside of institutions must be included. Looking at the case of poverty alleviation programmes, Kanbur, Keen and Tuomala note that “once the potential

4 “Zhengque bawo woguo shehui zhuyao maodun de bianhua” (Correctly grasping the changes in the principal contradiction in China’s society), *CPCnews.cn*, 27 November 2017, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2017/1127/c40531-29668491.html>. Accessed 26 February 2021.

5 Liu 2005; Zhou and Zhu 2019; Qi 2019.

6 Soss 2014; Frederickson 2015; Gooden 2015.

7 Herd and Moynihan 2018.

8 Heinrich and Brill 2015.

9 Moynihan and Herd 2010.

10 Chudnovsky and Peeters 2021.

11 Van Oorschot 1995; Van de Walle 1998.

12 Besley and Coate 1992; Currie and Gahvari 2008.

13 Currie 2004, 27.

incentive effects of such programs are recognized, previous discussions of optimal targeting [will] require revision.”¹⁴

In addition to focusing on formal institutions and policies, scholars have also looked at policy processes and contexts to find the causes of non-take-up. For example, numerous studies in welfare economics have shown that there is a great deal of evidence that potential recipients of in-kind transfers are sensitive to application costs.¹⁵ Political science is also concerned with similar issues. Indeed, academic debates about the dysfunctionality of government programmes and regulations have a long tradition in political science.¹⁶ Scholars of public administration have also noticed that public policy might best be understood at the “street level.”¹⁷ In other words, public policy and services are not entirely self-executing, but depend on a process of implementation and clients’ cooperation for their production, as such they constitute “extra-legal” outcomes.¹⁸ Successful take-up of social programmes requires a match between the “institutional capacity to delivery rights and services and people’s capacity to benefit from those rights and services.”¹⁹ In other words, as the outcome of a public service, (non-)take-up has a dual attribute: It is not only a phenomenon of administrative organisation, but also a social phenomenon; not only a process of the implementation of public policy and the result of its action on society, but also a process of individual experience and the responses of society to the state and its policies. Therefore, we need to adopt a perspective that combines the policy process and government–citizen interaction.

In recent years, based on the citizen-centred perspective, scholars have used the administrative burden framework to examine the factors that hinder individuals’ access to public services in their interactions with the state. This not only links the input side and output side of public services but also effectively reveals the interrelationship of these elements in the policy process as they affect non-take-up. Administrative burden has been defined as “an individual’s experience of policy implementation as onerous”²⁰ and is clarified as encompassing three types of costs (learning, compliance and psychological) involved in accessing public services.²¹ This conceptualizes the nature of the burdens that citizens experience in their interaction with government and offers a basis for further empirical studies. Thus it differs from the rules, “pointing instead to the costs that individuals experience in their interactions with the state.”²² It also illustrates “the important political and social implications of administrative burden associated with government–individual interactions.”²³ The above definition of the administrative burden has two important contributions:²⁴ First, it distinguishes between organisational practices and the experiences of individuals. Second, the definition acknowledges differences in the presence of administrative burdens among individuals and directs us to factors that can explain these differences. Administrative burden is therefore an important part of governance as it relates to barriers to clients’ access to services, the exercising of citizens’ rights and the realization of citizenship, democracy and social equality.²⁵ Furthermore, it can further shape clients’ “orientations towards government institutions and policies”²⁶ as well as their willingness to

14 Kanbur, Keen and Tuomala 1994, 192.

15 Bettinger *et al.* 2012; Alatas *et al.* 2016.

16 Migdal 1988; 2001; Scott 1998.

17 Lipsky 2010.

18 Soss 1999; Mettler and Soss 2004; Brodtkin and Majmundar 2010.

19 De Jong and Rizvi 2009, 4.

20 Burden *et al.* 2012, 742.

21 For definitions of these three concepts, see Moynihan, Herd and Harvey 2015; Herd and Moynihan 2018, Ch. 1.

22 Moynihan and Soss 2014.

23 Heinrich 2016, 403.

24 Christensen *et al.* 2020, 128.

25 Moynihan and Herd 2010, 654.

26 Mettler and Soss 2004, 62.

participate and their trust in government.²⁷ For the government, a focus on administrative burdens also helps to better understand the sources of administrative costs.²⁸

Empirical studies of administrative burden have mainly focused on its causes in specific contexts, which are clarified as three types of interactions, intra-organisational, citizen–state and citizen–citizen.²⁹ These explanatory factors come from two main sources, namely organisational factors (formally prescribed and informally created) and extra-governmental, or citizen, factors.

Organisational factors are elements and practices embedded in policy implementation. Peeters constructs a comprehensive framework that divides the organisational origins of administrative burden into four ideal types, based on two dimensions: (in)formality and (un)intentionality. Thus, administrative burdens can be either deliberate or unintended, or intentional and unintentional, and can be designed as formal structures or emerge from organisational practices, which covers many different streams of research.³⁰

Extra-governmental or citizen factors refer to the contextual factors of the policy process and the characteristics of services' clients, which exist prior to state–citizen interaction³¹ and are respectively conceptualised as culture³² and human capital.³³ Human capital influences how clients engage with administrative processes.³⁴ Variation in human capital helps to explain clients' different responses to the same programmes,³⁵ or “disparities in citizen outcomes such as take-up of services and benefits, civil engagement and feelings of political efficacy.”³⁶ Culture may frame or influence the agenda, process and output of social policy,³⁷ which may exist at the macroscopic and microscopic levels. Macro-level research reveals that public “deservingness” criteria,³⁸ popular preferences³⁹ and partisan political ideologies⁴⁰ can underpin perceptions of a “just distribution of burdens.”⁴¹ Micro-level research reveals that, in policy design, the mismatch between administratively defined need and different social perceptions of need,⁴² and in policy implementation, the habitual attitudes and practices of street-level bureaucrats and of the social to specific groups of clients, which are manifested as stigmas⁴³ and stereotypes,⁴⁴ could give rise to enormous costs involved in accessing services. On the side of service clients, their knowledge or perceptions of policy or government, such as citizen

27 Herd and Moynihan 2018, 2.

28 Peeters 2020.

29 Heinrich 2016; Nisar 2017.

30 Aspects of administrative burden are explored in different streams of research, such as studies of programme take-up, red tape, street-level bureaucracy, policy feedback, social policy, etc. See Moynihan, Herd and Harvey 2015; Herd and Moynihan 2018; Peeters 2020.

31 Christensen et al. 2020; Chudnovsky and Peeters 2021.

32 For a literature review, see Van Oorschot 2006.

33 There are many different conceptions of extra-governmental and citizen factors in administrative burden studies, such as claimant capacity (Brodtkin and Majmundar 2010) and social factors (Nisar 2017). There is evidence that administrative burden differentially impacts by class, race and gender in social programs (Aizer 2003; Heckman and Smith 2004; Brodtkin and Majmundar 2010), gender structure (in the case of female-headed households in poverty-reduction programmes; Buvinić and Gupta 1997), social networks (Bertrand, Luttmer and Mullainathan 2000), immigration (Fix, Passel and Sucher 2003), education (Hoxby and Avery 2012) and information technology (Widlak and Peeters 2020). Here, we continue in the vein of Christensen et al. (2020) and Herd and Moynihan (2018) by using human capital for the collective term.

34 Christensen et al. 2020.

35 Brodtkin and Majmundar 2010; Nisar 2017.

36 Christensen et al. 2020, 129.

37 Schneider and Ingram 1993; Van Oorschot 2006.

38 Van Oorschot 2000; 2006; Laenen, Rossetti and Van Oorschot 2019.

39 Reeskens and Van Oorschot 2013.

40 Moynihan, Herd and Harvey 2015; Herd and Moynihan 2018; Baekgaard, Moynihan and Kjærgaard Thomsen 2021.

41 Roosma, Van Oorschot and Gelissen 2016; Van Oorschot et al. 2017; Christensen et al. 2020.

42 Schneider and Ingram 1993; Van Oorschot 1995.

43 Van Oorschot 1995; Lipsky 2010; Nisar 2017; Li and Walder 2018.

44 Golding and Middleton 1982; Schneider and Ingram 1993.

trust,⁴⁵ policy feedback,⁴⁶ individual preferences,⁴⁷ cognitive resources⁴⁸ and so on, may impose considerable psychological costs to interacting with a service-providing agency.

In summary, existing research on the causes of administrative burden primarily focus on policy implementation and the characteristics of clients' human capital; "government–individual interaction" is primarily embodied as clients' passive "administrative encounter" in their specific context. Much less attention has been paid to the relations between these various factors. It is hardly convincing that the systemic exclusion of disadvantaged clients is due to various factors which are arbitrarily distributed in the various stages of the whole policy course. This paper explores a case where the government provided free community education, but disadvantaged groups were systematically excluded due to various administrative burdens imposed on them at different levels. We propose that the selective affinity mechanism, i.e. the interaction between the policy process and clients' human capital, leads unintendedly to this disproportionate administrative burden, preventing the disadvantaged from accessing the service.

Research Methodology

We adopted mixed methods of interview, participatory observation and questionnaire-based surveying to assess the outcomes of one public service, the Youth Community College Programme (YCCP) in Z City, China. We first communicated with the local governments of each of the 24 towns in the city three times beginning in January 2015, and then conducted interviews with students and teachers from eight towns' YCCP colleges to learn more about their courses, management, faculty recruitment and the process of registration. To find the experiential reality of potential clients, we conducted in-depth interviews with youths who were aware of the programme and their eligibility but did not participate in the programme⁴⁹ and those who initially did not but later did join a YCCP course. Finally, we also learned from these latter interviewees about the reasons why their friends did not participate in the programme. The total number of people interviewed was about 50. From May 2015 to June 2016, we collected two sets of questionnaire data from some students and teachers of the programme. The questionnaires were designed to gain basic background information about the respondents, their course participation, and their evaluations of the courses. The survey was conducted through a proportional sampling method in each town, with a sample of eight towns and 39 courses (Table 1). We focused on young people living and working in Z City and aged between 18 and 40, including individuals from both the local and migrant populations. We distributed 1,200 questionnaires and 892 valid responses were collected, of which 434 were from students taking skills courses (approximately 48.7 per cent). The details of the survey participants' enrolment in skills courses in each town are shown in Table 2.

The Case: Non-take-up of the YCCP

Public services in many Chinese cities are facing severe pressures. With the rapid development of the economy, many cities are seeing a huge wave of migrant workers, who even outnumber the local population in some cities. Conflicts between local and migrant populations have occurred, and Z City has experienced such problems. On 25 June 2012, a serious clash occurred between local and migrant residents in the city. In response to pressure for social stability, the Z City government introduced more public services for migrant residents, including the YCCP. In July 2012, the Youth

45 Ali and Altaf 2021.

46 Soss 1999; Mettler and Soss 2004; Moynihan and Herd 2010.

47 Reeskens and Van Oorschot 2013.

48 Christensen *et al.* 2020.

49 These were the people who attended course registration events but did not register.

Table 1. Summary of Different Types of Courses in Each Town's YCCP College, 2015–2016

Town	Course type				Total number of courses
	Skills	Arts	Lifestyle	Policy knowledge	
A	2	2	0	1	5
D	3	3	2	0	8
E	0	3	1	0	4
F	3	2	1	1	7
G	1	1	1	0	3
H	0	0	0	1	1
I	2	0	1	0	3
J	2	1	0	0	3
K	0	1	0	0	1
M	1	0	1	0	2
N	1	0	1	0	2
Total	16	13	7	3	39

Source: The data in this table were collected and processed by the authors.

Table 2. Course Titles and Number of Students for Courses Surveyed by the Authors, 2015–2016

Town	Course title (number of students)
A	Basic make-up (34), Two new youth enrichment courses (30)
D	Advanced office software (30)
F	Youth affairs work (4)
G	Conversational English for lighting (25), Basic English for lighting (46), Basic physiotherapy/yoga (22)
I	Home education (30), English for daily life (29)
J	Opening an online shop (30), Practical Kumon and advanced writing (9), Emerging youth (27), Cantonese (27)
M	Taobao operations (36)
N	Make-up (2), English (29)

Source: The data in this table were collected and processed by the authors.

League Committee (YLC) in Z City started this project, which was reported on in *Z City Daily*.⁵⁰ The YCCP aimed to improve the access of disadvantaged groups to practical training and to facilitate the community integration of the migrant population by providing free education to them in a so-called “academy without walls.”⁵¹ Therefore, the students targeted by the YCCP were mainly migrants, especially those who came from rural areas with low levels of education and who were relatively disadvantaged in Z City.

Local governments attached great importance to the development and promotion of the YCCP and invested significant administrative and financial resources in it. The programme’s entry requirements, teaching facilities, teachers and curriculums were carefully designed to ensure the quality of the programme. The admission requirements were low so as to include most migrant workers: all

50 *Z City Daily*, 31 July 2017. Details of the specific article are available upon request.

51 *Ibid.*; *China Youth Daily*, 13 December 2017. Details of the specific article are available upon request.

people who were “living and working in Z City” and “between the ages of 18 and 40” were eligible for free admission.⁵² In terms of teaching facilities and teachers, they made full use of every town’s YLC facilities, as well as youth clubs (*qingshaonian gong* 青少年宫), teaching locations of the local radio and television university (*guangbo dianshi daxue* 广播电视大学) in 12 towns, and other facilities and their teachers, to ensure high-quality instruction. In terms of curriculums, in order to meet the needs of the students, they conducted two rounds of questionnaire surveys every semester. The first round was conducted in the preparation phase of the courses, targeting the youth from various organisations and enterprises in the towns and focusing on their educational interests and course preferences. The state newspaper *China Youth Daily* reported that the YLC in Town A conducted door-to-door questionnaire surveys,⁵³ while the YLC in Town B distributed many questionnaires on the streets.⁵⁴ They tried to ascertain the training needs of local youth, especially those of migrant workers. The next round of surveys took place at the end of the courses, focusing on students’ suggestions for programme improvement. In order to increase public awareness of the programme, local governments used a variety of publicity tools, such as organizing promotional events in local shopping malls and squares and posting information about the courses on online platforms such as the “Z City Youth” mobile app and WeChat.⁵⁵

Through the local governments’ considerable efforts, the programme was rapidly promoted and garnered favourable feedback from higher levels of government and active participation from local communities. *China Youth Daily* reported that YCCP courses in Towns A and B were almost always full.⁵⁶ *Z City Daily* summarized that during the three years that the YCCP college in Town D was in operation, the YLC invited 25 private-sector teachers and 14 public-sector teachers to offer more than 100 courses; nearly 20,000 students received free training; and more than 2,300 received diplomas.⁵⁷ In the schedule from March to August 2015, for example, a total of 155 courses were offered in 20 towns, covering skills, arts, life and policy knowledge (Table 3). Thanks to these efforts, the YCCP in Z City also won a series of honorary titles, such as a “Provincial Law and Order Cultural Construction Demonstration Zone,” “Provincial Community Education Experimental Zone,” “Social Management Innovation Project” and “Characteristic Cultivation Project in 2012.” Overall, in 2015, the YCCP had achieved full coverage of the 24 towns in Z City, offering 92 courses and enrolling 3,176 students. In 2016, the programme expanded to offer 176 courses to 5,280 students. Because of its value as a public service model, the programme also attracted numerous study tours from other provinces and even from the central government.

However, our survey found that this public service did not fulfil the local governments’ goal as well as it appeared initially. Using descriptive statistics from the two surveys (Table 4), we examined education and *hukou* differences between the overall City Z population and the YCCP students in 2015 (Table 5). In terms of education level, the proportions of the migrant population (*liudong renkou* 流动人口, temporary/mobile residents without local *hukou*) and local population (*changzhu renkou* 常住人口, permanent residents with or without local *hukou*), with tertiary education were 7.73 per cent and 14.10 per cent, respectively, in Z City; in stark contrast, this proportion among YCCP students was far higher, at 63.45 per cent, indicating that the students belonged to a relatively advantaged group in terms of education level. In terms of urban and rural *hukou* status, the proportions of the migrant and local populations in the city with urban *hukou* status were 9.17 per cent and 88.12 per cent, respectively; however, the proportion of the programme students with urban *hukou* status was 41.4 per cent, much higher than that of the overall migrant population

52 *China Youth Daily*, 13 December 2017.

53 *China Youth Daily*, 24 December 2012.

54 *China Youth Daily*, 13 December 2017. Details of the specific article are available upon request.

55 La Porte, Demchak and de Jong (2002) and Dunleavy *et al.* (2006) have identified the use of information technology as a useful tool to reduce administrative burdens, speed up service delivery and increase clients’ participation.

56 *China Youth Daily*, 24 December 2012; *China Youth Daily*, 13 December 2017.

57 *Z City Daily*, 31 March 2014.

Table 3. Number of Courses Offered by the YCCP in the First Half of 2015

Town	Course type				Total number of courses
	Skills	Arts	Lifestyle	Policy knowledge	
A	2	3	6	0	11
B	1	0	2	0	3
C	0	4	0	0	4
D	4	14	1	0	19
E	0	5	1	0	6
F	8	3	2	2	15
G	1	6	3	0	10
H	1	2	3	1	7
I	6	3	2	0	11
J	2	1	4	0	7
K	0	3	0	0	3
L	0	0	2	0	2
M	2	1	2	0	5
N	8	2	1	0	11
O	2	0	1	0	3
P	2	2	1	0	5
Q	2	7	5	3	17
R	3	3	1	0	7
S	3	2	0	0	5
T	0	2	1	1	4
Total	47	63	38	7	155

Source: The data in this table were collected and processed by the authors.

in Z City, indicating that the students belonged to an advantaged group in terms of *hukou* status as well. In terms of local household registration, at the city-wide level the proportions of locally registered households among the migrant and local populations were 21.2 per cent and 43.34 per cent, respectively; in contrast, the proportion of locally registered households among the YCCP students was 42.48 per cent, which was obviously higher than that among the migrant residents but very close to that among the local population. This further indicates that the YCCP students belonged to a relatively advantaged group in terms of local *hukou* status. Furthermore, some other indicators in Table 4, such as the students' income, also show that relatively higher-income students were the majority, while the main policy target, the low-income residents, were the minority in the programme.

In summary, these educational and social background indicators show that the YCCP students belonged to a relatively advantaged group in Z City's overall population. The programme had been designed to target the disadvantaged to improve their skills and capabilities, and, as a result, promote their deeper integration with local communities; however, the disadvantaged had a much lower level of access to the programme. This issue was also observed by some local governments. As one CYL supervisor noted in an interview with the authors, "We have also gradually found that those who came to the college were mainly those with good qualifications and [academic]

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of the Survey Results

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	219	24.97%
Female	658	75.03%
Total	877	100%
Native/home province		
Inside province	556	62.82%
Outside province	329	37.18%
Total	885	100%
Hukou status		
Urban <i>hukou</i>	369	42.08%
Rural <i>hukou</i>	508	57.92%
Total	877	100%
Education level		
Junior middle school or below	56	6.31%
Vocational secondary school	112	12.61%
Vocational school	20	2.25%
Senior middle school	134	15.09%
Junior college	355	39.98%
Bachelor's degree or above	211	23.76%
Total	888	100%
Type of job		
Regular worker (full-time, salaried)	110	13.91%
Non-regular worker	681	86.09%
Total	791	100%
Marital status		
Married	481	55.03%
Unmarried	393	44.97%
Total	874	100%
Children		
Having child	435	50.88%
No child	420	49.12%
Total	855	100%
Housing status		
Purchased	424	58.64%
Employer's dormitory	99	13.69%
Rented	170	23.51%
Borrowed	30	4.15%

(Continued)

Table 4. (Continued.)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Total	723	100%
Monthly income		
No income	36	4.18%
Less than 1,500 yuan	12	1.39%
1,500 to 3,000 yuan	226	26.25%
3,000 to 5,000 yuan	408	47.39%
5,000 to 10,000 yuan	163	18.93%
10,000 yuan or more	16	1.86%
Total	861	100%
Living period in Z City		
1 year or below	48	5.73%
1 to 3 years	75	8.95%
3 to 5 years	90	10.74%
5 to 10 years	169	20.17%
More than 10 years	456	54.42%
Total	838	100%

Source: The data in this table were collected and processed by the authors.

Table 5. Differences between YCCP Students, Locals and Migrants in Z City, 2015

Population	Proportion with junior college education or above	Proportion with urban <i>hukou</i>	Proportion with local household registration
YCCP students	63.45%	41.4%	42.48%
Locals (permanent residents)	14.10%	88.12%	43.34%
Migrants (temporary/mobile residents)	7.73%	9.17%	21.2%

Source: The data on YCCP students were collected and processed by the authors; the data on the resident and migrant populations of Z City in 2015 were collected from the *Statistical Yearbook of Z City 2015* and the *Bulletin of Z City: National Economy and Social Development 2015* (issued by the Bureau of Statistics of Z City), as well as *Basic Characteristic Data on the Migrant Population in China: G Province* (issued by the National Science and Technology Infrastructure and National Earth System Science Data Sharing Infrastructure). Further details are available upon request.

foundations, and much fewer of those with low qualifications and skills enrolled in the programme. We have done a lot, but we have not been able to solve this problem.”⁵⁸ Evidently, it is necessary to determine why the non-take-up of the YCCP was so severe among the disadvantaged in Z City.

Explaining the Non-take-up of the YCCP: The Selective Affinity Mechanism

The above statistical results suggest that migrant populations were systematically excluded from the YCCP. According to the typology of administrative burden, we find that three types of administrative burden, participation cost, learning cost and psychological cost, exist simultaneously in the YCCP and at different levels: policy content and individual perceptions.

58 Interview with a CYL supervisor, Z City, September 2017.

Participation Costs and Learning Costs: Hidden Thresholds in Policy Content

“Organizational practices (both formally prescribed and informally created) are complicated, confusing, or cumbersome, they can add hidden costs to claiming, in some cases raising costs beyond the capacity of individuals to ‘pay’.”⁵⁹ Although the target population of the YCCP was migrant workers, it is clear from its specific policy content that there were some hidden thresholds which induced participation and learning costs for migrant workers. We find four thresholds in the policy content.

First, in terms of the timing of courses, the courses were offered at times convenient for those with standard working hours. This schedule made it difficult for migrant workers, who usually had irregular working hours, to attend the courses, which were usually scheduled on weekday evenings and weekends.⁶⁰ As one interviewee noted, “The colleges have strict attendance requirements, but our work time is often in conflict with the class time, discouraging many of us from enrolling.”⁶¹

Second, in terms of course locations, the colleges operated in local town centres, in institutions such as youth clubs, sports and recreational centres, teaching locations of the radio and television university and government offices. These locations were suitable for those living close to the town centre, who are usually local residents, while it was difficult for young migrant workers living in remote districts to attend. The latter often live in dormitories near factories and in rural rented accommodation because they cannot afford housing near to the town centre. As some scholars have mentioned, time and commuting distance can be heavy compliance costs for the disadvantaged.⁶² As one interviewee noted, “We live in remote areas and the transportation is not convenient, so when we go home after school at night, we don’t have buses to take. Many of us give up this free education opportunity for this reason.”⁶³

Third, in terms of the course contents, the programme focused on arts, lifestyle (e.g. wine-tasting, yoga) and skills classes. In order to attract attention, they also incorporated various fashionable elements, including wine-tasting (Town E), baking (Town F), calligraphy and painting (Town G), Wing Chun (a school of martial arts) (Town H), photography (Town A) and yoga classes (offered in almost every town). These classes were meant to enrich students’ cultural lives, but they were usually attended by people with higher incomes and education, certain life pursuits and more leisure time. The contents of these courses were not well suited to the needs of most migrant workers. The spare time of most migrant workers is basically spent in the same way, “either work an extra job or rest at home in one’s free time,” and they generally did not have interest in, or the requirements for, enrolment.⁶⁴

Fourth, in terms of the policy benefits, the courses were linked to the “points for local household registration” policy. By completing a course, students could obtain four points (up to a maximum of five courses, or 20 points in total), which was equivalent to the points earned by a personal investment of 400,000 yuan, payment of income tax of 4,000 yuan within five years or 100 hours of voluntary community service. By accumulating enough points, the students could apply for local *hukou* status, access to social welfare benefits (e.g. public school enrolment for their children) and even designation as “urgently needed talents for economic and social development in the town.” However, most people who wanted to take advantage of this policy to apply for local *hukou* status already had stable jobs and income. They hoped to earn enough points for local household registration because they had the financial capacity to live in the city permanently. Migrant

59 Brodtkin and Majmudar 2010, 827.

60 “Zhongguo jixie gongren: sanbandao, liushuixian, qing zunzhong jishu, shandai weihua (Chinese mechanical workers: three shifts, assembly line, no status, please respect technology and be kind to the future), QQ, 20 January 2021, <https://xw.qq.com/amphtml/20210120A0D5KR00>. Accessed 1 January 2022.

61 Interview with a citizen of Town H, Z City, February 2015.

62 Evans and Schamberg 2009.

63 Interview with a student in Town B, Z City, February 2015.

64 Interview with a student in Town J, Z City, February 2015.

workers were less attracted by this benefit because of their unstable jobs, low incomes and other obstacles that made it difficult for them to accumulate enough points and live in the city for the long term, even if they earned some points through the YCCP. Two respondents explained this as follows: “We are not stable in our jobs, we don’t earn much, and we haven’t considered whether to apply for a local *hukou* yet”;⁶⁵ “We will work here for a few years, and maybe later, we will go somewhere else.”⁶⁶ As a result, these provisions, which appear to be designed to attract migrants to settle in the city, in fact serve as a marker of identity distinction, because it is the advantaged who find the policy more applicable, not the disadvantaged. Thus, for most migrant workers, to whom these provisions are not really applicable, these are implicit thresholds that increase their learning costs, hindering their participation.

In summary, the four elements mentioned above are different types of administrative burden. Specifically, time and commuting distance are compliance costs and course contents and policy benefits are learning costs, which all make the “bite” of administrative burden potentially bigger,⁶⁷ and shape the motivation of migrant residents to non-participation.

Psychological Costs: The Human Capital Perspective

The demand-side origins of burdens, i.e. citizens’ experiences, expectations and resources, can also profoundly affect their willingness and capacity to engage with bureaucrats.⁶⁸ “The impact of burdens depends upon on how individuals construe the world, not on objective measures of costs and benefits. This construal is shaped by contextual factors that frame burdens and interact with individual psychological processes, including cognitive biases that may generate disproportionate response to burden. This basic insight explains why burdens that seem minor and defensible when designed by the administrator may exert dramatic effects when experienced by citizens.”⁶⁹ We sought to understand these individuals’ perceptions by interviewing those who were present at the YCCP registration site but did not register and by asking the participants why their colleagues or friends had not come.

First, perception mismatch in the service requirements plays an important role in their non-participation. Table 5 shows that those with a higher level of education were active participants, but those with a lower level of education, who were in more urgent need of continuing education, were excluded. Research on education finds that the effectiveness of education and training largely depends on both the programme provider and the students’ willingness to participate. In the case of the YCCP, advantaged groups were more able and willing to seize learning opportunities and achieve self-empowerment; by contrast, disadvantaged groups, despite having a greater need for education, were less able to do so and often rejected educational opportunities.⁷⁰ Furthermore, their limited academic experience actually weakened their willingness to study; as one respondent put it, describing non-up-take of an English-language course, “Colleagues who had no English foundation were afraid of being embarrassed.”⁷¹ This reflects that the disadvantaged feel different stimulations or pressures from the usual learning requirements based on their specific human capital. The theory of administrative burden takes such psychological costs as a cognitive bias; such biased risk and probability perceptions of a public service can make the disadvantaged feel that take-up of the service will be “onerous” and inhibits their willingness to do so.⁷²

65 Interview with a student in Town I, Z City, February 2015.

66 Interview with a student in Town H.

67 Heinrich 2016.

68 Ibid.

69 Moynihan, Herd and Harvey 2015, 46.

70 Billett 2000.

71 Interviews with some students in the English language course in Town N and the “Basic English for Lighting” course in Town G, Z City, February 2015.

72 Christensen et al. 2020.

Second, feeling alienated from a service programme can also be an important factor in non-take-up. In the case of the YCCP, although the courses could enrich one's personal hobbies, upgrade skills and improve quality of life, they were only adapted to the life goals of modern society. Weber was concerned with a similar phenomenon, arguing that those with traditional values were more addicted to the slower lifestyle to which they were accustomed.⁷³ It was difficult for them to respond actively to policies that embraced modern standards. Many migrant workers found recreational activities, such as playing electronic games, visiting friends and drinking, more attractive than education.

I used to love playing mahjong and played it every day after dinner...Now I have learned a lot through the YCCP, volunteered and served the community, and feel that my life has changed...it's meaningful...to meet more people, and it is also good for my business...But most of my migrant friends are from the old days, they won't come with me, they just think these are not interesting, and only playing mahjong is interesting.⁷⁴

They put learning on the relative back burner for the time being.

They are short of money...they are young now, and they are only interested in play, but a few years later, they will understand they have to do something and then they will want to know how to study.⁷⁵

When we asked those coming with their friends to the YCCP registration site why they did not sign up for the courses, they basically answered that they were not interested.⁷⁶ They presented a kind of "present orientation"; such an orientation affects people's willingness to expend effort to overcome costs and their tendency to overvalue the short term and hyperbolically discount long-term outcomes.⁷⁷ However, human capital exists prior to state–citizen interaction.⁷⁸ It is the result of the policy that the disadvantaged in Z City found the service inconvenient and unfriendly, and the provisions mismatched to their needs and preferences. Why could the policy not be specially arranged to adapt to their human capital, for example, by setting some triggers in the programmes for their interests, and highlighting English language courses tailored to those with no English experience?

Administrative burdens are constructed.⁷⁹ Policy affects participation through conveyed messages that imply "who belongs, whose interests are important, what kind of 'game' politics is, and whether one has a place at the table."⁸⁰ Taking into account the aforementioned implicit thresholds, it's not hard to understand the sense of alienation in the phrase "these are not for us."⁸¹ "For these people, the state is 'far away' – both geographically and metaphorically."⁸² These psychological costs indicate that the policy is mismatched to the needs of the disadvantaged and structure their disincentive to participate.

The Selective Affinity Mechanism of Administrative Burden Distribution

In the above analysis, we have identified the extra administrative burdens unintentionally imposed on the migrant residents that contributed to their significant exclusion from the YCCP. But why was

73 Weber 1992.

74 Interview with a student in Town H.

75 Interview with a student in Town D, Z City, February 2015.

76 Soss 1999.

77 Christensen *et al.* 2020.

78 *Ibid.*; Chudnovsky and Peeters 2021.

79 Herd and Moynihan 2018; Christensen *et al.* 2020; Peeters 2020.

80 Ingram, Schneider and DeLeon 2019, 100.

81 Interview with a young man who was at the registration site but did not register in Town I.

82 Chudnovsky and Peeters 2021, 12.

the policy not able to be designed or revised to adapt to the human capital of the disadvantaged, so that it would meet their needs better? We propose an interaction mechanism between the policy process and human capital, which we call “selective affinity,” to explain the case of the YCCP more comprehensively.

The selective affinity mechanism has been studied in both the natural and social sciences.⁸³ In chemistry, it refers to the difference in the ability of different substances to aggregate and repel each other. In social sciences, it refers to the association of different social factors. Max Weber used this term (*Wahlverwandtschaft*) to summarize the close relationship between Protestant beliefs and capitalism, and the different worldviews of individuals and the class interests behind them.⁸⁴ Zygmunt Bauman used the affinity between German capitalism and the rise of the Jewish people to explain the inevitability of the Holocaust.⁸⁵ Guillermo O’Donnell used the close relationship between bureaucratic authoritarianism and modernization to explain institutional change in South American countries.⁸⁶ Linda Weiss used this concept to reveal the strong connection between government-sponsored networks of government–business relationships and the US system as an important variable in explaining US technology development.⁸⁷ This paper applies this concept to define an interaction mechanism between policy design and human capital that gives rise to a disproportionate distribution of administrative burden among different groups, making seemingly neutral and fair public services actually more convenient for some groups and less accessible for others, and consequently, significantly preventing the latter from enjoying a given public service.

Selective affinity is an interaction mechanism in the policy process. On the one hand, the society conditions a government’s policy process. Specifically, clients’ human capital constrains the policy options available to government in terms of risks and costs. With a certain political economy and limited resources, policy design must make a choice among the available options. In terms of the risk consideration, the YCCP had to adhere to the principles of political expedience and public welfare, which meant that all course content must remain politically correct and must not be mixed with market elements, otherwise it would be “one vetoed.”⁸⁸ This put a lot of pressure on local governments to control the process, and they only chose the models of schooling that had high political credibility and were less difficult to regulate. For example, for YCCP courses, they chose sites in public institutions rather than sites in private businesses, sites close to the government rather than sites far from the government, sites within government units rather than flexible private training providers, teachers within the government system rather than those from the training market, etc. One leader of the YCCP said, “The course cycle is long and we cannot follow and monitor the whole process. Therefore, we must first choose credible and reliable providers.”⁸⁹ The head of the CYL in Town I said, “Those commercial training institutions are indeed more flexible [in course content, location, time, etc.], but our programme is government public welfare, so it is not allowed to charge fees. Commercial institutions would always try to add their own advertising and paid items to the training, which will create a lot of trouble for our management. Our own agencies

83 Elective affinity is a more popular term for this type of phenomenon in both the natural and social sciences. However, the concept of elective affinity in social sciences, such as in Weber’s works, is not always clearly defined. This paper follows Runciman’s (2005) suggestion to use selective affinity instead of elective affinity to emphasize mutual selection, in this case, the mutual selection by both the government and potential clients in the processes leading to (non-)take-up of public services.

84 Weber 1992; Bruun and Whimster 2012.

85 Bauman 1989.

86 O’Donnell 1973.

87 Weiss 2014, 16.

88 “One vetoed” means that the evaluation indicator is so crucial to the evaluation of a cadre or policy that as long as the established requirements are not met in this indicator, the whole evaluation will be disqualified no matter to what extent the other indicators are achieved.

89 Interview with a CYL supervisor.

generally do not mess around because they also suffer when things go wrong.”⁹⁰ In terms of the cost considerations, due to the lack of sufficient teaching space and teachers, local governments tried to reduce operational costs by borrowing resources and finding partners. Under the banner of a political mission, they used spaces and teachers belonging to vocational schools, cultural centres (*wenhua zhan* 文化站), art groups and sports schools at low prices (or even for free). Such government units and public schools are located in central areas of the city, not in remote suburbs, and community education in these locations could only be conducted after the regular work hours of these units. These can explain why all the 24 colleges share similar courses arrangements of time, location and partners, and also reflects the overriding principle of political economy that is their common concern.

On the other hand, the policy process (both policy design and implementation) shapes clients’ orientations and willingness to participate. “Bureaucracies are simply often required to differentiate among recipients. Confronted with more clients than can readily be accommodated street-level bureaucrats often choose (or skim off the top) those who seem most likely to succeed in terms of bureaucratic success criteria.”⁹¹ In the case of the YCCP, after identifying specific risk and cost scenarios, governments could only arrange the specifics according to the characteristics of these times and places to match the needs of the most likely participants. As mentioned earlier, their questionnaires, content innovations and programme promotions mostly reflected the needs and preferences of local residents or the middle class, which meanwhile created extra burdens for the disadvantaged. The interaction of the policy process and human capital takes place in the two stages, policy design and policy implementation, and the latter functions as a reinforcement for the former. Therefore, whoever has the kind of human capital that is more “affinitive” to the government’s underlying political economy is more likely to experience the public service in question as considerate and convenient and thus is more likely to join the programme, while others who are less affinitive to government’s requirements will feel that uptake of the service is more burdensome, and therefore, will be much less likely to participate.

This interaction mechanism is also constructed within China’s specific authoritarian system. “Administrative burden is a venue of politics, that is, the level of administrative burden placed on an individual, as well as the distribution of burden between the state and the individual, will often be a function of deliberate political choice rather than simply a product of historical accident or neglect.”⁹² Thus through it we are able to discover “a deeply engrained structure and behavioral pattern in public administration”⁹³ and the policy process. In China’s authoritarian governance structure, the government dominates the entire process of public service provision, and the overriding principle of political economy is to manage political risks and costs. When heterogeneous human capital shapes the political costs of different policy options, as in the case of the YCCP, bureaucracies’ first-choice option will be determined according to underlying political factors, and not according to the formally prescribed aims. In authoritarian states, when bureaucracies face political risk in the policy process, they tend to be more politicized than meritocratic,⁹⁴ “the primary orientation of bureaucrats is compliance with rules rather than their factual (or even intended) outcomes.”⁹⁵ The needs of the targeted population are pre-empted by political considerations, which is an example of goal displacement and biases the targeting of the service. Thus, the selective affinity mechanism reveals an interaction between the policy process and clients’ human capital that contributes to the disproportionate distribution of administrative burden in the context of China’s authoritarian political economy.

90 Ibid.

91 Lipsky 2010, 107; Brodtkin and Majmundar 2010.

92 Moynihan, Herd and Harvey 2015, 43.

93 Peeters 2020, 1.

94 Cornell and Lapuente 2014; Dasandi and Esteve 2017.

95 Peeters 2020, 16.

Conclusion and Limitations

This paper adopts the theoretical perspective of administrative burden to study the non-take-up of one public education programme in China. It has addressed the following research question: why were disadvantaged migrant residents of Z City, as the main targeted clients, significantly excluded from this public service? We argue that the mechanism of selective affinity leads to disproportionate administrative burden on the disadvantaged, and subsequently, the widening of existing inequalities. The contribution of this study may be seen in three respects.

First, the paper extends the understanding of the causes of non-take-up of public services and administrative burden on the disadvantaged. Previous studies have mainly discussed certain factors from the perspectives of policy content, implementation, cultural perceptions, behavioural context and so on; in contrast, selective affinity is an interaction mechanism in the policy process. And crucially, the influence of “vulnerableness” in this mechanism is quite different from previous studies. Previously, in explaining vulnerable groups’ non-take-up of public services, the concept of “vulnerableness” has been adopted as indicating social habitual attitudes towards certain populations,⁹⁶ or certain groups’ (in)effective opportunities to take-up policy programmes.⁹⁷ In this study, however, vulnerableness is represented as a kind of policy option for political cost and risk, which is constructed and traded-off under an authoritarian political economy. As such, how to take into account the human capital of vulnerable groups in the policy process is an important consideration in improving their take-up of public services.

Second, the paper reveals that within China’s authoritarian political economy there is goal displacement and a dysfunctional relationship between state and society. Existing theories tend to explain the existence of goal displacement in terms of the politics–bureaucracy interface, which mainly focuses on the problem of socio-economic development.⁹⁸ Specifically, it has been argued that in many developing states, the collusive relationship between bureaucracy and politics, which fosters patronage, clientelism and arbitrary management, impedes development policies.⁹⁹ Meanwhile, China adopts a collaborative model, as indicated by the close relationship between Chinese bureaucratic and political elites, together with the autonomy shared by a highly skilled and meritocratic bureaucracy, which is central to the effective use of industrial policy that leads to economic development.¹⁰⁰ However, the selective affinity mechanism proposed in this study reveals that even in this collaborative model, political considerations pre-empt policy goals due to the authoritarian political economy, which results in the dysfunction of social policy. From the point of view of state–society relations, it can be seen that authoritarian states cannot fully achieve the prescribed impacts on society, even when they use socially beneficial and desirable policy instruments, which does not come from the weakness of state capacity or social boycott, but from the process of state–society interaction under its authoritarian political economy.

Third, this mechanism sheds light on the issue of inequality reproduction and poverty governance in China. Previous research on inequality in China has focused on the impact of various formal institutions, such as the *hukou* system and discrimination against migrant workers. However, this case study reveals that even after local governments have removed these formal institutional constraints and attempted to provide non-discriminatory public services, the vulnerable were still significantly excluded from the public services, actually widening social inequalities. This raises the issue that when authoritarian governments try to promote national prosperity by aggressive provision of universal public services (e.g. healthcare, education, etc.), it might unintentionally enlarge

96 For example, stigma, stereotype, deservingness, etc. See notes 36–41 above.

97 For example, “bureaucratic disentanglement” (Lipsky 1984) and the capability approach, which is largely based on a series of studies by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, among others. For a literature review, see Robeyns 2005.

98 Hite and Cesarini 2004; Dasandi and Esteve 2017.

99 Evans 1992; Dasandi and Esteve 2017.

100 Johnson 1982; Wade 1990; Evans 1992; Leftwich 1995; Dasandi and Esteve 2017.

existing inequalities. Although through political mobilisation and political mandates, the Chinese government can specifically address the economic inequality of disadvantaged groups with programmes such as targeted poverty alleviation, it is also important to reduce the reproduction of inequality in ordinary public services.

This study has several limitations, which may provide directions for future research. First, the research methodology of this paper is the case study. Whether the selective affinity mechanism derived from the case of the YCCP has sufficient explanatory power should be tested by quantitative studies using larger samples within and across countries. Second, this study is only uses cross-sectional data, and lacks observation of whether the selective affinity has changed over a longer period of time. Is it possible that over time, these services can effectively cover the disadvantaged groups? If this indeed occurs, it must be done by adjusting policy design to match the human capital of disadvantaged clients, which the selective affinity mechanism has highlighted.

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