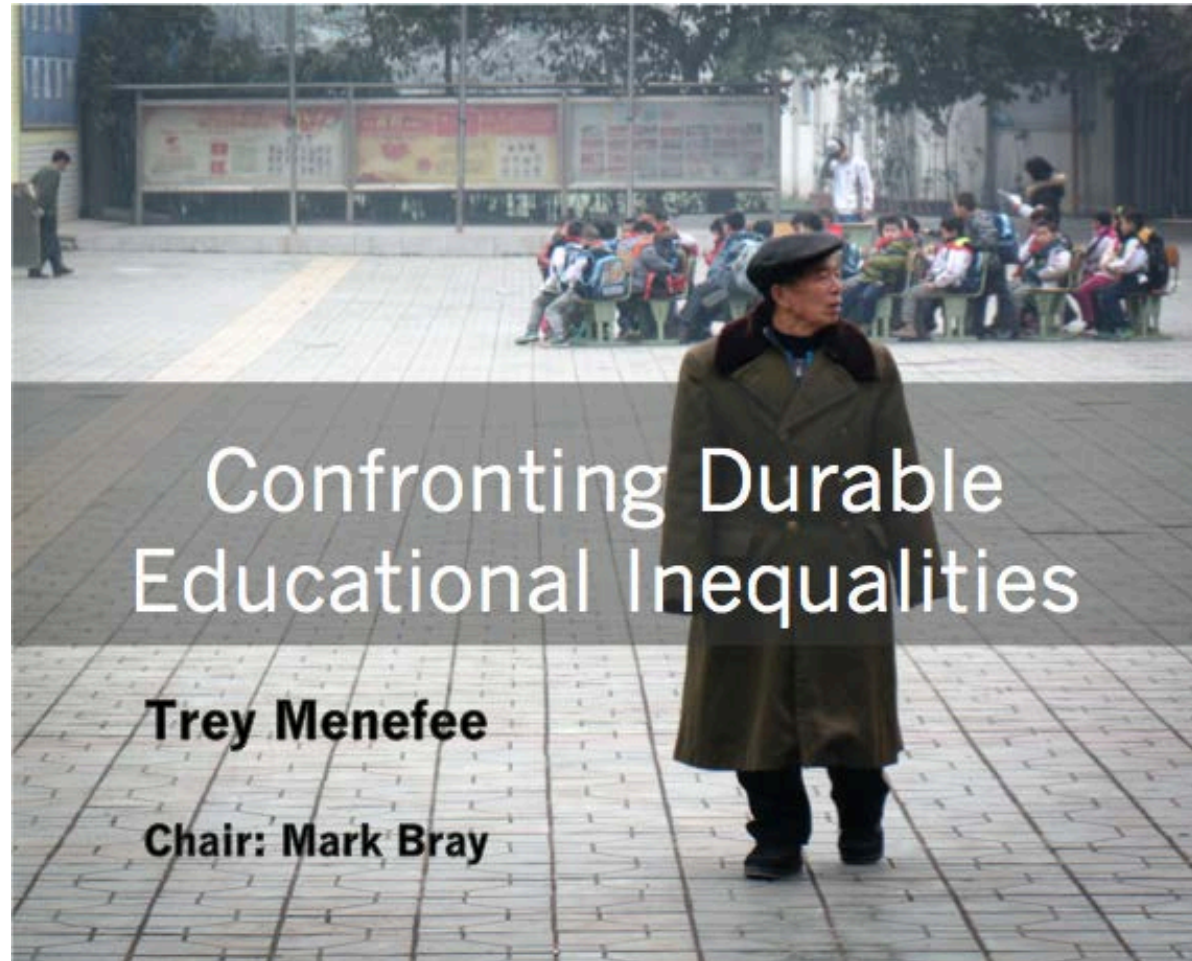


Trey Menefee

# Confronting Durable Educational Inequalities

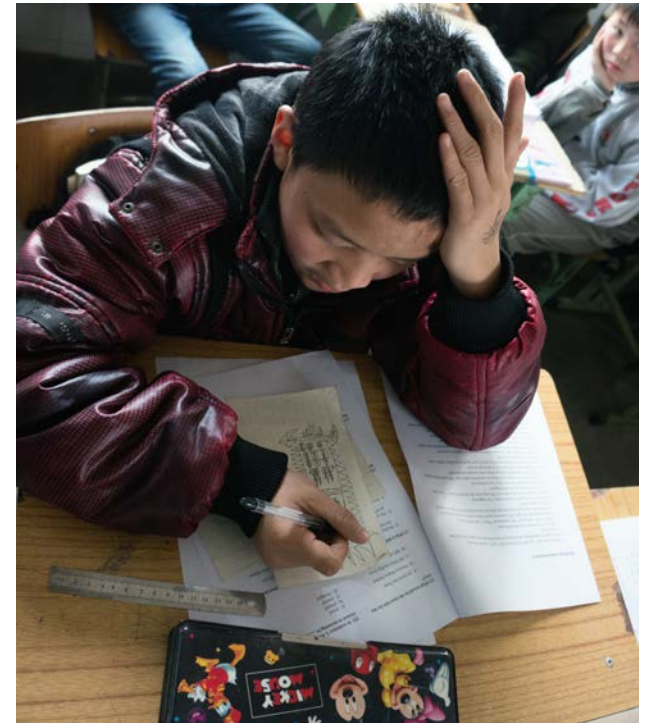
# This Talk

- I do not mean to dwell on the issue of migrant children in China
- Instead, I want to show that how the way we talk and think about educational inequality matters
- I want to call for a 'Perestroika' that allows for more critical realism.



# A Case Studied

- The children of migrants in Chengdu who have no *hukou* are not granted the right to a fee-free public education in the city
- Either they are 'left behind' (61m), go to a private *minban* school, or use money and connections to get access to public schools
  - Exclusion by *mafan*
- Most are excluded from an academic secondary education because of English test scores, which prevent them from going to university.
- An NGO I work with wants a 5% improvement in English scores, because that's what stakeholders want.



# Issues



Assessment showed their English levels are extremely low.

More than a third of them speak English at such a low level as to not even register on my assessment

Major attitude issues

Difficult home life

High teacher turnover rates, especially at worse schools

Probably a much higher dropout rate than administrators or teachers realized

Very large difference between *minban* schools than

- Some of these schools have an awful environment, some of them feel like public schools.

# Contexts



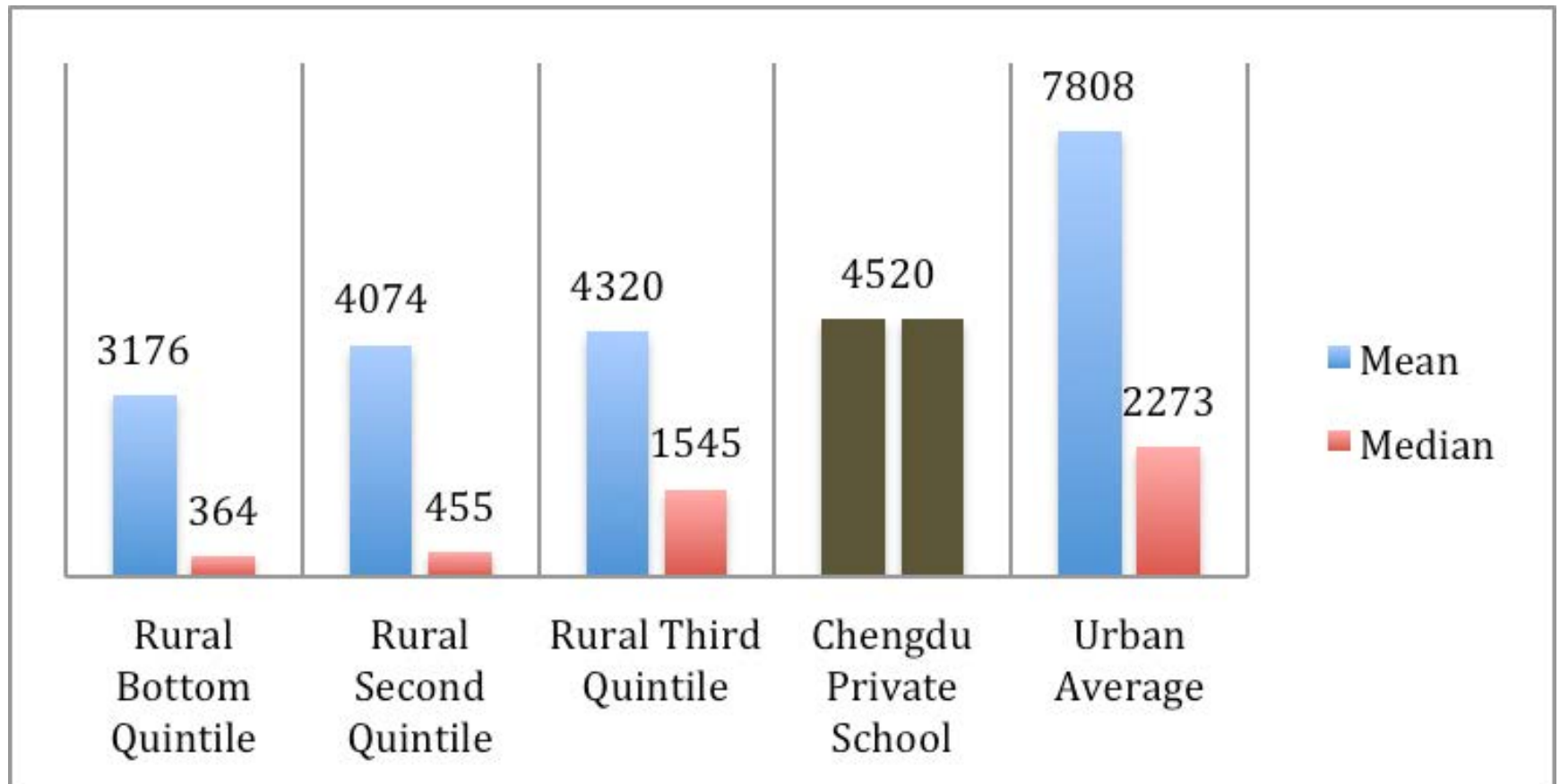
75% of children in China will not make it university.  
There is a lack of viable alternatives.

Disproportionate educational spending burden,  
particularly if they were to stay in their hometowns.

City government says they have no money to tackle  
this issue.

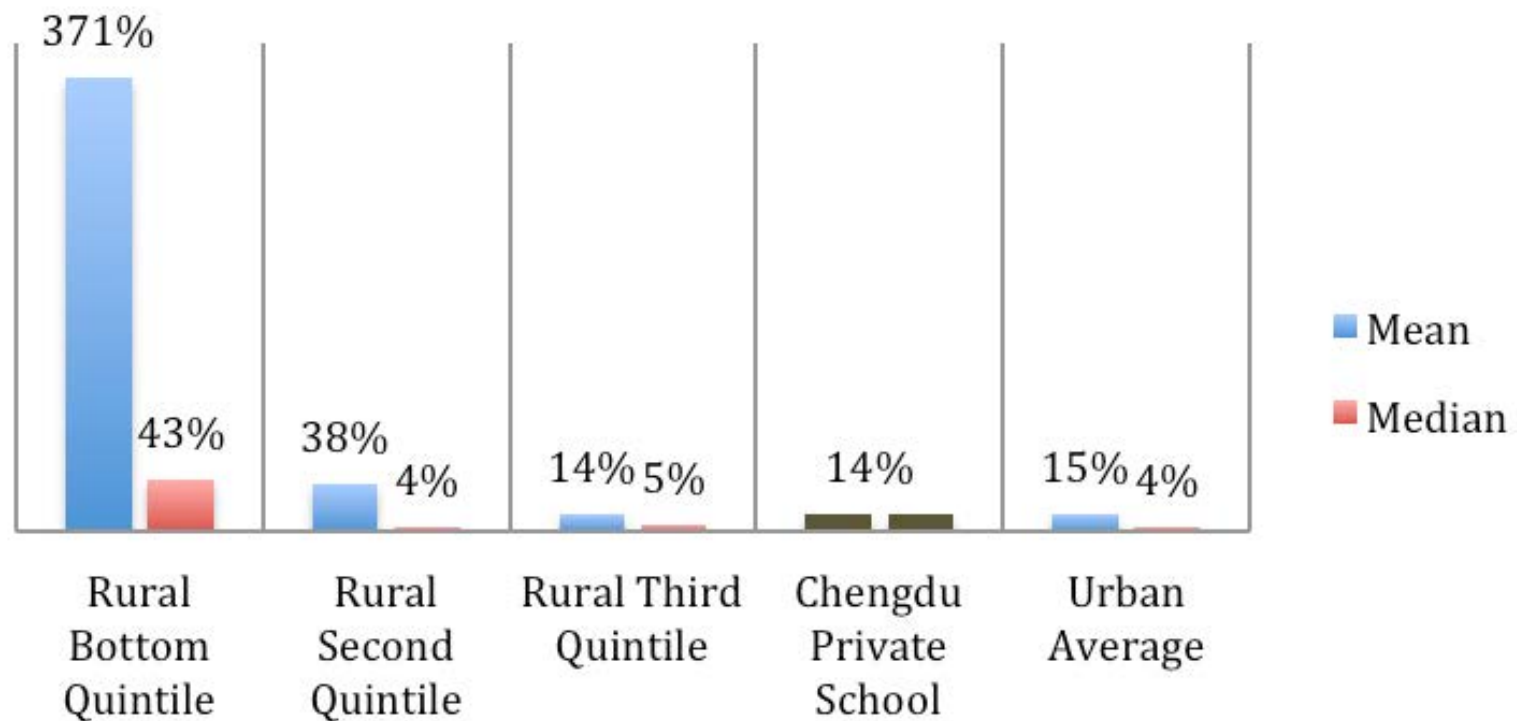
Governance through stupidity (see Graeber 2006)  
A refusal to do 'interpretative labor' (解释  
性劳动) rooted in structural violence

# Spending (Relative)



# Spending (Relative)

## Comparative Household Education Costs in China



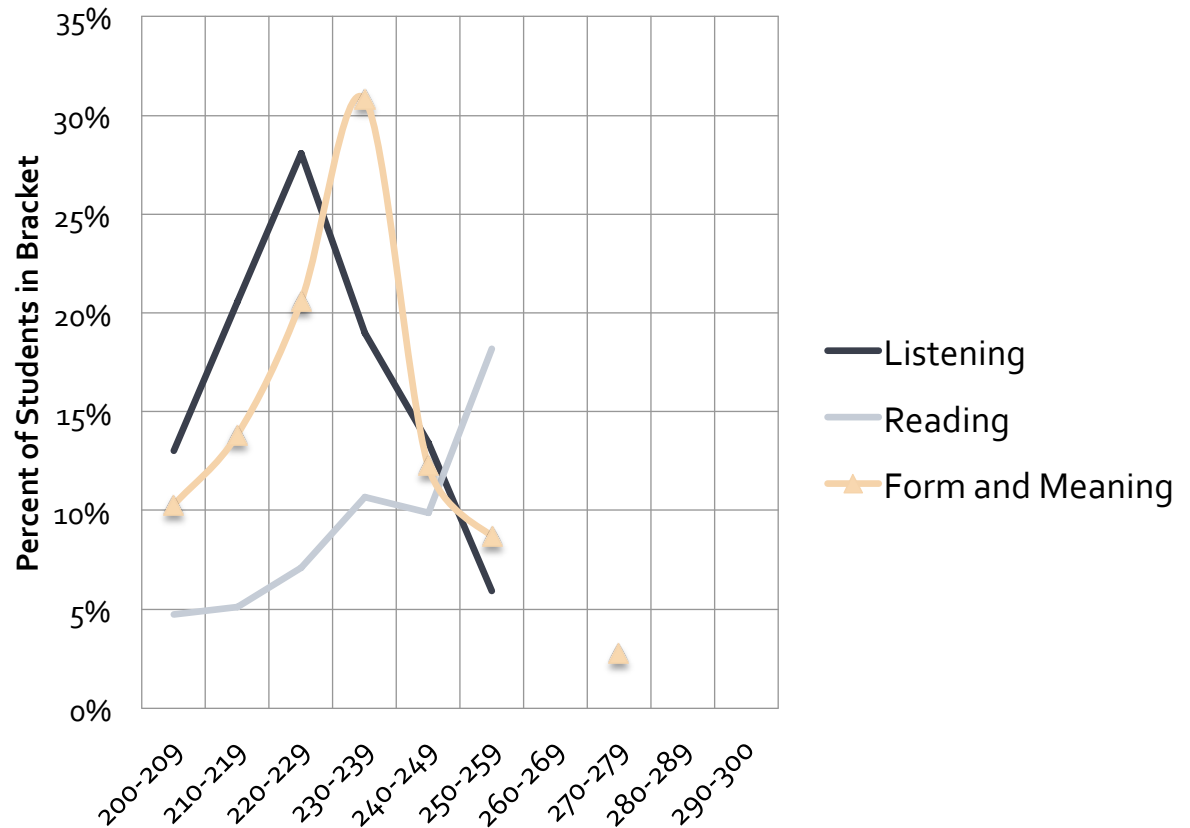
## How far behind?

Huizhi wants a 5% increase in English scores.

This is normally considered a very reasonable goal.

... but it would take 40-45x that to bring these students to an intermediate level of English.

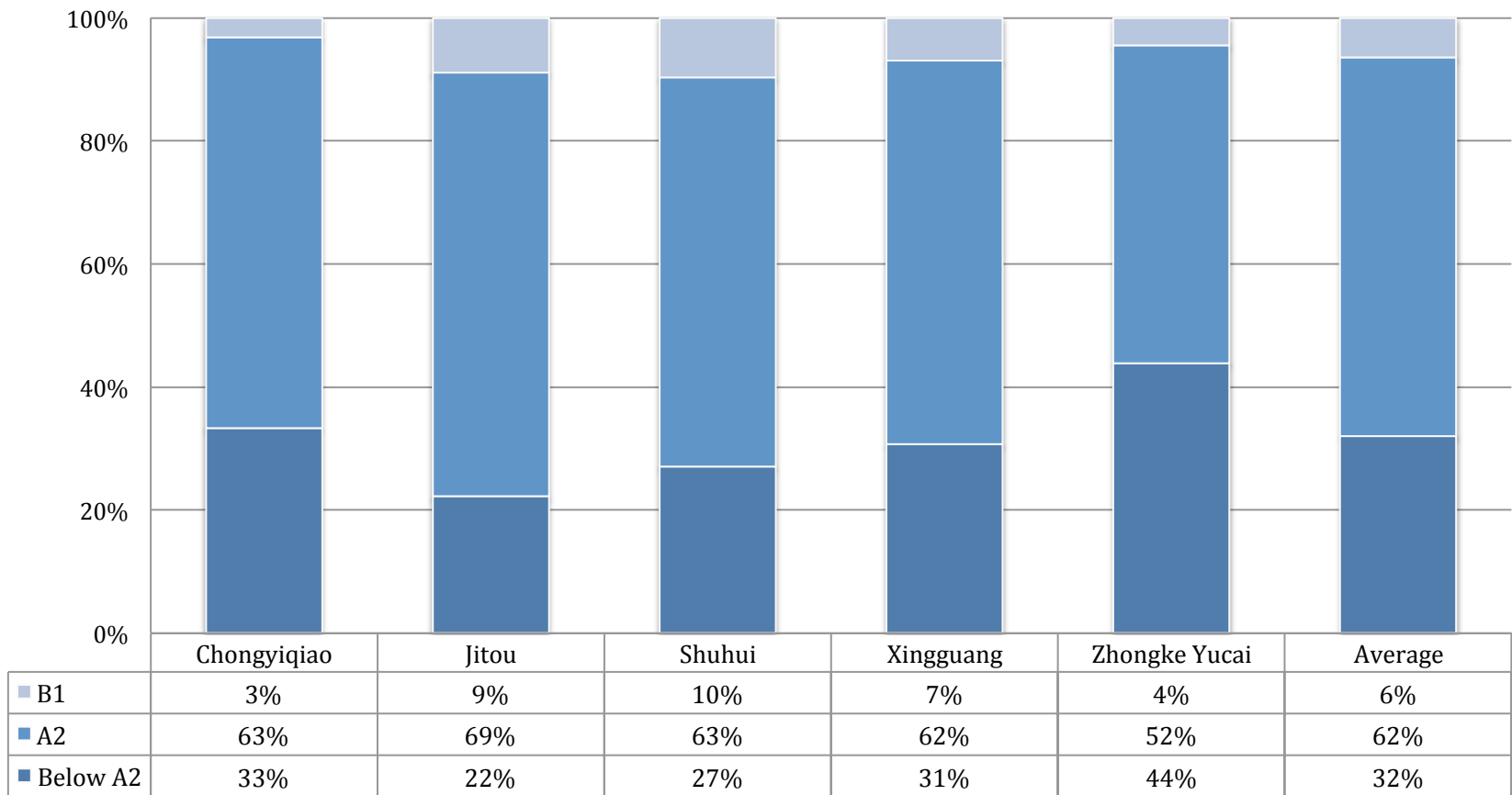
### Distribution of Score Ranges Per Dimension





# The Scores from Another Direction

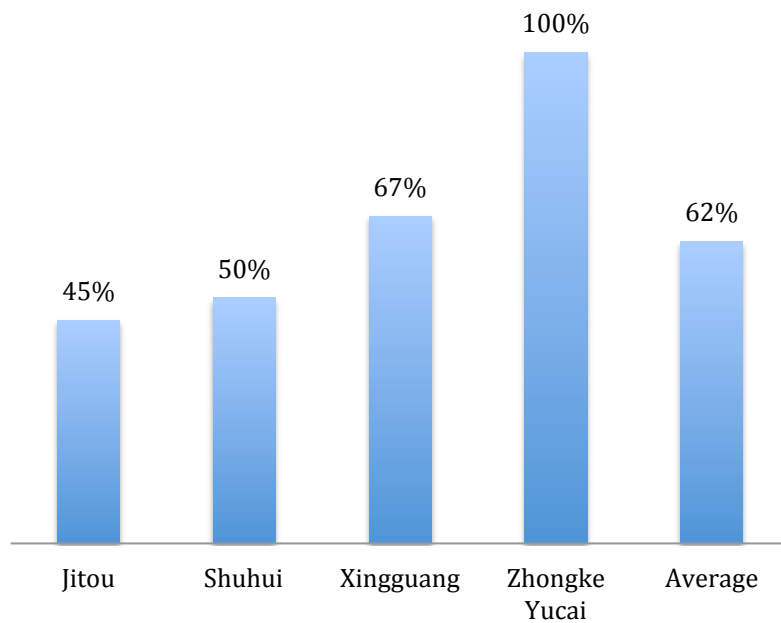
Distribution of Average CEFR Equivalence Per School



# Assembling Teachers

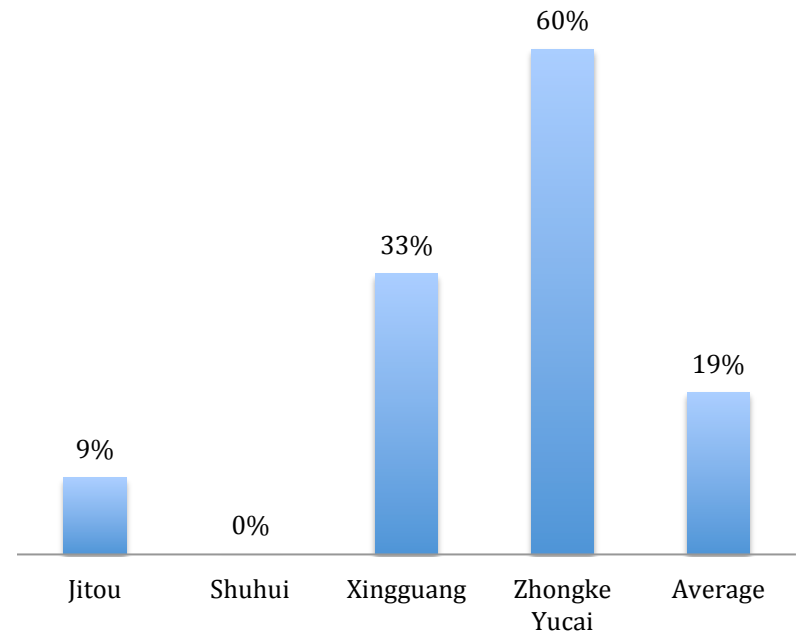
## TURNOVER

Proportion of Teachers Working at the School For Less Than Two Years



## EXPERIENCE

Proportion of Teachers With Less Than Two Years of Teaching Experience



# My Problems

## PLANNING

- What's Plan B?
- Why force these kids to spend years studying for a test that was *designed* to fail them?
  - Extraordinary effort required to make even marginal gains
- How much does focusing on English blame them for inequality and reinforce a fundamentally unjust and inequitable system?
  - ... and blames the teachers

## INEQUALITY

- Easiest way to increase scores
  - Ignore the worst students
  - Ignore the worst schools
  - Partner good schools with slightly worse schools
  - Pick the best students, help them cram

## Where do we stop?



The State of Louisiana

Literacy Test (This test may be given to anyone who cannot prove a fifth grade education.)

Directions:

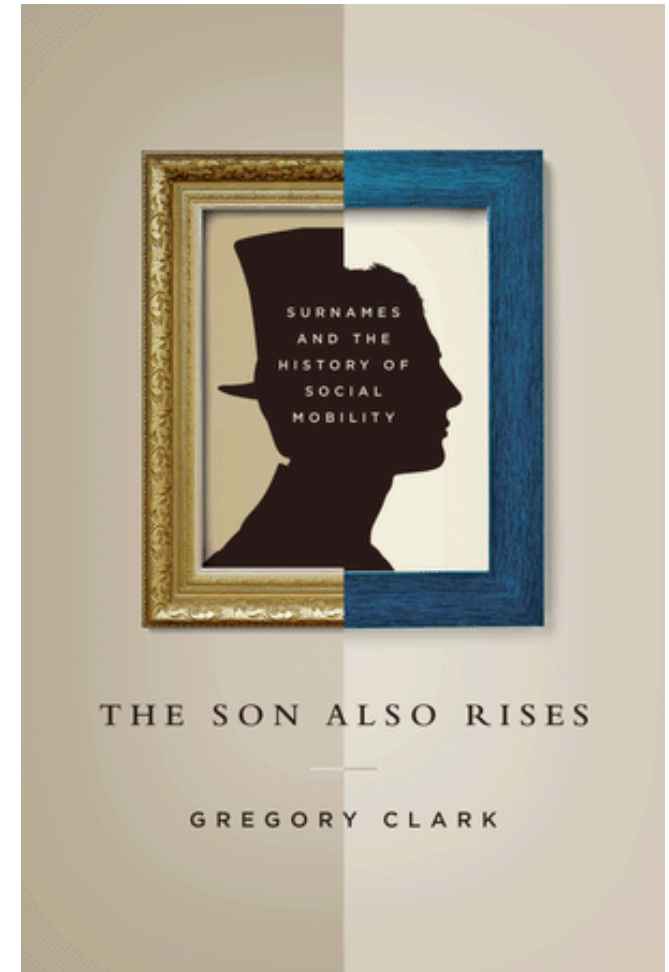
Do what you are told to do in each statement, nothing more, nothing less. Be careful, as one wrong answer denotes failure of the test. You have ten (10) minutes to complete the test.

1. Draw a line around the number or letter of this sentence.
2. Draw a line under the last word of this line.
3. Cross out the longest word in this line.
4. Draw a line around the shortest word in this line.
5. Circle the first, first letter of the alphabet in this line.
6. In the space below, draw three circles, one inside (engulfed by) the other.
  
7. Above the letter "x" make a small cross.
8. Draw a line through the letter below that comes earliest in the alphabet.

Z V S D A K M P H B T Y C

# How Unequal?

- Tracked rare surnames across the globe (13 in China, for instance)
- On average, it takes 10 to 15 generations (300 to 450 years) to regress to the mean



# How Unequal

## INCOME

- Top 5%
  - 23% of total household income in China
- Bottom 5%
  - .1% of total household income in China

## EDUCATION

- Likely ~8% of kids out of primary school, mostly rural
- Decentralization = vastly unequal educational spending
- Universities are overwhelmingly urban, and the proportions are growing
- Between 2-5% of rural kids make it to higher education

# How Inequality Works

## THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

If by some black magic all of the migrant and rural children could learn to speak English at the level of their urban peers, what would become the role of English in assessment and social mobility?

## WHICH OUTCOME?

- They all enter the middle class?
- English suddenly loses value?
- Other subjects, perhaps Putonghua or maths, become more important?

# Dumbing Down Inequality?

- Why do ILO and UNESCO reports read so differently when speaking of?
- Does UNESCO offer any answers aside from 'more, better, equitable schooling'?

"In a lot of ways, I think we were talking about inequality in a much more nuanced way in the 1970s and 1980s."

- Alberto Motivans  
UNESCO UIS



# Breaking the Circle

- Inequality is on the rise...
- Because of inequality...
- ... which generates inequality.

Inequality creates and sustains inequality, which is caused by inequality. We should definitely do something about it.

**because circular reasoning works**

# The CERC Legacy

## SHADOW EDUCATION

- Changing the system
  - Raising the academic bar
  - No longer an 'added bonus', increasingly a necessity
  - Shifting obligations for remedial help from schools and teachers to private sector

## HOUSEHOLD SPENDING

- An 'arms race'
- Far higher burden on the poor
- Masked by the 'façade of fee-free education'

# Better Questions

1. Inequality of what?
    1. Why does it matter?
    2. Was X designed to produce inequitable outcomes?
  2. Inequality between whom?
    1. Within groupings?
    2. Between groupings?
  3. What causal theories of inequality can/should we dismiss?
  4. Can we trace its production?
1. The ability to speak and use English
    1. They need it to enter university
    2. Absolutely.
  2. Difficult to say, imprecise units of analysis and missing data
    1. Huge between migrant schools in Chengdu
    2. Probably, unknown.
  3. Genetics, intelligence, luck.
  4. Probably.

# Our Theories, Ourselves

## SOCIOLOGY OF THE SOCIAL

- Substitution Words
  - Neoliberalism
  - Inequality
  - Quality
  - Society

## SOCIOLOGY OF ASSOCIATIONS

- Latour and the Actor-Network Theorists
- Tilly and the 'relationalists'

# Explanations for Inequality

- Human and/or social capital
- Genetics
- Discrimination
- Capitalist exploitation
- Relational categorical exclusion

# Our Standard Model

## THE QUEUE

People go through a line and are 'scanned' and sorted based on

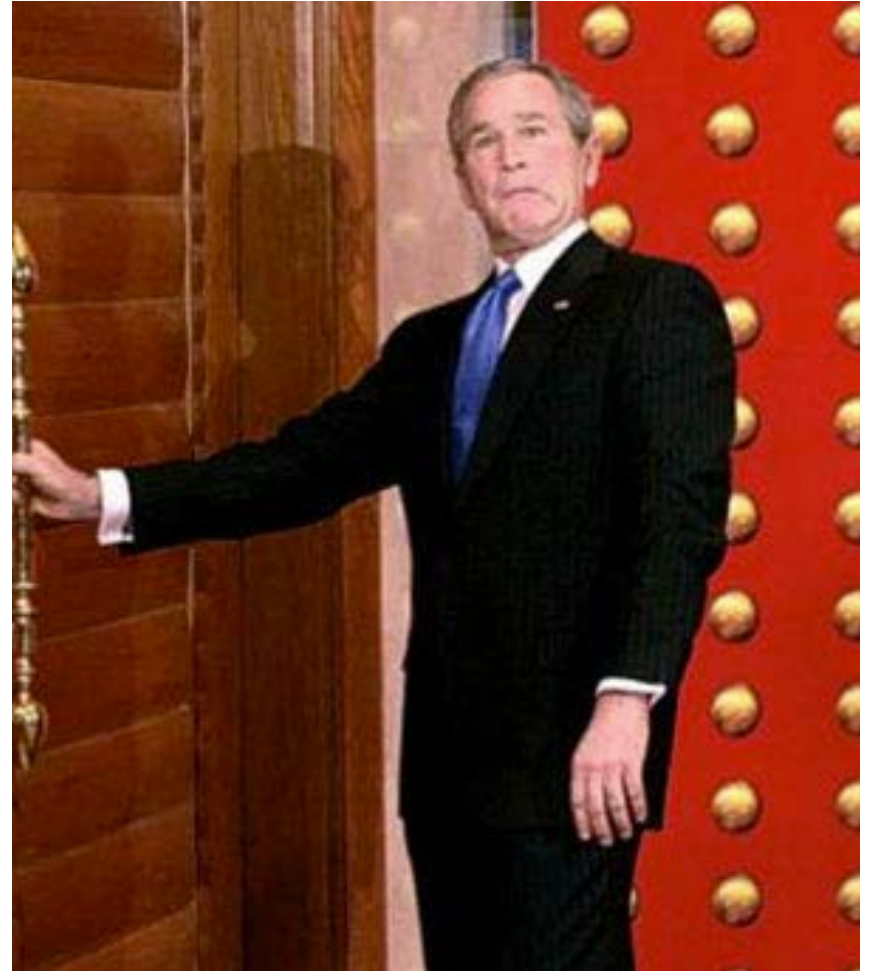
- Human capital
- Social capital
- Cultural capital
- Race, gender, ethnicity



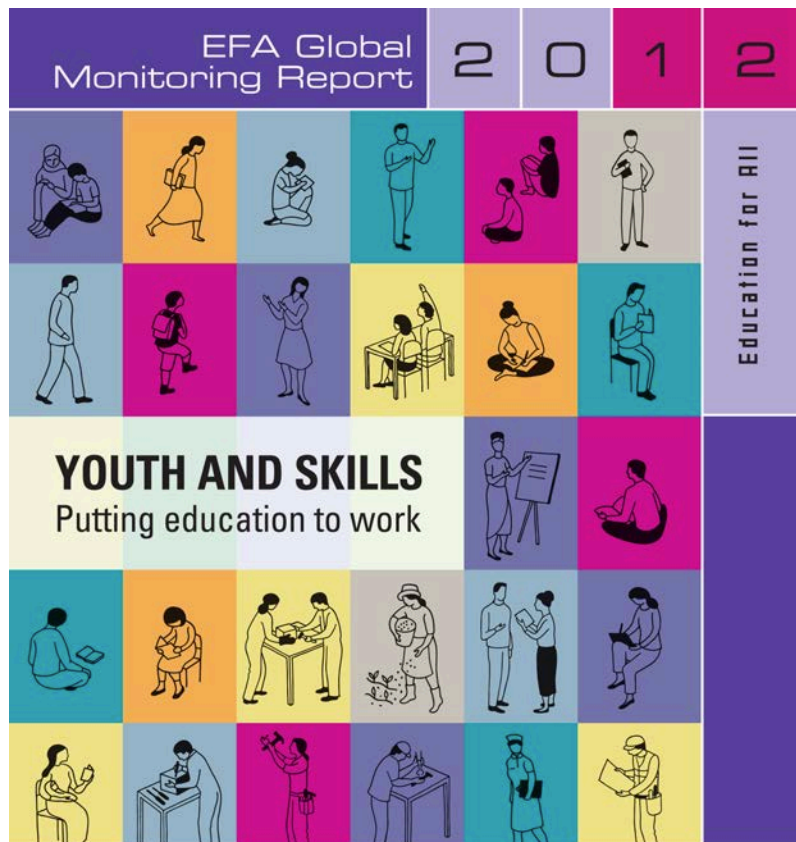
# Common Discourse

“The fact is, income inequality is real – it’s been rising for more than 25 years.... The reason is clear: we have an economy that increasingly rewards education and skills because of that education.”

- George W. Bush



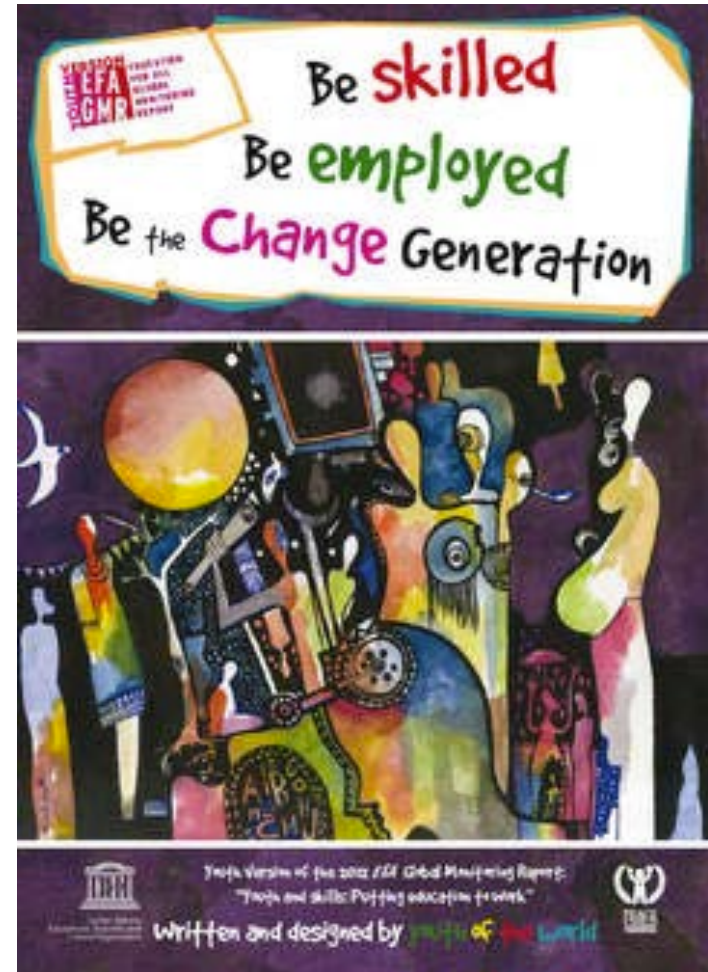
# A Tale of Two Reports





# Human Capital

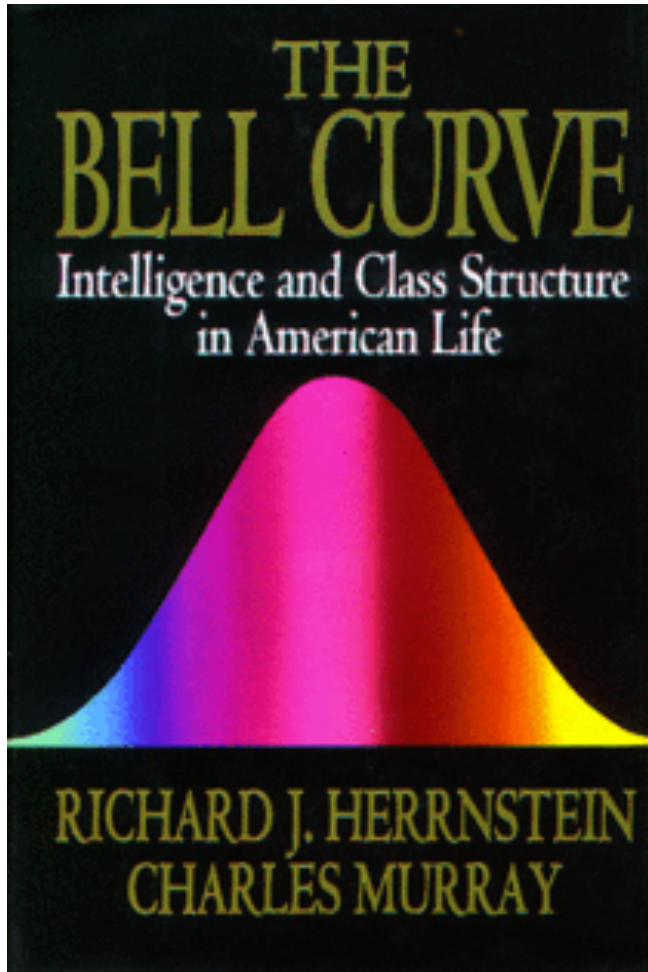
- What's correlated with what?
- Very little statistical evidence in aggregate
  - Adult Literacy (.04, .03 B)
  - Average Years of Schooling for Adults (.07, .01 B)
  - Gini Coefficient (.94)
  - GDP per capita (.8)
- More education = higher Gini scores



# The Math: Bivariate Correlations

- ECI and Average Years of Schooling (Adults)
  - Pearson .16 / Sig (2-tail): .48
- Avg Years of Schooling (Adults) and GDP/pc
  - Pearson - .22 / Sig (2-tail): .19
- Avg Years of Schooling (Adults) and Gini Momentum
  - Pearson .02 / Sig (2-tail): .93
- Avg Years of Schooling (Adults) and Youth Unemployment
  - Pearson .06 / Sig (2-tail): .76

# Genetic / Intrinsic Differences



- Surprisingly popular in the United States.
- Does it make sense in more ethnically homogenous places like China?

# Discrimination?

## CONTEXT

- The gap between human capital and pay is the level of discrimination

## ISSUES

“.... segregation and the norms associated with it are embedded in the economic order... so deeply that a willful act of discrimination is not really necessary to maintain gender inequality”

- Tilly 1999

# Tilly's Relational Forms of Inequality

## BASIC TERMS

- Bounded Categorical Pairs
- Exploitation
- Emulation
- Adaptation
- Opportunity hoarding
  
- Focuses on 'transactions'

## WHAT IT DOES

- Dismisses human capital, genetic, and other essentialist explanations.
- Tells us where to use our Foucault, Bourdieu, Marx, etc.
- Two windows for structure, two windows for agency
- Recognizes a certain fractal-like nature of inequality

# Tilly's Durable Inequality

## DIMINISHED

- Human capital approaches
  - 'knowledge economy'
  - Under-education
- Active discrimination

## SITUATED

- Exploitation
  - Marx, Weber, Wallenstein, Gramsci, Graeber, *et al*
- Opportunity Hoarding
  - Foucault, Bourdieu, Weber, post-structuralists, *et al*
- Adaptation
  - Neo-classical economics, complexity, Scott, *et al*
- Emulation
  - Gellner, Tilly, World Culture Theory, *et al*

# Bounded Categorical Pairs 有界双范畴

## EXTERIOR (SOCIAL)

- Black : White
- Man : Woman
- Christian : Muslim
- Citizen : Non-Citizen
  - *Hukou* : no-*Hukou*
- Expat : Immigrant
- Foreign : Local
- Immigrant : Refugee
- Urban : Rural
- Educated : Uneducated
- Graduate : Dropout

## INTERIOR (INSTITUTIONAL)

- Manager: Employee
- Salaried : Wage
- Tenured : Tenure-Track
- Tenure-Track : Adjunct
- Permanent Staff : Temp
- Credentialed : Non-Credentials
- Qualified : Unqualified
- Experienced : Inexperienced
- Skilled : Unskilled

# Durable Inequality 耐用的不平等

Inequality becomes durable and reinforced when interior categories overlap with exterior categories

Exterior Categorical Boundaries

Migrant, rural, non-local, uneducated

Interior Categorical Boundaries

Wage labor, temporary, *mingong*, unskilled,

	No Exterior Category	Exterior Category
No Interior Category	<i>Gradient</i>	<i>Imported frontier</i>
Interior Category	<i>Local frontier</i>	<i>Reinforced inequality</i>



# Exploitation 剥削

## DEFINITION

“...when persons who control a resource a) enlist the effort of others in production of value by means of that resource but b) exclude the others from the full value added by their effort.”

## EXAMPLES

About 1% of the retail cost of an iPhone goes towards labor.

Where does the rest of the money go?



# China is not Poor.

- Average Income
  - \$2,100 USD
- GDP Per Capita (nominal)
  - \$6,747 USD



# Emulation 仿真

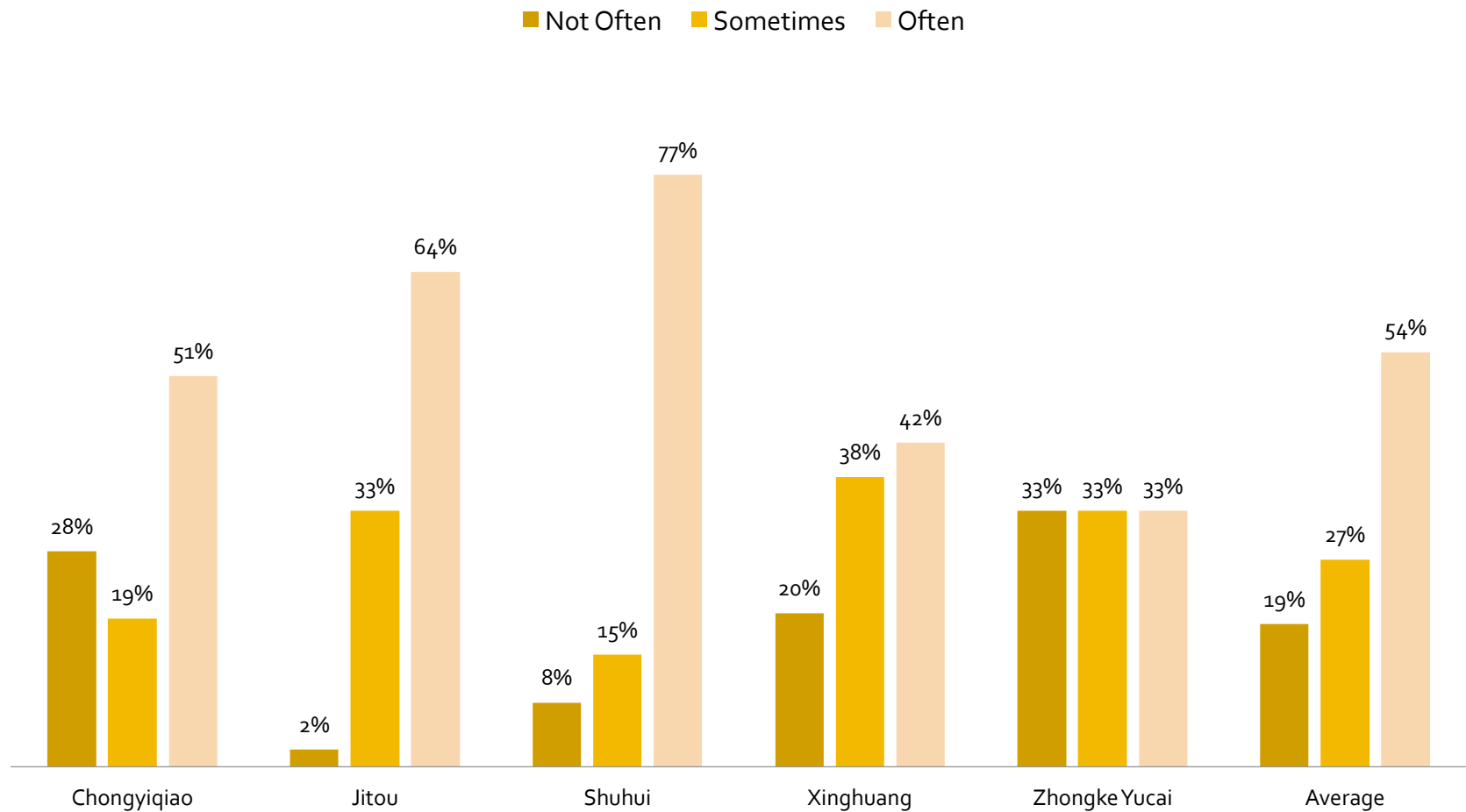
## EMULATION

“... when those who control an inequality-generating set of social relations import categorical distinctions (e.g. by gender or caste) that bring with them readily available practices and meanings”

## EXAMPLES

- Every student in Chengdu is studying the same English book, if not the same chapter, regardless of actual ability
- Vocational high schools seems consistently awful and exploitative
- Provincial and district governments shutting down remote rural schools
- Groups like Huizhi instinctively move towards improving *Zhongkao* scores.

# "I Understand What is Going on in English Class"



# Why Emulate?

- It's cheap.
- It's easy
- It solves organizational problems
- People already know the scripts

Delicious starts  
right here.



# Adaptation 适合

## DEFINITION

“...involves subordinates’ adjustment of their daily routines so that they actually depend on the social arrangements generating inequality.”

## EXAMPLES

- ‘playing the game’ even if you know it’s unfair

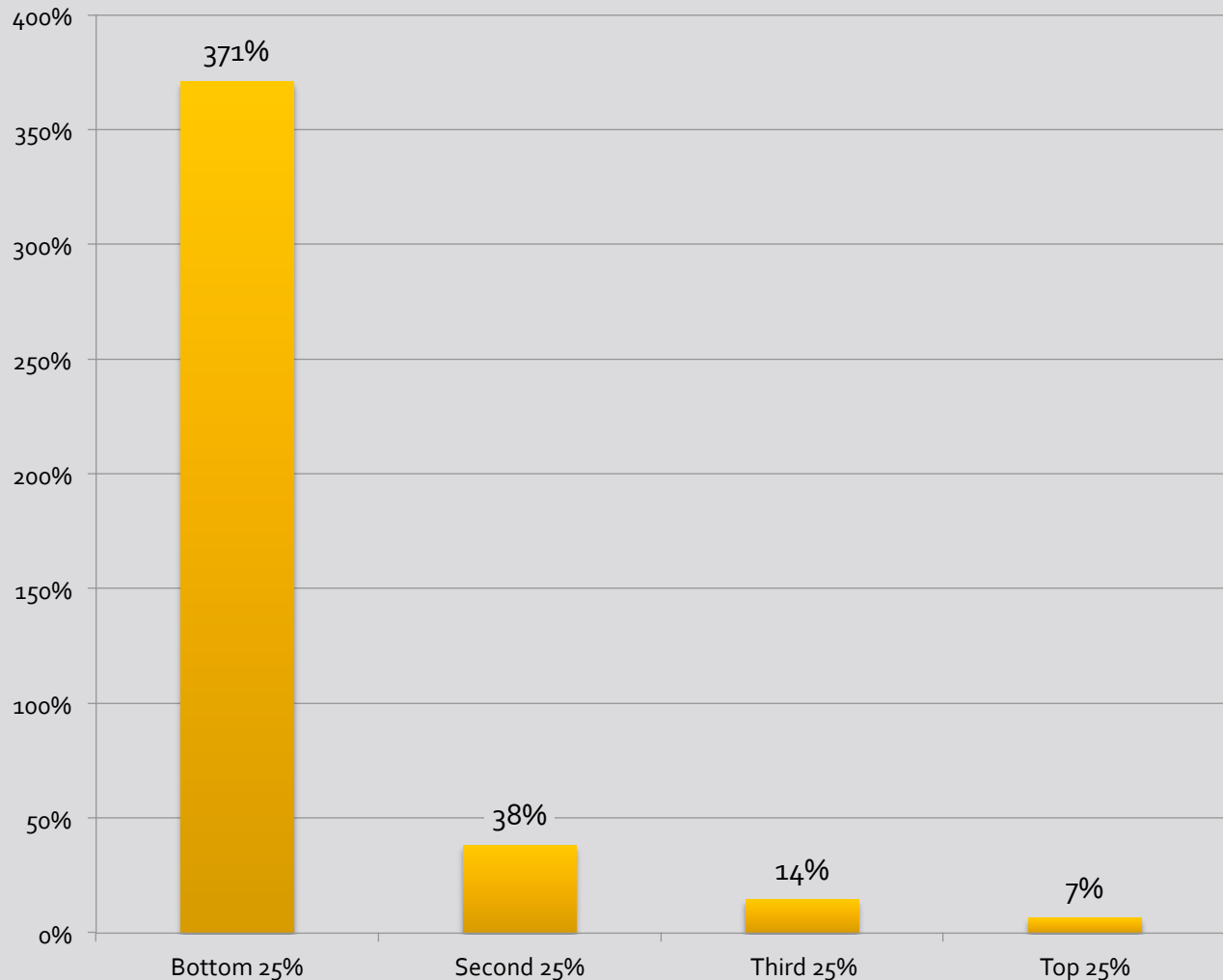
# Household Educational Spending in China

Are we looking at 'false consciousness' (虚假意识)?

Or, is this "the only game in town?"

What responsibilities do we have, as educationist, in alleviating this problem and creating viable alternate pathways?

Education Spending to Income Ratio in China by Income Bracket

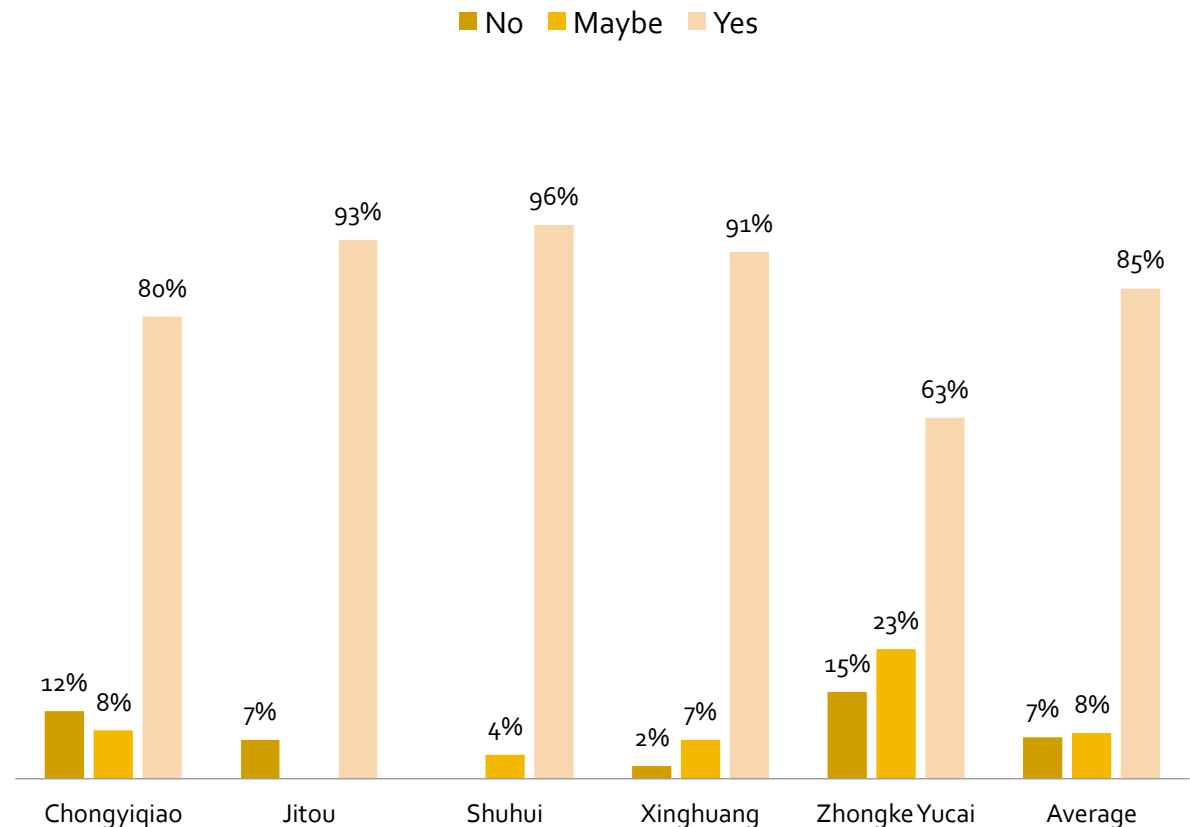


# False Consciousness or 'One-Log Bridge'? 一独木桥

Reality:

- China's gross enrolment rate for higher education is 25.
- ~75% of students in a statistically average classroom will **not** go to university.
- Emotionally, what is the education community setting these kids up for?
- **What's "Plan B"?**

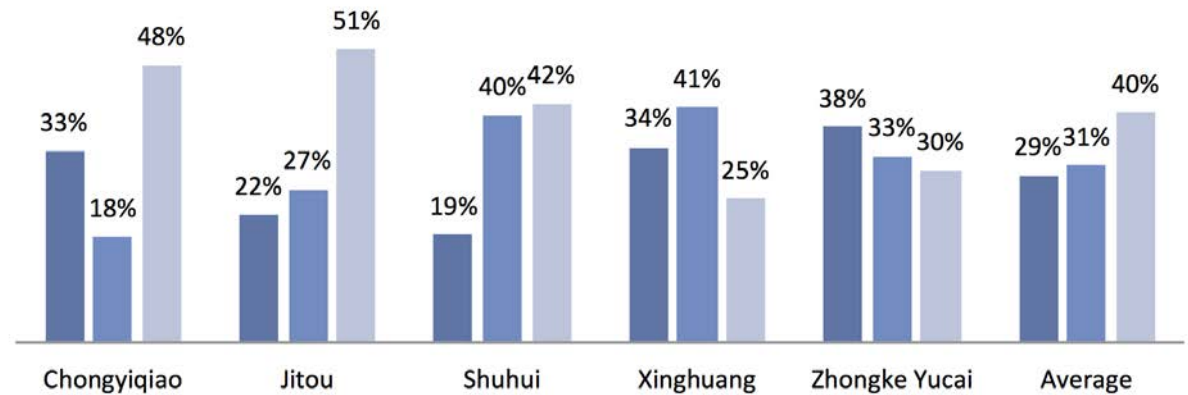
"Do you think you will go to university?"





## "Do you think you will pass the Zhongkao English section?"

■ Not Likely ■ Maybe ■ Likely



# Why Adapt?

“When the great lord passes, the wise peasant bows deeply and silently farts.”  
- Ethiopian proverb

- ‘Infrapolitics’ (政治外) cheaper, easier
  - Foot-dragging, sabotage, absenteeism, poaching, cheating

“False consciousness or just laying it on thick?”



## Domination and the Arts of Resistance

Hidden Transcripts  
James C. Scott

# Who is adapting?

## THE EDUCATION COMMUNITY

- Promising a 'golden room'
  - “书中自有金屋”
- Pushing students down a 'one-log bridge'
- Focusing on increasing individual-level performance
- Little focus on creating viable alternate pathways

## STUDENTS AND PARENTS

- Study harder
  - 吃苦
- Maintain high spirits
- Have the right 'attitude' in face of overwhelming statistical odds

# Opportunity Hoarding 囤积的机会

## DEFINITION

“...confining disposition of a value-producing resource to members of an in-group”

## EXAMPLES

- Those who have entered the ‘white collar’ workplace will do everything they can to maintain distinctions
- Boundary-crossers build the strongest walls

# Who is Opportunity Hoarding?

## EDUCATION COMMUNITY

- The quality *wallah's*
- The massification *wallah's*

## SOCIETY

- Elite university graduates maintain their privileged position over those from non-elite universities
- People from non-elite universities maintain their distinction from those who didn't go to university
- Those who finished high school maintaining borders from those who didn't finish.

# Putting it together

## STRUCTURES

- There is an enormous amount of **exploitation** in China
- There is enormous amount of **emulation**, of institutions and scripts

## AGENCY

- People adapt to these structures
- Groups and people 'pull up the ladder' and do constant boundary maintenance for the purposes of **opportunity hoarding**

# Following Scripts

## WHAT PEOPLE WANT TO HEAR

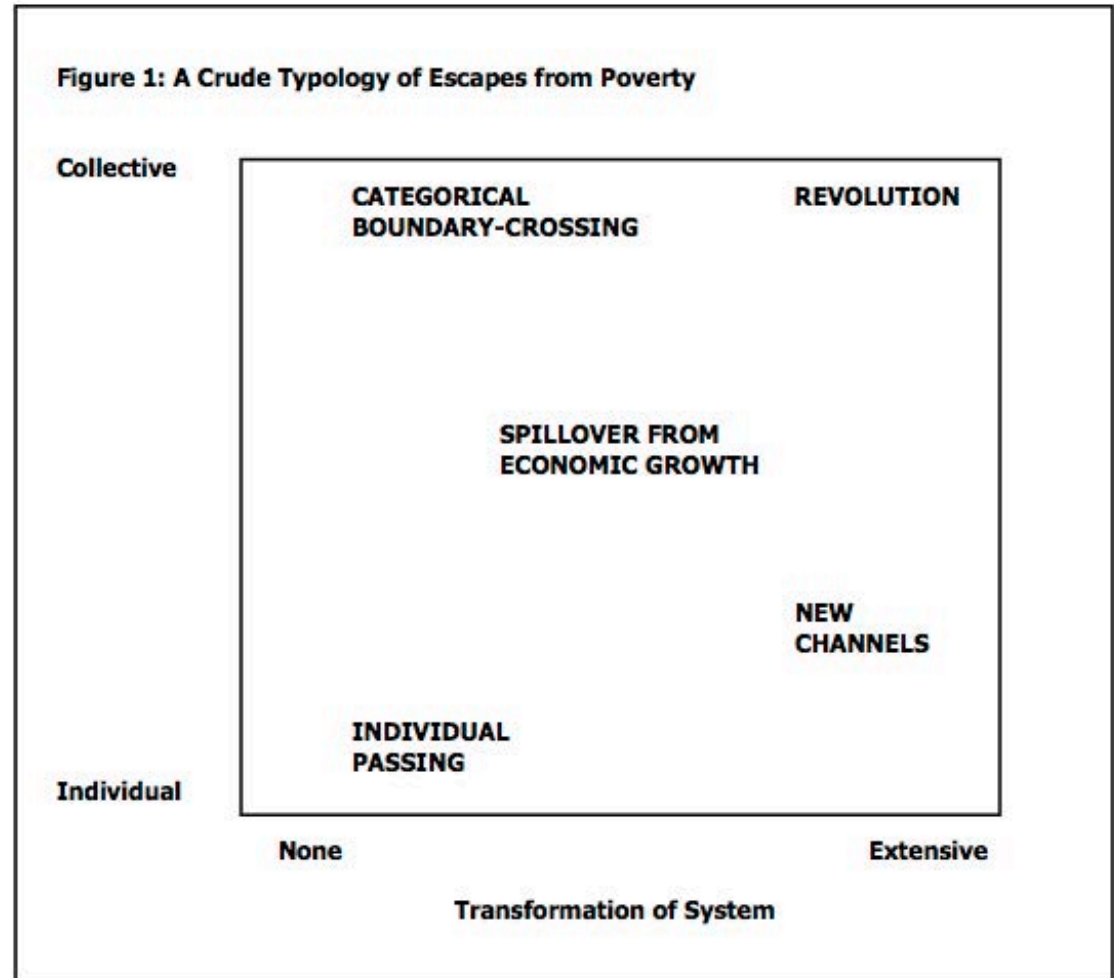
- Improve teacher quality
- Find innovative teaching methods
- Improve student's attitudes towards English
- Find better schools and partner with them

## WHAT THEY NEED TO HEAR

- Young, inexperienced teachers are being assembled into the same places as marginalized youth.
- In aggregate, the scores are probably not improvable
- The most efficient way to reach those goals is the most inequitable

# Available Paths

- Categorical Boundary Crossing
- Individual Passing
- Spillover from Growth
- New Channels
- Revolution





# Individual Passing



- Doesn't actually help that many students
- Can foster very inequitable practices and policies
  - Focus on the highest performers
- Wasted time and resources in a vast number of contexts
- Reinforces the system and the myth of meritocracy

# Categorical Boundary Crossing

## MEANING

- Use of 'migrant' and 'rural' as a class deserving of preferential treatment
- A guarantee of a minimum number of seats
- Weighted *Zhongkao* and *Gaokao* scoring

## ISSUES

- If no growth, it can simply close down paths for others
- Can retrench systems of inequality
  - Out-of-proportion adaptation
  - Justification of opportunity hoarding

# Bypassing, Making New Paths

## CONTEXT

- Creation and promotion of non-academic paths
  - Vocational high school

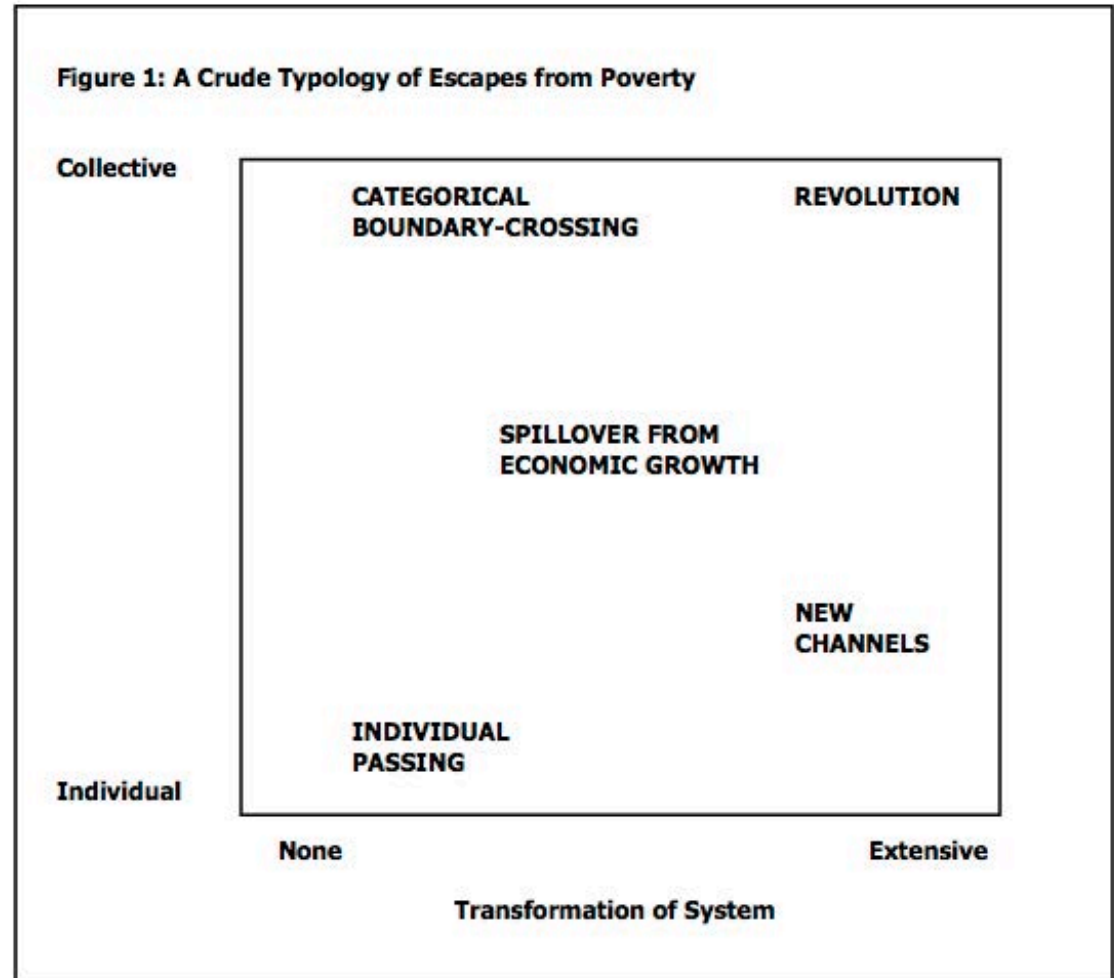


## ISSUES

- Transforms the system more than boundary crossing, but helps fewer people
- Risky
  - Can 'mark' students if not done well
  - Can prevent upward and lateral mobility
  - Resistance from students, schools, and parents

# Available Paths

- Open new channels helps more people and



# Implications for Shadow Education

- Opportunity Hoarding
  - Raising the bar
  - Does important work of reinforcing and raising categorical boundaries
- Adaptation
  - Families spend more than they can afford to 'play the gam.'

# Perestroika, please...

- Rights-based discourse has smothered out critical realism.
- Our response to nearly every problem is, 'more education.' More quality, for more people, with more equity.
- How are we different from economists, then?
- Maybe we should be thinking 'education last'?

