



# Exploring the Causes of “Super High School” in China

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**Abstract.** “Super middle schools” are a special phenomenon arising from China’s modern education reform. They refer to a group of super-sized middle schools with a high enrollment rate established by a group of schools located in cities that monopolize teacher resources and high-quality students. “Super high schools do broaden the channels of social mobility to a certain extent, but they also break the level playing field of secondary schools.” This paper is devoted to studying how these “super high schools” come into being and what are the deep reasons behind their emergence. This paper not only finds that the phenomenon of super middle schools in China is the result of political, economic, and cultural factors, in line with the general market law and rational choice of students, but also some local government’s promotion. The purpose of this paper is committed to summarizing what cause super high school’s emergence found in previous studies and providing help for the research on how to solve this phenomenon.

**Keywords:** Super high school · Secondary education · Education reform

## 1 Introduction

Super high schools are a combination of China’s university entrance exam system and exam-oriented education system. They usually refer to schools with strong, large numbers of students and high popularity. There is no clear definition of ‘super high school’ by now, but some scholars cited descriptive concepts in their research. Chinese academic scholars generally believe that the emergence of super high schools is due to market factors, government factors and special social conditions in China. However, there are many different opinions on the specific causes. “Super high schools” in China had something special in common: located in the provincial capital or big cities, large number of students, monopolized local first-class students and teachers, graduates monopolized first-class universities in the province (autonomous regions, municipalities directly under the Central Government) admission plan.

Education fair of China will always as an important goal of education reform, and super high school as a kind of monopoly and control are of high-quality resources of serious damage to achieve the goals of this, how to change this situation, how to make more high school personnel training can get better play, let the university entrance exam is fairer for all problem in Chinese education. But to figure out how to solve this

**Table 1.** Occurrences of Themes

Main Theme	Occurrence Number	Featured Paper
Educational Equality	12	[2]
Huanggang High School	7	[3]
Rural Students	6	[5]
High school Education	5	[6]
Exam-oriented Education	5	[1]

conundrum, the first place to start is to understand where “super high schools” come from.

At present, the understanding of the formation of “super middle school” mainly focuses on political reasons and market reasons, as well as their common results [1]. In general, the emergence of “super middle schools” conforms to the natural result of market competition to some extent, and also coincides with the objective needs of local governments, students and families [2]. Some scholars also understand the emergence of multi-super middle schools through evolutionary logic and historical analysis.

Through reading all the articles related to super high schools on CNKI in the past 10 years, it is obvious that although many scholars have analyzed the causes of super high schools from various angles, there are still some shortcomings. Many of the super high schools came from key high schools in the 1950s, and then underwent the market economic reform to become the super high schools today, because they already have the tendency to monopolize quality resources. This trend has rarely been analyzed by scholars. At the same time, some local governments have tried and failed to build super middle schools in their cities to boost housing prices. At present, there is little analysis of these failure cases. Table 1 shows all topics and representative paper significantly related to super high schools analyzed by VOS.

## 2 The Causes of “Super High School” in China

There are a lot of discussions on the reasons for the formation of super middle schools. In addition to the discussion of the formation logic, scholars generally believe that the reasons for the emergence of super high schools are atmospheric economic factors, political factors and cultural factors.

In terms of evolutionary logic, it is logical to evolve from an ordinary middle school to a ‘super middle school’ [3]. From the perspective of political logic, China’s high school policies have experienced several stages of key development, quantitative development and diversified development, and super high schools have enjoyed policy support in different periods. From the perspective of market logic, with the decrease of government investment in high school education, schools have to raise funds from the market and use market mechanism to operate schools. From the perspective of cultural logic, the Chinese cultural tradition of respecting teachers and valuing education and the high school in the construction of excellent learning style complement each other, laying a foundation for the emergence of super middle schools.

## 2.1 Economic Factor

The emergence of “super middle school” has a certain inevitability in economic factors [4, 5]. At the macro level, with the development of China, the flow of social classes is accelerating. In the information age of the 21st century, education is the arena for capital competition between different classes, and cultural capital is playing an increasingly important role. Cultural capital determines a person’s occupational stratification and social status and is highly correlated with income over a long period of time, hence the demand of parents for quality high school education and stable class. In the middle level, as a social organization, schools are normative, compulsory and utilitarian, which determines the comparison between each other and teachers’ “voting with their feet”, thus facilitating the game between schools, and finally resulting in the vicious competition of “super middle schools”. From the micro point of view, super middle school comes from the rational choice of students, their demand for higher education and learning. The school’s choice reflects the principle of maximizing personal interests.

There are two main types of market-oriented “super high school”. One is the private super middle school formed naturally under the action of market mechanism, which absorbed a lot of money and adopted advanced educational concepts, but charged very high tuition fees. The other type is the hybrid “super high schools” created by the government, schools and the market, which is a product of educational industrialization of education. All in all, parents in the background of examination-oriented education for the eager pursuit of enrollment rate. High schools are blindly expanding in pursuit of economic profit. What’s more, local governments will step up efforts to support super high schools in order to meet performance appraisal in the education field. These are the cause of the existence of super high schools [2].

In a few areas, real estate developers cooperate with the government to raise prices and build so-called “experimental schools” and “foreign language schools” by introducing branch schools of well-known high schools. As the population grew and competition for exams intensified, these schools gradually evolved into the second-tier “super secondary schools” in the city [6].

## 2.2 Political Factor

Local governments are also under great pressure to meet targets in education reform, so they often give preferential policies to schools in areas with relatively high quality students. The biggest type of “super high school” is the government-run “super high school”, which is usually developed from the former key schools and thus has a distinct trace of government policy intervention. The second type is the private super middle school formed naturally under the action of market mechanism, which absorbed a lot of money and adopted advanced educational concepts, but charged very high tuition fees. The third type is the hybrid “super high schools” created by the government, schools and the market, which is a product of educational industrialization of education. Public super high schools, which have attracted the most public attention, know little about the other two types. All in all, parents in the background of examination-oriented education for the eager pursuit of enrollment rate. High schools are blindly expanding in pursuit of economic profit. What’s more, local governments will step up efforts to support super

high schools in order to meet performance appraisal in the education field. These are the cause of the existence of super high schools [2].

### 2.3 Cultural Factor

Cultural factors are one of the factors that are currently less studied in the academic community. In Traditional Chinese culture, great importance is attached to the education of children, which can be reflected not only in the education expenditure of Chinese families, but also in the expenditure of some Chinese families who have settled overseas.

A large part of the cultural reasons for the emergence of super middle schools stems from the fact that Chinese families especially urban families generally have access to high family education expenditures. Many secondary schools have taken this as an opportunity to cooperate with education and training institutions to establish super secondary schools. In urban areas, many families will choose to increase their investment in the education and training of their children in order to ensure that the living standards do not decline.

In the early days of China's reform and opening up, a large number of people obtained high-income jobs through university diplomas, and then they became urban middle-class people with a higher standard of living than before. At that time, China's higher education penetration rate was very low, so college graduates were a scarce talent. But now, in the context of the continuous expansion of higher education and the poor standardization of vocational education in China, people with college degrees are no longer rare. In 1978, there were only 165,000 college graduates in China, but in 2021, there were 9.09 million. Therefore, in order to keep the class of their children from declining, many families have chosen to let their children join a more brutal competition at the high school level, so as to ensure that they can be admitted to famous schools when their children take the college entrance examination. Super Middle School took advantage of the psychology of these parents and constantly publicized its own "Qingbei rate" (the rate of graduating students being admitted to Tsinghua University or Peking University) to profit from high tuition fees.

## 3 Conclusion

"Super high school" was born in the period of Social transformation in China and grew in the cultural soil of the interweaving of traditional Education and modern society. Under the background of market-oriented choice, social class mobility and local government support, it has gradually become a special phenomenon in the field of education. In the formation process of "super middle schools", the local government plays a leading role in promoting this, and some high schools also monopolize resources for profit in the tide of education industrialization, thus forming the super middle schools. From the social level, super high schools are not only the result of vicious competition, a cancer that leads to resource concentration and education equity imbalance, but also an important tool to promote social class mobility. Economically, super high schools drive the development of education industry in certain regions to some extent, but the suppression of other schools leads to the deformity of the entire education industry.

Although the academic circle has discussed the economic and social reasons for the formation of super middle schools, it can be seen that there is still room for exploration in the future. Many “super high school” from the beginning of the founding of new China to the construction of the priority of a batch of key middle school, such a policy is in China of “efficiency first, fairness” development train of thought, but later, the reform is to promote the efficiency of the relevant fair construction has not become the focus, the reason not only economic factors, there is also a social and cultural factors, The specific content of cultural factors is rarely discussed. At the same time, the assessment of education indicators of local governments is not always inherent, and its rationality has been controversial, but it has not been discussed and compared in detail.

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