

**The Chinese College Entrance Exam:
High Stakes and Pressure Cooking**

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On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aide on this thesis.

Matthew Pruh

Reader Approval

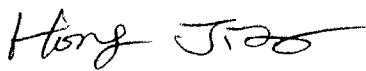
This thesis project, written by Madeline Bush, meets the required guidelines for partial completion of the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Asian Studies.

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Chapter One

China's National College Entrance Examination system (NCEE) is the driving force behind the Chinese education system as a whole. This single test is not only a determinant of an examinee's future, but also guides the entire country's education system and curriculum while encouraging many traditional Chinese beliefs. In theory the test simply serves to filter students into appropriate colleges using a high-stakes testing system. However, in practice the NCEE serves as a lens through which the Chinese culture looks. This high-stakes testing system has created social urgency and fever surrounding education and college admission. As the single predictor of success and the only factor in college admissions, intense competition and pressure is created in Chinese society. Though the culture created the test, the test is in some respects also shaping the culture.

Lit Review

In examining the interconnection of the Chinese National College Entrance Exams with Chinese society and culture, many scholars and Chinese government officials alike discuss why China, with a society of high-test-scoring students, has not become more globally competitive. With national economic and political goals in mind, the effectiveness of the education system is in question due to China's lack of worldwide influence while producing highly intelligent students. Literature regarding the *gaokao* (高考) addresses this problem through the discussion of the impact of high-stakes testing on the Chinese education system.

Dr. Yong Zhao, a Chinese born internationally known scholar-researcher of innovative learning models and creator of schools encouraging global competence,

discusses the impact of China's *gaokao* in his most recent publication, *Catching Up or Leading the Way: Education in the Age of Globalization*. Zhao explains:

Education always performs two functions – to select and to educate. A nation's education system functions on behalf of society to decide what kind of talents, knowledge, and skills are useful and what kinds are not. It is intended to cultivate the ones that are valuable and suppress the ones that are deemed undesirable. High-stakes testing is one of the most effective ways to convey what a society values and to pressure all involved in education –parents, teachers, and, of course, students – to focus all their efforts on what is tested.¹

Thus far, China's desire to become globally competitive in realms of innovation has been hindered due to the reliance on test scores being sole evaluators for academic excellence. This reliance has transformed the entire education system to teach children skills they will need to succeed. In this case, knowing how to effectively take tests is the only way to this success.

High-stakes testing systems in China have a history far greater than that of the *gaokao*. "Education fever is not a new phenomenon in China. Paying great attention to education has been deeply integrated into Chinese culture with the influence of Confucian philosophy over more than 2000 years. Under the surface of education fever, high-stakes examinations have been and continue to be the hidden driving force. Education fever in China is in fact fever for success on exams."² Priority attention has been given to education for thousands of years with the influence of Confucian philosophy. Beginning with the Sui dynasty (581-618 AD), selection of government officials was by a national exam system, with a continuation of this high-stakes style

¹ Yong Zhao, "Why China Isn't a Threat Yet: The Cost of High Test Scores," in *Catching Up or Leading the Way: American Education in the Age of Globalization* (Alexandria: ASCD, 2009), 74.

² Hoi K. Suen and Lan Yu, "Historical and Contemporary Exam-driven Education," *KEDI Journal of Educational Policy* 2, no. 1 (2005): 29.

being used in the Tang dynasty (618-907 AD) with the Civil Service Examinations (*keju*, 科举). Similarities between the two testing systems feature central state-organized administration, standardized process, large-scale-high-stakes testing, quota systems, one-track learning, rote memorization and great importance of the test being reflected through high-level security of testing materials.³ In addition, both tests impact cultural ideals as well as become societal forces in their own right.

The importance of rote memorization in Chinese education is evident throughout Chinese history with the use of the *keju* system for assessing ability. “The exams by and large tested rote memorization of the [Confucian] classics or regurgitated interpretations of the classics. For example, one of the common formats was to remove certain words from original passages of the classics and ask the test takers to provide the deleted words...Memorization of the classics thus became the most important education activity in preparation for the *keju*.”⁴ The Five Confucian Classics are the *Classic of Poetry*, *Book of Documents*, *Book of Rites*, *Book of Changes*, and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, with the *Classic of Poetry* itself including 305 poems. In order to be able to replace deleted words, an examinee would have to rely entirely on memorization of material. This style of learning permeated through dynasties and into present day Chinese testing practice. “A century has passed since the *keju* was officially ended. But its spirit lives on, in the body of the National College Entrance Exam, the same one I took in 1982. The National College Entrance Exam (*gaokao* in Chinese) has every element of the *keju* except for the content. The *gaokao* is as powerful as the *keju* was in determining the course of an

³ Suen and Yu, “Exam-driven Education,” 21.

⁴ Zhao, *Catching Up or Leading the Way*, 75-76.

individual's life."⁵ These high-stakes examination systems have created an education fever originating from the Civil Service Exams that has been sustained through present day *gaokao* practice. "The fact that they [*gaokao* and Civil Service Exams] are both high-stakes tests has led to many common intended and unintended social consequences. The most apparent common consequence is that the phenomenon of education fever has been maintained throughout China for over 1,400 years."⁶

Though stability and reliability serve as the *gaokao*'s advantages, unavoidable by-products of testing based education have pervaded Chinese society. Examination based learning discourages individual creativity and innovation due to an emphasis on only teaching material students will be tested on. The *gaokao* system creates a chain reaction in Chinese education styles, placing a focus on testing results rather than cultivation of comprehensive knowledge. In the Chinese education system, creativity, an integral component of innovation, is ignored largely due to the necessary emphasis on one-track learning through the *gaokao*. Dr. Zhao explains, "To be creative is to be different. Creative people often have ideas, behaviors beliefs, and lifestyles that deviate from the norm and tradition."⁷ Research on the contextual and social influences on creativity has concluded that the acceptance of deviation from tradition and conventional patterns resulted in more creativity.⁸ A comprehensive study on families with highly creative children found that (on average) these families had one or less specific rules for their children. Families without highly creative members had an average of six specific rules

⁵ Zhao, *Catching Up or Leading the Way*, 79.

⁶ Suen and Yu, "Exam-driven Education," 25.

⁷ Zhao, *Catching Up or Leading the Way*, 91.

⁸ Richard L. Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

for their children to follow. These families with highly creative members also encouraged “distinctive thinking patterns” from an early age, lived in uncommon settings and lived a relatively uncommon lifestyle as parents. Research has shown that in collectivist cultures that emphasize tradition and stability, in contrast to the United States where creativity is a respected expression of the individual, it is important for an individual not to be different, but rather be an extension of the collective.⁹ In school, obedience to teacher and furthermore the education system is shown as the way to succeed. Only through following the rules of the system does one succeed in education. Rules form the base of all behaviors especially in schools. Chinese teachers are infamous for maintaining order in classrooms by emphasizing conformity to the collective.¹⁰ Teachers, from a practical level, need to maintain order in the classroom in order to teach effectively. The intense structure of obedience in the classroom in addition to the amount of time Chinese students spend in a rigid school system removes the possibility for children to find creative outlets since their time spent outside of school is mostly spent on schoolwork.¹¹ Further, through standardization and centralization of the education system children have no opportunity to create individual difference between themselves and other students. In relation to the creativity gap between China and other countries, China’s problem is not the lack of teaching of creativity, but the consistent thwarting of creative behaviors on behalf of the education system.

Even China’s leaders understand the damaging impact of China’s examination culture and the obstacles to possible reform options. In 1997, Guojia Jiaowei as part of

⁹ R. Keith Sawyer, *Explaining Creativity: The Science of Human Innovation* (New York: Oxford University press, 2006).

¹⁰ Zhao, *Catching Up or Leading the Way*, 93.

¹¹ *ibid*, 92.

the then named National Education Commission (present day Ministry of Education) discussed problems with the Chinese education system with hopes of enacting effective reforms:

Test-oriented education refers to the factual existence in our nation's education of the tendency to simply prepare for tests, aim for high test scores, and blindly pursue admission rates [to colleges or higher-level schools] while ignoring the real needs of the students and societal development. It pays attention to only a minority of the student population and neglects the majority; it emphasizes knowledge transmission but neglects moral, physical, aesthetic, and labor education, as well as the cultivation of applied abilities and psychological and emotional development; it relies on rote memorization and mechanical drills as the primary approach, which makes learning uninteresting, hinders students from learning actively, prevents them from taking initiatives, and heavily burdens them with [an] excessive amount of course work; it uses test scores as the primary or only criterion to evaluate students, hurting their motivation and enthusiasm, squelching their creativity, and impedes their overall development.¹²

Though China's leaders identify and attempt to reform their education system, true impact of these reforms has yet to be noticeable. The comprehensive association between testing culture and the education system complicates effective change.

This thesis will identify the historical creation and present continuation of high-stakes testing in Chinese society and education. The comprehensive testing guidelines will be explained and thus where those guidelines come from. Through the explanation of the Imperial Civil Service Examinations, the values of rigorous testing practices and influence of memorization will be examined. The transition of high-stakes testing will be explored through the historical transitions of the *gaokao* and Chinese education system through the Cultural Revolution arriving at an examination of present day *gaokao* practice.

¹² *ibid*, 95.

Chapter Two: The *Gaokao*

Overview

The common name for this test, *gaokao* (高考), is a shortened version of the official name *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Putong Gaodeng Xuexiao Zhaosheng Quanguo Tongyi Kaoshi* (中华人民共和国普通高等学校招生全国统一考试). The English translation is, “The People’s Republic of China College and University National Unified Enrollment Examination.” The colloquial term is a reference to the lengthy version, using *gao* (高) to refer to the usage of *gaodeng xuexiao* (高等学校), meaning advanced schooling. *Gao* (高) also relates to the age of the students taking the exam, *gaozhong xuesheng* (高中生), meaning high school students. The term *kao* (考) literally means “to test.” Therefore, *gaokao*(高考) refers to a test taken by high school graduates, while simultaneously inferring the weight of the test. Additionally, the word *gao* (高) also means “high” or “tall,” which implies the weight of the highest, most important test in China.

The *gaokao* system was created during the first years of university establishment in China. Though the test has gone through many reforms, the Chinese government has used this high-stakes testing system as the singular mode of college enrollment. The only time the test was not in use was in the midst of the Cultural Revolution when universities and schools were shut down (1966-1977) and children were sent to the countryside to learn the importance of manual labor.

Due to the importance of the test, the test material is the main curriculum in secondary schools. Even in elementary schools, children are taught in ways that will benefit their future performance on the *gaokao*. The primary mode of teaching is through

memorization and recitation, with very little (if any) application of learned materials in practical ways. This has resulted in lack of creativity and trouble working in international companies for future college graduates. Jiang Xueqin, the deputy principal of Peking University High School and director of the International Division wrote an op-ed for the Wall Street Journal in 2010 explaining the problem with China's emphasis on examinations. "Tests are less relevant to concrete life and work skills than the ability to write a coherent essay, which requires being able to identify a problem, break it down to its constituent parts, analyze it from multiple angles and assemble a solution in a succinct manner to communicate across cultures and time. These 'critical thinking' skills are what Chinese students need to learn if they are to become globally competitive."¹³ A McKinsey & Company report titled, *Addressing China's Looming Talent Shortage*, found that multinational companies are finding few Chinese graduates with the necessary skills for the occupations studied: engineers, finance workers, accountants, quantitative analysts, generalists, life science researchers, doctors, nurses and support staff." According to interviews with 83 human-resources professionals involved with hiring local graduates in low-wage countries, less than 10 percent of Chinese job candidates, on average, would be suitable for work in a foreign company." These findings, interviewees said, is due to "the educational system's bias toward theory. Chinese students get little

¹³ Xueqin Jiang, "The Test Chinese Schools Still Fail: High Scores for Shanghai's 15-year Olds Are Actually a Sign of Weakness," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 8, 2010, accessed November 14, 2013, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748703766704576008692493038646>.

practical experience in projects or teamwork” when compared with teaching methods in Europe or North America.¹⁴

However, a common college enrollment system does allow a fair opportunity for all students in being assessed by same criteria. The promotion of equity is a concurrent quality of examination throughout all testing cultures. The *gaokao* has created an environment in which everyone is equal in front of tests and test scores.¹⁵ In turn, this standardized testing system allows an opportunity for geographic mobility of rurally based students, which in turn would impact social mobility.

Due to the massive population of the Chinese people China enacted the *hukou* (户口) system in the 1950's. The *hukou* system requires that each person declare a city of residence allowing participation in schooling in that locale along with other residential benefits. It also allows the government to track population with regards to available education, economic and residential resources by controlling population movement to the largest cities, often times binding people to their birthplace.¹⁶ This means that a student from a rural area could not simply attend a school in a large city like Shanghai or Beijing. In order to receive the benefits of living in one of the larger cities, one's *hukou* must state that they are a resident of that area.

¹⁴ Diana Farrell and Andrew Grant, *Addressing China's Looming Talent Shortage*, Report. McKinsey & Company, 2005. Accessed November 15, 2013. http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/china/addressing_chinas_looming_talent_shortage.

¹⁵ Haifeng Liu and Qiong Wu, "Consequences of College Entrance Exams in China and the Reform Challenges," *KEDI Journal of Education* 3, no. 1 (2006): 12.

¹⁶ Tiejun Cheng and Mark Selden, "The Origins and Social Consequences of China's Hukou System," *The China Quarterly* 139 (September 1994): 645, accessed March 8, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/655134>.

However, through the *gaokao* system, a rural student accepted to a university in a large city would receive a new *hukou* stating that they had now become a resident of this city. This in turn would allow the student to stay a resident of the large city post college graduation and reap the benefits of living in a metropolitan society. Furthermore, their future children would be given residential status in that city and in turn have an opportunity for a better quality of life than that of a rural worker. Therefore, the *gaokao* serves as a key channel for students in rural areas to gain residency in urban areas. Furthermore, since the *gaokao* is a nationally unified test, examinees from all parts of the country have access to apply to any university nationwide. This opportunity for students has translated into an opportunity to further improve and develop rural education systems and “becomes an invisible drive for rural residents to become educated.”¹⁷

The *hukou* system also dictates that students must sit for *gaokao* in the province where they hold permanent residency. This regulation motivates families to relocate to a different province, often times using fraudulent methods, with hopes of creating better chances of earning higher scores on a different provinces *gaokao*. Though the *gaokao* is nationally uniformed, specific testing requirements and practices are modified from province to province in an attempt to accommodate the quality of local education.

In addition to provincial change in *gaokao* degrees of difficulty, the Chinese government enacts quota systems. Overseen by the Ministry of Education (MOE), responsible for all educational protocol and policy, in order to continually regulate the number of university graduates based on China’s national economic and social needs. With provincial, university, and subject quotas being negotiated between universities and

¹⁷ Liu and Wu, “Consequences of College Entrance Exams in China and the Reform Challenges,” 13.

national provincial authorities, the plans aim for the top 10% of *gaokao* examinees to be eligible for admission to Tier One universities, and the next 20% of candidates to be eligible for admission to Tier Two universities. Tier One institutions are all included in the Ministry of Education's Project 211 (1995). The aim of Project 211 was "to develop about 100 leading universities to bring them up to world-class standard to train high-level professional staff who could help solve the major problems of China's economic construction and development. These universities receive additional government funding and resources. In addition, in 1998 the MOE established the 985 Project to increase China's ability for science and technological innovation and improve international intellectual competition. Tier One universities "account for 80% of doctoral students, 66% of all graduate students, house 96% of the key laboratories, and receive 70% of scientific research funding."¹⁸ These Tier One universities currently accept around 6% of the annual student cohort. Tier Two institutions make up the majority of three and four year universities, with their status being dependent on a student's permanent residential status. "For example, Hebei University is a Tier One university for students applying from Hebei Province, and students must meet the Tier One cut-off for entry. However, Hebei University is a Tier Two university for students applying from other regions such as Beijing, and students therefore require a lower entry score."¹⁹ The status of part time Tier One universities is reviewed annually by the relevant provincial education authority and further approved by the Ministry of Education.

¹⁸ Australian Education International, *Research on China's National College Entrance Examination (the Gaokao)*, Strategy Policy and Research in Education Limited, 2008, accessed October 16, 2013, http://sydney.edu.au/ab/committees/admissions/2011/AEI_Gaokao_Report.pdf.

¹⁹ Australian Education International, *Research on China's National College Entrance Examination (the Gaokao)*, 14.

In China, standardization is also important with regard to fairness of access to opportunity. The rigorous processes of studying for the *gaokao* is required for every student in order to ensure his or her own personal success. Aiming to do “well” in this test is simply not sufficient. In order to get into a top university and ensure a bright future, ones score must be in the top 30% of test takers. When the amount to examinees reaches the 10 million mark, this means that often times a students best just isn’t good enough. The way standardization benefits the system is that everyone is held to the same near-impossible standards and expected to achieve success based on their own personal merit and achievement.

The Ministry of Education is the governing body responsible for controlling all education institutions through policy-making, funding, planning, legislation and evaluation. Working closely with provincial education authorities to set all policy matters to adhere to central government priorities, the MOE sets all policy matters relating to student recruitment plans for higher-education access as well as supervising and implementing plans, one of those being setting guidelines for content of senior secondary curriculum and examination. This in turn makes the MOE responsible for the *gaokao* in all aspects. Provincial education authorities, under the guidance of the MOE, are responsible for *gaokao* student applications, providing local accommodations for testing and overseeing testing procedure, creating, producing, proctoring, and scoring the exam, as well as developing recruitment plans according to provincial needs.

***Gaokao* Examination Topics**

There are three types of examination subjects in the *gaokao*: common, basic and skill. The common topics are national language and general political knowledge, ensuring

that the foundation of a student's education is based on national historical information and political awareness. The basic subject matter refers to the general foundations of all the specialties needed for national construction while testing a candidate's suitability for a wide range of disciplines. Finally, the skill portion of the test is designed to discover individual excellence in specific fields of study.

Post-Cultural Revolution, the *gaokao* testing structure experienced many reforms and changes. In 1977, upon the reinstatement of college entrance exams, testing subject matter reverted to the system in place at the start of the Cultural Revolution. In this system students being examined in the arts category were tested on politics, Chinese language, mathematic, history, geography, and foreign languages, while science and engineering students were tested on politics, Chinese language, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, and foreign languages. However, this system made it increasingly difficult to select excellent students for universities due to the comprehensive areas of study required and in turn was reformed. The next style introduced in 1995 was the beginning of the true transformation to the current system. Deemed "3+2," this method examines students on three compulsory subjects that are included in all exams: national language (Chinese), Mathematics and English. The '2' refers to the two choice subjects, which are selected by candidates in terms of their chosen learning fields. Science, engineering, agriculture, and medical students would complete a physics and chemistry examination as their '2.' Arts and history students, on the other hand, would take politics and history as their two other test subjects.

The next testing reform came in 1998 when the Ministry of Education came under criticism regarding the rigidity of the Chinese education system negatively influencing

and weakening quality of education resulting in lack of creativity. Taking this into account, the MOE issued guidelines for a new system titled, “3+X.” This system integrates the three compulsory subjects with the inclusion of a comprehensive paper intended to “promote high quality education and train innovative personnel.”²⁰ By 2003, the ‘3+X’ system became nationally implemented in state run universities in accordance with national education reforms.

Provincial Testing Systems

The current testing systems vary from province to province with variations of the “3+X” system being used across the country. The “X” refers to an additional subject of the student’s choosing, which is dictated by the students chosen academic track. The Social Sciences track’s additional subjects include Politics, History and Geography. While the Natural Science tracks additional subjects consist of Physics, Chemistry and Biology. This “3+X” system has been implemented in most parts of the country, including Tianjin, Chongqing and the capital city of Beijing.²¹

Shanghai participants have used the “3+1+X” system since 1985, which includes the three compulsory subjects, adding a choice from Politics, History, Geography, Physics, Chemistry and Biology.²² The “X,” in this case, refers to the comprehensive ability test classified by Social Sciences or Natural Sciences tracks, respectively. Social Science students can choose between Politics, History or Geography and Natural Science

²⁰ Lisha Liu, “An Overview of Development of Higher Education Access in China,” *Higher Education Studies* 2, no. 2 (June 2012): 108, doi:10.5539/hes.v2n2p107.

²¹ Lichao Sun, “Gaokao or Bust,” *International Newsroom University of Colorado*, May 1, 2013, accessed April 6, 2014, <http://www.internationalnewsroom.com/gaokao-or-bust/>.

²² This score is not included in the total score for admissions by vocational and technical college. Often applicants going to those schools will not participate in this section.

students can choose between Physics, Chemistry or Biology. Regardless of Social or Natural Science classification, all comprehensive ability tests cover knowledge of the six subjects (Politics, History, Geography, Physics, Chemistry and Biology).²³

Jiangsu Province operates on a pilot examination system referred to as the “3+2+X” system. The “Three” refers to three compulsory subjects (Chinese, Mathematics and a foreign language), and the “plus two” to two choice subjects from six areas: politics, history, geography, physics, chemistry and biology. “X” in this case refers to a comprehensive Social or Natural Science exam. The “Two” and “X” scores are not recorded in the total score but are referenced in university admission processes.

In 2007, Shandong Province implemented the “3+X+1” system which requires each student to take the three compulsory tests (Chinese, Mathematics and a foreign language), one comprehensive test according to the students chosen track (Social or Natural Sciences) and a basic proficiency test on skill high school graduates should have in order to adapt to social life. This testing system will be eliminated in June 2014 when Shandong Province will revert back to the “3+X” examination system.²⁴

Attempts to accommodate students in all provinces are notable, especially with the change of testing date in 2003. Prior to the change, the NCEE was held over two days in July. However, due to adverse effects of summer weather on students’ ability to adequately prepare for the *gaokao*, the test date was changed to June 7-8. Further assistance in lowering distraction for test takers is taken by Chinese cities during the weeks and days before the test. “In some cities, police cars were barred from using their

²³ Herrick, Joel. "Shanghai's Gaokao Length to Be Gao-cut," *Shanghaiist*, September 22, 2011, accessed November 27, 2013.

http://shanghaiist.com/2011/09/22/shanghais_gaokao_length_to_be_gao-c.php.

²⁴ Sun, “Gaokao or Bust.”

sirens during testing hours, and taxis were given yellow signs allowing them right of way when delivering examinees to their test sites. In others, construction was halted at night for fear that the clangs and booms might stand in the way of a good night's sleep."²⁵

***Gaokao* Regulations**

All examinees are obligated to fall under extensive guidelines dictated by the MOE in order to be eligible to sit for the *gaokao*. The regulations created and imposed by the MOE state that students must have completed senior secondary school (high school) or an equivalent qualification, be physically healthy, obey the constitution and laws of the People's Republic of China, and hold permanent residence (*hukou*) in the province where they will be sitting for *gaokao*. Those prohibited from participating in the examination are: people who are already university undergraduates; people with a criminal record or who are in prison; those who had deceptively already sat for the *gaokao*; those who acted as a ghost-writer for the *gaokao*; and those who have not completed secondary school.²⁶

Any and all measures are taken by students and parents to ensure *gaokao* success. Cheating is the main active force taken during the examinations to increase student's chances. In addition, candidates will do anything they believe will help them often times having to do with supplements or different medications. The three months before the *gaokao* is the most intense process of cramming from dusk till dawn, often times studying fourteen to sixteen hours a day. In studying processes, students have been

²⁵ Siegel, Benjamin. "Stressful Times for Chinese Students," *TIME*, June 12, 2007, accessed October 30, 2013, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0%2C8599%2C1631854%2C00.html>.

²⁶ Australian Education International, *Research on China's National College Entrance Examination (the Gaokao)*, quoted from Chinese Ministry of Education – Regulation for Enrolment in Higher Education Institutions 2008.

known to receive amino acid drips, be administered oxygen, and take contraceptives (to avoid menstruating) in order to prolong their studying on a day-to-day basis. “In Tianjin, China’s third-biggest metropolis, doctors reportedly prescribed birth control pills to female test-takers whose parents feared that an untimely period would prove distracting.”²⁷ Any distractions for students are also avoided with some parents with the reserving of hotel rooms in order to put their children at a certain advantage. “The special hotel rooms – which cost up to 800 yuan (\$126) more than an ordinary room – are billed as having previously been rented out to someone who scored high points in the exams. Rooms with lucky numbers such as six – which symbolizes success in Chinese culture, or eight – which represents wealth – are also favorites.”²⁸ In addition to renting hotel rooms, parents will enlist an “exam nanny” to look after the students during exam time. These college-educated nannies provide tutoring as well as help the students cook meals, wash their clothes, and provide emotional support.²⁹

Cheating is another extreme measure students take in order to ensure their *gaokao* success. Punishment for attempting to cheat on the *gaokao* ranges from disqualification from future test taking to imprisonment. Due to answers and test papers being governed by criminal law, cheating is considered to be in violation of the laws of the People’s Republic of China. Wireless technology and the buying of answers are often main forms of cheating, in addition to paying a stand in to take the test in place of the true

²⁷ Siegel, “Stressful Times for Chinese Students.”

²⁸ Hays, Jeffrey. “The Gaokao: The Chinese University Entrance Exam,” Accessed October 25, 2013. <http://factsanddetails.com/china/cat13/sub82/item1649.html>, (Beh Lih Yi, AFP, June 6, 2012).

²⁹ Ibid.

examinee.³⁰ Therefore cheating on the *gaokao* is never a one-person job. In most cases, parents are key facilitators in attempting to get around the system. This results in not only children being punished by the law, but also parents as well. In June 2008, Wenfang took the National College Entrance Exam, but instead of going to college after the exam, she was sent to prison, along with her parents. During the math portion of her exam, a wireless transmitter was discovered that was being used to receive answers from her parents, who were parked outside of the testing site. Her parents purchased the answers for \$1,200 (about 800 RMB) and the transmission equipment for an additional \$700 (about 4,500 RMB) from one of their daughters' classmates. The side business operated by the classmate made around \$4000 (about 27,000 RMB) in profit from selling the test answers he obtained from another source. In total, twenty-six individuals were arrested for "stealing national secrets."³¹ Just a month before the *gaokao* in 2013, the Chinese police dismantled a number of gangs selling cheating equipment to students and parents. In Jilin province, a gang responsible for selling equipment to thirty-seven students and parents was apprehended. Twenty-five suspects were detained in addition to the 403 sets of wireless equipment confiscated, which was valued at over \$48,390 (about 300,000 RMB).³²

As cases of prosecuting cheaters become increasingly prevalent, the general public has been defending its right to cheat on China's most influential test. In 2013,

³⁰ Zhao, *Catching Up or Leading the Way*, 90.

³¹ Fanping Kong, Jingzeng Lu, and Lihua Shi, "Parents Help with Childrens' Gaoke, 12 Indicted in Shandong Province," *Xinhua News*, August 23, 2008, accessed February 7, 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/legal/2008-08/23/content_9637886.htm.

³² Caixiong Zheng, "Ministry Vows to Fight Cheating in Gaokao Exams," *China Daily*, accessed March 20, 2014, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013-06/05/content_16572933.htm.

Zhongxiang, a city in Hubei Province, received a warning from the provinces Education department after officials discovered ninety-nine identical papers in one *gaokao* subject from the previous year. In order to strictly enforce the rules for the 2013 Zhongxiang sitting of the *gaokao*, students found that fifty-four randomly chosen external proctors, opposed to the typical supervision of their own teachers, would supervise them. These proctors used metal detectors to discover and remove secret transmitters, some looking like pencil erasers or mobile phones. In addition, a group of officials outside of the school patrolled the area, catching at least two groups of people attempting to communicate with students from a hotel on the other side of the school's gates. At the exam's end, disgruntled parents and students alike formed an angry mob smashing cars and chanting: "We want fairness. There is no fairness if you do not let us cheat." This chant explaining that cheating was the fairest way to take the *gaokao* was in reference to the cheating epidemic in China's *gaokao* system, and the lack of prevention in other cities and provinces, rendering students taking the Zhongxiang *gaokao* at a disadvantage. An upset father punched the proctor responsible for confiscating his sons cell phone and refusing a bribe to return it, explained his actions to police saying, "I hope my son would do well in the exams. This supervisor affected his performance, so I was angry." Hundreds of police ultimately surrounded the school, allowing proctors trapped in the school to exit safely and local government statement explained the "exam supervision had been too strict and some students did not take it well."³³ The high-stakes nature of the test creates an atmosphere where students will do anything to pass, believing that success on the *gaokao*

³³ Malcolm Moore, "Riot After Chinese Teachers Try to Stop Pupils Cheating," *The Telegraph*, June 2013, accessed March 20, 2014.
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/10132391/Riot-after-Chinese-teachers-try-to-stop-pupils-cheating.html>.

is the only way true happiness. “If cheating can make your classmates like you better and your parents love you, why not do it? We are just trying to prove our worth.”³⁴

³⁴ Jing Lin and Qinghai Chen, “Academic Pressure and Impact on Students’ Development in China,” *McGill Journal of Education* 30, no.2 (1995): 161, quoted in Zhou Shun, “The Distorted Exam Floor,” *Bao Gao Wen She* [Literary Report] (1988): 344.

Chapter Three: High-stakes Testing in Imperial China

Confucian Influences

The teachings of Confucius (*kong fuzi*, 孔夫子) (551-479 BCE) have been prevalent in China before the Civil Service Exams up until present day. As an underlying guiding force, Confucian ethics are highly respected and followed in the Chinese culture, often times without personal direct intent. These complex systems of moral, social, religious, and political teachings are based on the five constant virtues: benevolence (*ren*, 仁), righteousness/justice (*yi*, 义), propriety/courtesy (*li*, 礼), wisdom/knowledge (*zhi*, 智), and fidelity/truthfulness (*xin*, 信). Along with the five virtues come the five cardinal relationships: ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, siblings (brothers), and friends. This hierarchical structure of relationships informed everyone how they were to act in every relationship in order to promote harmony in society.³⁵ The Confucian emphasis on a harmonious society stems from Confucius's personal belief that the welfare of a country was dependent upon the moral cultivation of its people within an understood hierarchy. He believed that embracing the five virtues and respecting the five relationships would lead to individual cultivation, resulting in a nation of cultivated people. "The Confucian ethic did not stress innate ability per se, seeing it as of little value if not accompanied by moral training, but taught that all had a capacity to discern the correct ordering of human relationships, the cornerstone of good government. This quality of discrimination has been aptly defined as "the evaluating mind." Men were born equal and the "divine spark" was to be found in all, but they became different from one

³⁵ Don Starr, "China and the Confucian Education Model," *Teaching & Learning Position Paper* (2012): 8, accessed April 6, 2014, Universitas 21.

another through education.”³⁶ This equality was also explained through Confucius’s belief that education should not be dictated by class distinction. Rather everyone should cultivate their intellectual nature, which would subsequently result in success and status. With all encompassing teachings, Confucian beliefs permeate throughout Chinese society by focusing on individual cultivation resulting in national harmony.

Spending most of his life as a teacher, Confucius is known as the author/editor of the Five Classics, which were used as testing content in the Imperial Civil Service Exams. These Five Classics (*Classic of Documents*, *Classic of Poetry*, *Classic of Changes*, *Classic of Rites* and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*) formed the core of the Chinese curriculum and are still present in modern day China. Another highly regarded Confucian, written by his followers, is a commentary on the Five Classics known as the *Analects*. The *Analects* is a collection of Confucius’s sayings and ideas that reflected his views on society and in turn education. “Confucius said, Those born with understanding rank highest. Those who study and gain understanding come next. Those who face difficulties and yet study – they are next. Those who face difficulties but never study – they are the lowest type of people.”³⁷ Confucianism teaches that education is the path to self-improvement and that anyone can rise up through study and perseverance. The Civil Service Examinations (and *gaokao*) reflect Confucian ethics of opportunity being able to pass through the class system on the basis of individual ability, ability only gained through intense education.

³⁶ Robert Taylor, *China’s Intellectual Dilemma: Politics and University Enrollment, 1949-1978* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1981), 2.

³⁷ Burton Watson, *Analects of Confucius* (New York: Columbia University Press 2007), 16:9.

The Imperial Civil Service Examinations

The modern *gaokao* is an indirect descendent of the Civil Service Examinations, or the *keju* (科举) used by the imperial court to create a group of loyal scholar-officials. The test was as equally high-stakes as the *gaokao*, theoretically allowing common males to become government officials, which in turn granted them social status and better quality of life. This testing system contributed to forming Chinese cultural practices through standardization methods as well as promoting the intensive pursuit of education.³⁸

Standardization and equality in front of examinations were initiated in this high-stakes testing system with the ability for any man to take the test regardless of social status. This system was a reaction to the pre-Song dynasty (920-1279 AD) method of choosing states officials, which primarily relied on nominations by existing officials. The *keju* in turn diminished the natural corruption and unfair advantage created by a key cultural tendency, *guanxi*(关系). *Guanxi* is the Chinese basis of interaction and loyalty, which in English would be most adequately translated as “relationship.” The *guanxi*-based system could be compared to a western idea of “networking,” however the relationship ties pervade far deeper than surface level mutual benefit. *Guanxi* runs deep through familial ties as well as a sense of loyalty through friendship. High-stakes testing, therefore, benefits the most people in a *guanxi* based society due to elimination of a biased system. In this right, the Civil Service Examinations allowed for any man, regardless of social or economic status, regardless of *guanxi*, to have the same equal opportunity to attend top universities as all other applicants. “One of the original intents

³⁸ The *keju* policies being discussed refer to that of the most modern procedures from the Qing dynasty (1644-1912).

of the Keju exam system was to ‘reduce the privileges of the hereditary aristocrat families that threatened the imperial autocracy.’”³⁹ As a means for broadening the class background of the Chinese government officials, the *keju* provided opportunities based off of personal work ethic and determination encouraged by Confucian teachings.

Teaching Methods

The testing process of the *keju* was far more extensive than that of the current college entrance exams, however. Learning tendencies and behaviors were similarly crafted from a very young age helping create a system of one-track, rote memorization, testing based education systems. From the beginning of learning, around age three, boys were instructed primarily in the classics. Other subject matters were left to workers, mathematics for merchants, and science and technology for the working class. To reach officialdom one had to study the Four Books, the Five Classics, and other Confucian works, in addition to possessing the ability and knowledge to compose essays and poems. As early learning is the creation of future beliefs, initial elementary learning skills (such as reading, writing) were taught using Confucian doctrine or materials promoting Confucian ideals. Using twenty-five beginner characters, young boys were first taught to write by copying this verse: “Let us present our work to father. Confucius himself taught three thousand. Seventy were capable gentlemen. You, young scholars, eight or nine! Work well to attain virtue, and you will understand propriety.”⁴⁰ Though there was no need for the child to know what the characters meant, using this material opposed to non-Confucian promoting materials indicates that Confucian ideals were the most important

³⁹ Suen and Yu, “Exam-driven Education,” 25.

⁴⁰ Ichiasada Miyazaki and Conrad Schirokauer, *China's Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China* (New York: Weatherhill, 1976), 14.

guidelines to follow. Additionally, children's understanding at this point was unnecessary. However, they were able to write the entire poem through practice and memorization. Continuing to place emphasis on examination success through Confucian education, formal education was taught by former officials who had lost their positions or scholars. Further perpetuating the cycle of understanding that only through one learning style could a man achieve success in society these scholars had repeatedly taken and failed the examinations. Teachers educated their students by reading texts, phrase by phrase, with the students repeating the text. Students who had learned to read the text would continue on to reciting the passage one hundred times, fifty times with the book open and another fifty times with the book face down. Through this students adapted to "learning by heart", or in other words memorizing, large texts and practiced answering questions involving certain passages that would be selected as examination topics. The *Analects*, *Mencius*, *Book of Changes*, *Book of Documents*, *Book of Poetry*, *Book of Rites*, and *Tso Chuan* alone contain about 431,286 characters.⁴¹ Due to the sheer amount of texts that required not only recounting but also understanding, "rapid-study methods were devised with the sole purpose of preparing candidates for the examinations."⁴²

College Admissions Exams within the Keju System

Where as the *gaokao* structure requires examinees to take only one test to decide their fate, *keju* examinees were put through multiple levels of tests that would propel them to a higher level of importance and therefore social status. Through this ladder of success, examinees went through an extremely long process including multiple levels of

⁴¹ "The *Great Learning* and the *Doctrine of the Mean*, which together with the *Analects* and the *Mencius* constitute the Four Books, are not counted separately, since they are included in the *Book of Rites*.

⁴² Miyazaki and Schirokaur, *China's Examination Hell*, 17.

examinations. Initially, those who wished to participate in the Civil Service Examinations were required to pass a series of entrance exams to the government university.⁴³ The government school system consisted of a national university in the capital, with prefectural, departmental, and district schools in the provinces. In order to successfully move up the ladder, one must pass the district examination, the prefectural examination, and the qualifying examination, in that order. Only upon completion of these levels of entrance examinations would a student be able to attend government school and further participate in the examinations that actually led to civil service. Admission to the examinations was dependent on a candidate's family for the past three generations not having participated in low-class endeavors, such as running a brothel, and having a guarantor confirm his family's exploits were unblemished.⁴⁴

District Examination

District examinations started early in the morning with canons going off well before sunrise to alert the candidates to start preparing for the day. Before seven in the morning, all examinees were in the large testing hall off of the district offices awaiting the start of the test. Candidates were called to the front of the room, bowed to the magistrate and waited for their identity to be confirmed by his guarantor. Taking a set of answer sheets, the candidate returned to his seat to await the completion of distribution throughout the hall. After all the answer sheets had been given out, the magistrate announced the first question, quoting a passage from the Four Books and asking for the candidates to explain the view of a known scholar and conclude with his own explanation. After an hour, proctors went around and stamped a seal on each candidates test to

⁴³ Miyazaki and Schirokaur, *China's Examination Hell*, 18.

⁴⁴ *ibid*, 19.

indicate how far the student had progressed in their answer. Following the first question, two more questions were issued and candidates were allowed to work on their answers until nightfall. The questions consisted of one based on the Four Books and the other requiring the students to write a poem using a specific style and set of guidelines. Following completion, examinees were let out of the testing hall in groups of fifty to prevent unauthorized people from entering the hall.⁴⁵

Following the examination, the magistrate took three or four days to grade the answer sheets and posted the scores from highest to lowest with names of the passing candidates distinguished with a red dot next to their name. The day following this announcement, candidates participated in a second examination consisting of three questions: one based on the Four Books, one on the Five Classics, and one calling for the composition of a poem. The day after these results were posted, candidates were called for a third examination consisting of a question from the Four Books, the writing of a poem, and composing a rhymed prose using a specific style.

Following the announcement of these results, remaining candidates participated in an examination consisting of answering a question from the Four Books, composing a poem, and writing an essay regarding historical events or government. The fifth and final component of the district examinations was not intended to fail any of the examinees, but contained a key question that had to be answered without error. The first question was from the Four Books, but the second question was to write down one of the sixteen articles of the *Sheng-lun Kuang-hsun*, which was an “Imperial Rescript on Education” issued by the fifth emperor of the Qing dynasty, Yung Cheng. As to not disrespect the

⁴⁵ *ibid*, 20-21.

emperor and his writings, examinees were required to reproduce these documents without mistake as to avoid failing the last part of the district examinations.⁴⁶ After reading the final set of examination papers, the magistrate determined the list of successful candidates and posted them in the same manner as the previous results.

In a process lasting around twenty days, the district examinations were intended to eliminate as many candidates as possible in order to meet the schools' quotas. Quotas for district schools were determined based on the areas population and cultural level, naturally resulting in areas with higher cultural levels having more intense competition and remote areas difficulty being comparatively easy. Though an area with less competition would be easier to pass initially, students having experienced competition from the start of education would thrive further down the line in subsequent levels of examination. The district examination, if passed, merely granted examinees permission to move on to take the prefectural exams.⁴⁷

Prefectural Examinations

Prefectural examinations were given at the same time in every district as a preventive measure to prohibit a man from lying about his permanent residence and take the examination more than once and were conducted in the prefectural capital in a permanent examination hall. Candidates gathered early in the morning by district and were led into the hall by teachers from the districts schools. This examination followed the district examination structure being administered in three parts and included the reproduction of an article from the *Sheng-lun Kuang-hsun* in the third and final session. Each group was given different questions and scoring was done separately for each

⁴⁶ *ibid*, 23.

⁴⁷ *ibid*, 24-25.

district. The prefectural examinations eliminated nearly half of the candidates while allowing the other half eligibility for the qualifying examination. Those who earned a prefectural position had the most common degree in imperial China, taking either positions of leadership in their town or becoming schoolteachers and perpetuating the educational system that had provided them with success.⁴⁸

Following the announcement of the results of the prefectural examination the provincial director of studies, reports directly to the emperor with education critiques as well as being an examination official, made his way to the prefecture. Upon arrival, the director paid his respects at the local Confucian temple and lectured the students on the Confucian classics, which they were to be tested in the following days.⁴⁹

The day of the examination, candidates were grouped by district, searched for prohibited materials, and allowed to enter the room. Answer sheets were distributed to the candidates who removed their name from the papers, as to only allow his corresponding seat number to negate the possibility for bias in grading procedures. The first question, different for candidates from each district, concerned the Four Books. Two hours later a second question regarding the Four Books was announced, in addition to a poem based on a directed theme.⁵⁰ After the results were announced, this time by seat number, the passing students continued to the second session, weeding out just enough so that final selections were just about made.⁵¹ Following the results from the second session, the third session commenced requiring candidates to answer questions relating to the classics and writing the first few sentences of their answer for the first examination paper

⁴⁸ *ibid*, 25.

⁴⁹ *ibid*, 26-27.

⁵⁰ *ibid*, 27.

⁵¹ *ibid*, 29.

from memory, as to confirm the identity of the candidates. The fourth and final session consisted of explaining themes from the Four Books and Five Classics, a poetry assignment (both results were inconsequential), and writing out a passage from the *Sheng-lun Kuang-hsun*.⁵²

Officials did everything they could to prevent examination irregularities on the final, most important test, and in doing so the director prepared ten different seals to distinguish candidates participating in improper actions. These frowned upon activities consisted of: leaving one's seat, exchanging papers, exchanging papers, dropping a paper, talking, looking at other examinees papers, changing seats, disobeying instruction, violating regulations, humming, or failure to complete the exam by sundown.⁵³ In grading the examinations the director was assisted by his private secretaries, all well acquainted with his ideas as to assess candidates in the way most parallel to the opinions of the director.⁵⁴ Though candidate's identities remained secret to the grader, exams with stamps on them seriously impacted the judges' impression of the examinee, especially in a competitive pool of submissions lacking indication of impropriety.⁵⁵

Qualifying Examinations

This qualifying examination, considered the most important of the three, was the last step to becoming a licentiate, *shengyuan* (生员). The announcement of final results simultaneously served as a school-entrance ceremony and was held in a Confucian temple, "a location chosen to symbolize the fact that entrance into a national school was

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ *ibid*, 28.

⁵⁴ *ibid*, 29.

⁵⁵ *ibid*, 28.

equivalent to formally becoming a disciple of Confucius.”⁵⁶ The *shengyuan* subsequently had an audience with the director, dressed in the uniform of a licentiate, and was given a cap ornament, an insignia used to distinguish his newly gained academic and social status.⁵⁷ The names of men who had passed were reported to their respective districts and announcements were sent to their homes. Upon returning to their districts, the licentiates gathered with their magistrate and instructors in the district schools temple of Confucius to retake the oath declaring them disciples of Confucius. Licentiates also took time to appreciate the relationships that helped them throughout the examination process, offering gifts to guarantors and instructors.⁵⁸

Though the school system was intended to provide opportunity for learned people to enter the workforce, most students concentrated on studying for the Civil Service Examinations and ignored the alternative route to office life through schooling. Similarly, government officials neglected the school system and emphasized the selection of intellectual men through the Civil Service Examination process. Though proper schooling had its benefits, Civil Service Examinations provided more than enough candidates for public office in a cheaper way as a result of examinations only being given at certain time intervals.⁵⁹ However, annual examinations given through the school system did contribute to the Civil Service Examination system. Through these annual examinations, students were divided into six grades of rank according to their score on the exam. The best students, taken from the top two grades, were automatically permitted to take the

⁵⁶ *ibid*, 30.

⁵⁷ *ibid*, 30.

⁵⁸ *ibid*, 31.

⁵⁹ *ibid*, 34-35.

provincial examination, the first part of the Civil Service Examinations.⁶⁰ Students in the inferior grades were disqualified from taking the provincial exams. However, just before the provincial exam, the director could convene the disqualified students for a preliminary examination to fill any last-minute vacancies.⁶¹

Provincial Examinations

The first stage of the Civil Service Exams, given once every three years, lasted three days and two nights, all of which was spent in a large testing compound. Only given in the years of the rat, hare, horse, and cock, the first session of the exam was always held on the ninth day of the eighth month of the Chinese calendar, with the second and third sessions following on the twelfth and fifteenth day, respectively.⁶²

The permanent testing compound in each provincial capital was a collection of thousands of cells big enough to fit only one person. Examinees each resided in their own testing cell, devoid of doors or any furniture each cell contained only three long boards to be placed across the cell from wall to wall with the lowest becoming a seat, the middle becoming a desk, and the highest acting as a shelf.⁶³ Candidates were required to bring their own writing materials (ink, ink stone, brushes), a water pitcher, an earthenware pot, food, bedding, and a curtain to hang across the cell entrance to serve as a makeshift door.⁶⁴ Each applicant went through a series of searches before entering their cell, passing through many gates that would be secured upon arrival of all candidates.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ The top five or ten candidates in the next grade were also admitted. Miyazaki and Schirokaur, *China's Examination Hell*, 38.

⁶¹ *ibid*, 38.

⁶² *ibid*, 39.

⁶³ *ibid*, 41.

⁶⁴ *ibid*, 44.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*.

Early morning on the ninth day, following verification of identity, question and answer sheets were distributed and candidates began working until their deadline of sundown on the following day. The first day's examination pertained to three themes from the Four Books along with the composition of a poem in a specific rhyming style. Upon completion of the first session, candidates turned in their answers with those having acceptable presentation given exit passes to return back to the testing compound the next day.⁶⁶

Upon return to the compound, candidates re-gathered at the front of the gate where they went through roll call, waiting to re-enter. The distribution of the second round of questions involving five questions on the Five Classics and a reproduction of the opening paragraph or poem composed on the earlier test in order to verify the identity of the test taker.⁶⁷ The evening of the thirteenth day, answers from the second session were due, and candidates proceeded to take the third section two days later. The final component of the provincial examinations was an essay question, composed by the chief examiner, involving a commentary on past or present government policies. These final essays were usually written with less care than the other sections due to the coinciding of the harvest moon, and examinees typically left before nightfall.⁶⁸

The importance of the examination also created an intense procedure for grading. With fears of cheating and corruption being at the forefront of examination culture,

⁶⁶ These paper standards consisted of skipping parts of a page, handing in a white paper with no writing on it, leaving blank space or cutting out missing characters and pasting them in. An examinee that was found to be in violation of proper paper standards was barred from taking future examinations. Miyazaki and Schirokaur, *China's Examination Hell*, 4.

⁶⁷ *ibid*, 50-51.

⁶⁸ *ibid*, 51.

assessment procedures were remarkably thorough and required many different components to ensure validity. The provincial exams averaged the score from all three sessions opposed to the elimination between each session as in the qualifying exams. This complex process could take up to a month, with hundreds of officials grading tens of thousands of papers.

When candidates initially arrived at the compound they wrote their information on their test packet. However, this information was removed from the booklet for grading purposes and the answer sheets were tracked by the candidates' examination cell's number. As to avoid graders partiality to a certain candidate, the candidates original answer sheet, written with black ink, was sent to clerks to be copied on separate sheets of paper using vermilion ink. These first copying processes required the labor of several thousand clerks and upon completion were sent to the proofreaders. The several hundred proofreaders received the original copies and the vermilion copies, which were then sent to the custodian, responsible for retaining the originals and delivering the copies to the internal examiners. The associate examiners would first receive the vermilion copies and decided in general who passed and who failed. As it was not their duty to issue the final rulings, papers appearing to have passed were stamped with "recommended" and appearing failures stamped with "mediocre" or "without merit."⁶⁹

All papers were then sent from the associate examiners to the chief and deputy examiners who usually only read the recommended papers, despite having access to all answer sheets.⁷⁰ When all grading was completed, the final decisions on who would pass were made according to fixed provincial quotas, ranging from forty to ninety candidates

⁶⁹ibid, 52

⁷⁰ ibid

depending on size of the province.⁷¹ The examiners then met with administrative officials outside of the compound and compared the vermilion copies to the original to ensure a match. If matched, the seal was broken on the cover of the original answer papers revealing the candidates name.⁷² The vermilion copies of the ten best sets of answers were also forwarded to the capital for the emperors' personal inspection. The examination staff then brought out a placard naming the successful candidates from the sixth man on down. The top five examinees would be written later, giving those who didn't initially see their names a moment of hope.

Those who passed acquired a new status as a "graduate" for the rest of their lives and were now qualified to take the metropolitan examination in Peking and eligible to hold certain offices. The man passing with the highest grade received the additional title, *jiyuan* (解元), earning them great prestige.⁷³ However, the declared status had to go through one more check before these examinees were officially declared successful. Answers collected from all over the country were sent to the capital at Peking where forty officials assigned by the Board of Rites examined the original black ink versions against the red-ink versions to decide if the papers were worth passing in addition to not having violated any policies. Any irregularities discovered would result in the cancellation of the graduates' newly acquired status.⁷⁴

The year following the provincial examinations, candidates for the metropolitan examinations gathered in Peking. However, due to metropolitan examination regulations

⁷² A further and officially final assessment of the tests would be done by the Board of Rites in Peking – Miyazaki and Schirokaur, *China's Examination Hell*, 55.

⁷³ *ibid*, 56.

⁷⁴ *ibid*, 61.

allowing anyone who had ever passed the provincial exams the opportunity to take the metropolitan examinations there was worry that all the candidates would not fit in the Peking examination compound. As a result, a reexamination was done less than a month before the metropolitan exam, taking one day and consisting of a question on the Four Books and the composition of a poem. These answers were graded by comparing answers from the candidates' provincial exam to see if the writing was identical and if the first examiners grade was accurate.⁷⁵ Candidates ranked in the top three groups of the reexamination were then eligible to take the next metropolitan examination. The fourth group was suspended from taking the subsequent exam ranging from one to three years depending on their score. Candidates listed in the fifth group were removed of their status as graduates and resumed the rank of a commoner.⁷⁶

Adverse weather with poor housing conditions provided obstacles to many candidates, especially those of privilege whose survival skills had never been put to the test. Upon wind and rain, candidates would have to construct barriers with their sheets in order to keep their testing materials from ruin, in addition to worrying about splattered oil from their candles used when working in the dark. Soiled testing paper often resulted in suspension from subsequent examinations as a reflection of commonly held views that retribution for evil was carried out in the examination compound.⁷⁷ Reward for good deeds was also believed to be carried out in the examination process, with many stories of

⁷⁵ *ibid*, 65.

⁷⁶ *ibid*, 65.

⁷⁷ *ibid*, 49.

men of good character being provided with some kind of spiritual assistance leading to examination success.⁷⁸

Metropolitan Examinations

Beginning on the ninth day of the third month of the Chinese calendar, the metropolitan examinations effectively served as the heart of the Civil Service Exams due to the subsequent palace examinations never resulting in failure but more as another reexamination.⁷⁹ The Minister of Rites, functioning as the Minister of Education, designated one chief examiner who received the first set of questions received by the emperor. On the day the candidates entered the compound, the chief examiner took the question and began printing it inside the compound to distribute to candidates the next day.⁸⁰ This first question consisted of three questions on the Four Books and a poem. Handing in their papers, candidates left the compound until the next morning for the second round of testing. This time the chief examiner selected the five questions on the Five Classics. For the final session, also compiled by the chief examiner, candidates were to compose five essays. At the completion of the exam grading, the Minister of Rites petitioned the emperor for his approval of the list of succeeding participants. This process involved the verification of the red-ink copies against the black-ink originals and was followed by the issuing of the results in front of the Board of Rites.⁸¹ Since it was regulation not to fail anyone in the palace examinations, passing the metropolitan examination was crucial to passing the palace examination.⁸² However, similarly to

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ *ibid*, 66.

⁸⁰ *ibid*, 66-67.

⁸¹ *ibid*, 67.

⁸² *ibid*, 70.

previous examinations, all of the passing answers were sent to re-examiners, appointed by the emperor, who cross-examined the examinations with a self-submitted life history written with the candidates' own hands. After the examination papers validity had been authenticated, the final list was reported and approved by the emperor.⁸³

In the beginning of the Qing dynasty, those who succeeded in the metropolitan examination were automatically eligible to take the palace examination. However, during the reign of Qing Long (1735-1796) a metropolitan reexamination was ordered to serve as a preparatory test for the palace examination. The intention of this was to verify the adequacy of a candidates' academic prowess, familiarize the candidates with the location and protocol, in addition to ensuring the candidate's identities.⁸⁴ Without status or office, these examinees were required to submit a letter of guarantee from a capital official to the Board of Rites and have this sponsor present upon entrance to the examination hall, once again to verify identity of the test taker. The emperor held this examination lasting one day and consisting of one question on the Four Books and one poem. The papers were then checked for calligraphy against the original black-ink submissions of the metropolitan exam. Candidates who finished in the top three ranks were immediately admitted to the palace examination, with those in the fourth rank or lower being removed of their right to take the examination from one to three times depending on the seriousness of their insufficiency.⁸⁵

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ *ibid*, 71.

⁸⁵ *ibid*, 72.

Palace Examinations

The palace examinations theoretically conducted by the emperor, but in practice conducted by high court officials with outstanding literary ability, were held on the twenty-first day of the fourth month. The emperor's apparent control of the test was to create a bureaucratic solidarity between the candidates and emperor by creating an atmosphere where the candidates would consider the emperor their patron.⁸⁶ Questions were submitted by eight selected government official readers, approved by the emperor, and subsequently printed for the next day's examination. Soldiers guarded questions all night, while the Board of Rites printed formal answer booklets.⁸⁷ The morning of the examination, candidates were divided into two groups depending on the even or odd number of their seat assignment. Upon the completion of roll call, answer booklets were distributed to each group as they passed through their final set of gates.⁸⁸ As imperial guests, Civil Service Examinees would not be put through the same horrifying conditions of the previous examinations, but rather treated with the utmost courtesy, having their materials carried by soldiers to their designated seat and later served a noontime meal with tea, signs of increased status already becoming noticeable.⁸⁹ Pomp and circumstance were becoming increasingly prevalent in this process, seemingly as the candidates own status increased, so did the formality of the testing procedures. The senior academician of the grand secretariat then presented the examination papers to the bowing minister of rites. Following suit, the candidates approached the officials of the Board of Rites, bowing respectfully as they accepted their booklets and entered the examination hall to

⁸⁶ *ibid*, 75.

⁸⁷ *ibid*, 76.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*.

⁸⁹ *ibid*, 79.

begin working.⁹⁰ These set of questions were phrased in a different manner and furthermore required much more formality and respect than the responses on other examinations. With the emperor being the conductor of the test, and overarching grader, all answers were addressed to the emperor using formal language intended to convey immense respect for the emperor and personal modesty.⁹¹ Candidate's answers began with sentences like "Your humble servant replies to your question," and introductions often included a praise of the emperor.⁹² "Without a pause in state affairs, Your Majesty devotes Yourself to government, and I am most gratefully fortunate that, despite this, You take time from the pressure of work to seek from even on as inexperienced as Your servant his opinions on the rights and wrongs of the past and present governments."⁹³ At the beginning of the Qing dynasty, emperor's questions pertained to the examinees own personal opinions on the ruling of the country. However, as time passed, questions gradually became formalized and candidates' views regarding historical events were to be discussed in a more ideological form.⁹⁴

As sunset arrived, answers were turned in with no less than one thousand characters. With names of examinees covered, once again being recognized by seat number, each of the eight readers inspected thirty to forty papers, assigning preliminary grades. Each test was read by every reader and filtered into five groups: full credit, eighty percent, sixty percent, forty percent, and twenty percent.⁹⁵ The ten best answers were then ranked and presented to the emperor, who personally examined and officially ranked

⁹⁰ *ibid* 75-76.

⁹¹ *ibid*, 77.

⁹² *Ibid*.

⁹³ *ibid*, 77-78.

⁹⁴ *ibid*, 78.

⁹⁵ *ibid*, 80.

them. The emperor also assigned the grades after looking at the candidates' faces to judge their behaviors and appearances.⁹⁶

This ranking system was extremely important, as a candidates' rank in the test would provide them with further benefits down the line. Though passing the Civil Service Examination was a feat in itself, the most success and status accompanied first rank. The announcement of the results took place in the most important pavilion in the palace, the T'ai-ho Pavilion, where all important formal ceremonies were held. Ceremonial dress was required for all government officials at the ceremony deemed "the calling of names," serving as "both a graduation terminating many years spent as a student and a coming-of-age ceremony marking the attainment of the qualification to be a self-supporting official."⁹⁷ The ceremony, containing many different components, stressed loyalty to the government through their achievement and conveyed the candidate's extreme respect for higher officials through different honoring practices. Though all of the successful examinees were now *jinshi* (进士), often translated in the West to "doctor," according to their new degrees, the man receiving the highest score, *zhuangyuan* (状元), received the greatest glory.⁹⁸ However, this glory was not always an indicator of true success with stories of troubled career decisions or sacrifice for country resulting in demotion or death, luck was the most important part of future success.

Rewarded with banquets, gifts, and praise the new *jinshi* participated in many celebrations in their honor following the deliverance of their degrees, with the *zhuangyuan* given the task of being the representative of the group in ceremonial

⁹⁶ *ibid*, 81.

⁹⁷ *ibid*, 83.

⁹⁸ *ibid*, 87.

situations.⁹⁹ On the first day of the fifth month, the *jinshi* were ordered to pay their respects in the university's temple of Confucius, further paying respects to the man that got them there, as well as other Confucian worthies such as, Mencius, Zengzi, and Zisi.¹⁰⁰ The *jinshi* also received gifts that served as a physical representation of their newly acquired status in a government issued allotment of silver to set up triumphal arches outside of their residences or entrance to street their house was on. This arches served as objects of prestige, giving not only the *jinshi*'s family pride and status, but also increasing the reputation of their town or village.¹⁰¹ This new group of elite men also gave copious thanks to the superior officials and examiners that participated in their examination process and with their new status swore lifelong friendship and loyalty to these men in an attempt to solidify their relationships in a truly Chinese fashion.¹⁰²

Though the first place examinee earned higher honors and often a career as an official, receiving this honor did not by any means assure a man's success. Luck played the most important part in achieving first place in life, and when the luck ran out men often fell back into the ranks of a commoner. In 1814, the top examinee Lung An-yen was "assigned to the bureau responsible for compiling the *Shih-lu*, the 'veritable records' of the preceding reign."¹⁰³ Lung's wife, less amused with his new status, created conflict in the home making Lung spend less time at home. Once, while he was gone a document from the *Shih-lu* Compilation Bureau arrived for Lung to revise. As Lung was in no hurry to return home, a second messenger came back during his absence to return the document

⁹⁹ *ibid*, 86.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid*, 87.

¹⁰¹ *ibid*, 88.

¹⁰² *ibid*, 89.

¹⁰³ *ibid*, 93.

back to the Bureau and his wife gave the unrevised document to the second messenger without any revision by Lung. The document contained an important passage and lack of revision led to a serious error. This error resulted in immediate removal from his prestigious position. Without any special abilities, he ended as an undistinguished official, far from the prestigious position he held before this ghastly mistake.¹⁰⁴

With intense focus on Confucian doctrine being the most rewarded area of learning, this high-stakes testing method led to a decrease in emphasis on other important areas of study. Society dictated through the *keju* what knowledge and subject matter was worth knowing to be important. Emphasizing that learning Confucian teaching's resulted in high rewards inadvertently de-valued all other skills and subject matter. Areas including medicine and technology were diverted to preparing for examinations, which of course were based solely on Confucian texts. This created a shift in academic focus "by both the diversion of attention toward the study of Confucianism and poetry and the basic de-valuation of technology within the Confucian philosophy."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Suen and Yu, "Exam-driven Education," 27.

Chapter 4: High-stakes Testing and the Cultural Revolution

The *Gaokao* Through the Cultural Revolution

The Cultural Revolution also contributed to this intertwined nature of education in Chinese society with its revolutionary leaders radical reforms on education style. The necessity for an instant work force became a top priority pre- and mid-Cultural Revolution, influencing the *gaokao* to take on an urgent, high-stakes form.

Following the creation of People's Republic of China in 1949, China's government found they had real problems politically, economically, and academically. In order to fix these concerns, China needed a national workforce of intelligent, learned individuals who could provide labor in accordance with the states new goals. With this in mind, the Chinese government attempted to adapt Soviet educational style processes in order to benefit the country's desired rapid industrial growth. After the Soviets launching of Sputnik I, the Chinese saw the Soviet system having the ability to compete with Western innovation. "In Chinese eyes, the centralized, technically oriented modern school system of the USSR presented a rational model worthy of emulation."¹⁰⁶ This regimented system used the allocation of resources to create the intended workforce. In this way, each higher-education institution "was assigned a specific role as a comprehensive university of the pure arts and sciences, a polytechnical university, an agricultural or specialist engineering institution, a teachers' university, or an institution specializing in some other narrow knowledge areas, with nationally standardized

¹⁰⁶ John F. Cleverley, *The Schooling of China* (North Sydney: Allen & Urwin, 1991), 128.

curricula in each case.”¹⁰⁷ This allocation system was the beginning of intense competition due to the specified nature of enrollment guidelines, requiring valuing candidates’ preferences less than planned allocation numbers. Due to this, the level of examination performance was the most common yardstick when students with exceptional test scores had chosen the same preference.¹⁰⁸ At this time, enrollment regulations were based on test scores; however, each institution was responsible for its own enrollment within the framework of centrally devised regulations. This meant that as long as ability was proven, students would be enrolled based off of other merits as well including political adequacy and previous employment history. As higher education institutions were divided into priority categories, institutions were placed in order of rank on the basis of China’s national workforce needs.

In 1958, Chairman Mao launched “The Great Leap Forward” in order to aid the rapid transformation of China into an industrialized communist society from its roots as an agrarian society. Through industrialization and collectivization, this movement attempted to adapt industrial and agricultural processes to Chinese society by creating communes overseen by local government. These communes served as their own little societies, organizing hospitals, laying down and administered laws, as well as surveying education needs. Academically, curriculum was integrated and discarded “on the criterion of usefulness” often-encouraging military training. The integration of labor with knowledge was used in an attempt to combine work with study in order to “eliminate the

¹⁰⁷ Ruth Hayhoe, *China’s Universities, 1895-1995: A Century of Cultural Conflict* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 5.

¹⁰⁸ Taylor, *China’s Intellectual Dilemma*, 87.

divorce between mental and physical labour, unite theory and practice, and provide the foundation for an all-round education.”¹⁰⁹

Due to national policy, based on Maoist doctrine, now emphasizing the value of labor, the Chinese government reacted by giving preferential university acceptance to workers and peasants taking part in revolutionary work. The workers were also allowed admission without undergoing rigorous admissions examination (although individual institutions proctored their own exams in order to ensure the students ability to keep up with the work). These preferential acceptance rules for laborers, Party personnel and vocational middle school graduates, among others, implied that preferential treatment was given to those who serve the state as a reward for their loyalty to the state system and processes. In 1959, the principle enrolment regulations required Party committee leadership, class background (preference given to worker-peasants), and responsibility of each institution to ensure the quality of its enrolments. Along with this came the initial categorization of higher education institutions with the creation of “key point” universities. This was done in order to guarantee the quality of the institution, thereby guaranteeing the quality of students in attendance. Key point institutions would enroll the best students, have the most favorable student-teacher ratios, provide the most up-to-date facilities and further national construction by providing high quality teachers for the rest of the education system.

These enrolment regulations of preferential acceptance with State submission continued until 1961 when Party and government personnel were no longer guaranteed

¹⁰⁹ Cleverley, *The Schooling of China*, 144.

entry or allowed to demand lowered acceptance levels. Instead, all applicants would be selected based on examination performance.

When the Cultural Revolution began in 1966 Chairman Mao questioned the effectiveness of the education system in its entirety. In the second half of 1966 teaching in schools and universities was suspended, with most of these schools not opening up again for another three years, and some remaining inactive for ten years or more. On June 13, 1966, a Joint Directive of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council announced the abolition of the entrance examination system. The year's enrolment work would be delayed for six months in order to carry out the Cultural Revolution and to prepare new admission procedures. The new methods of enrolment, for the time being, were based on the historically used system of recommendation and selection.¹¹⁰ Students were to be chosen from among a group of recommended students for their outstanding political, intellectual, and physical qualities. Selection of students then became a "social laboratory" used to serve proletarian politics in combination with productive labor in order to better coordinated with the State's other social and economic activities.¹¹¹ Selection for enrolment was not to be performed in isolation, but rather in coordination with China's social and economic goals. This plan was enacted in order to better incorporate the masses into the education system instead of the perpetual promotion of privileged people. Although schools and colleges remained open, classes were not held.

¹¹⁰ Systems of recruitment by recommendation have been used since the Han dynasty.

¹¹¹ Taylor, *China's Intellectual Dilemma*, 151.

Students and factory workers joining Mao's revolutionary movement, deemed "Red Guards," were responsible for spreading Mao's message and intentions for the new direction of the Chinese nation. Throughout the Cultural Revolution, Red Guards were dispatched as the main enforcing agency for the Maoist revolution resulting in many violent and vandalizing practices throughout China and specifically in educational institutions. In July 1968, as Mao began to realize the chaos created by the broad ruling of the Red Guards, Mao created "Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Teams" who were sent back to their respective campuses to restore order and provide proletarian leadership. These teams further assisted in setting up re-education centers for academics, teachers and administrators. These re-education centers were called "May 7 cadre schools" per the Chairman's directive of 1966. As of mid-1968, university and college staff were sent to the countryside to labor and live like peasants, read Maoist doctrine, reclaim land, build their own dwellings, and plant necessary crops for nourishment. This movement discredited and dislodged educators from power, as they were educating under the "old" system. Revolutionary educators had to be educated by the Revolution, rendering past educators without the same status as pre-Cultural Revolution thinkers and out of touch with current national interests.

The Red Guards, under CCP and Mao direction, also concentrated on the requirement that urban youth go 'up to the mountains or down to the countryside.' Mao's belief was that educated young (and old) people needed to be re-educated by the poor, lower-middle class peasant workers of the countryside. Over 10 million educated youth were relocated in the period of 1968 to 1975, with unit superiors only allowing people to leave upon pledging themselves to country service at mass rallies.

In 1968, Mao begrudgingly decided to reaffirm the role of colleges and universities in China, though regular admissions were not restarted until the early 1970's. The reopening of universities was a slow process with only six institutions being open by March of 1971.

The enrolment process of 1970 was designed to incorporate the masses in the enrolment process by first accepting voluntary individual registration, which was followed by recommendation by the masses. This promoted Maoist doctrine by removing opportunity for advantage of one "type" of person by integrating education and society. Only once the mass recommendation was secured was approval by leadership necessary, this leading to a re-examination process by institutes of higher education.¹¹² This system was intended to satisfy four different groups simultaneously: the individual, the masses, the leadership, and the higher education institutes themselves. This recommendation and selection system emphasized class origin and political attitude as main admissions criteria, along with a required two-year minimum work experience, good health, entry age between 20-25 and political reliability. Though previous education was included, political factors were more of a heavy influence due to the belief that previous political qualifications would overcome any educational shortcomings.¹¹³ Due to the required work experience, middle school graduates were sent to the countryside to participate in work experience in order to become eligible for admittance. These 'worker-peasant-soldier students' received free accommodation, medical treatment, tuition and food.

With the "demands of self-reliance and learning wisdom from the masses" educational time standards were changed. With regards to university medical training, the

¹¹² Taylor, *China's Intellectual Dilemma*, 151.

¹¹³ Cleverley, *The School of China*, 184.

timetable was reduced from six to eight years to three to four years, with an emphasis on traditional Chinese medicine skills opposed to Western techniques.

Chinese education also saw the impact of the Cultural Revolution through the newly focused curriculum emphasizing political ideology. “Whereas children in the Beihai Boarding Kindergarten had played with tea sets to develop their language and manipulative skills, they now discussed ‘the social significance of the cup made by Aunt and Uncle workers.’¹¹⁴ Regular primary schools core curriculum now taught Chinese language, arithmetic, politics, revolutionary music, drawing, singing and drama, elementary science, physical culture as well as productive labor. Middle schools followed these trends along with perpetuating the teaching styles of primary schools, teaching lessons using revolutionary examples.

As primary and middle school curriculum molded the future university students, the university students at the time were experiencing a shift in curriculum as well. Universities primarily taught Marxist philosophy, scientific socialism, political economy, history of the CCP and the social development of humanity all in accordance with Mao Zedong thought. Though Mao himself did not believe in the examination system and warned against the disadvantage that enrollment tests brought to workers’ children’s’ higher education opportunities, the emphasis on collectivism over individualism helped influence the Chinese society that is seen today.

The Gaokao Post-Cultural Revolution

As 1976 saw the end of the Cultural Revolution, the people also saw a new regime on the horizon with the death of Chairman Mao in September 1976. With his last

¹¹⁴ *ibid*, 186.

plea of the continuation of his revolutionary ideals, a power struggle was initiated between the old system and the new desire to focus national attention on different ideals. As Mao's widow, Jiang Qing, accompanied by the propaganda chief Zhang Chunqiao, the cultural administrator Yao Wenyuan, and the Vice Chairman of the CCP's Central Committee Wang Hongwen, were providing leadership in cultural and educational affairs without the backing of Mao, they were soon detained by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and effectively taken out of power.¹¹⁵ The 'Gang of Four,' as the group came to be known (dubbed by Chairman Mao himself), were finally brought to trial in 1980 and charged with crimes against the state and CCP in addition to plotting the torture and death of two professors and fabricating cases against revolutionary leaders.¹¹⁶ With the four conspirators out of influential positions, it was time for China to find their way out of the educational black hole created by the Cultural Revolution. Senior Vice-Chairman Hua Guofeng, previously having pledged to carry out the proletarian revolution after Mao's passing, reversed allegiances and was subsequently established as Chairman. Hua spent most of his time undoing the Cultural Revolution's education reforms.¹¹⁷

The first college entrance examination after the end of the Cultural Revolution was held in December 1977, attracting 5.7 million applicants with one in twenty students being successful. This year the test papers were drawn up independently by province allowing the candidate to choose five or six papers from Chinese language, history, politics, geography, foreign language, mathematics, physics or chemistry. In 1978, the college entrance exams became standardized as students across the country received the

¹¹⁵ *ibid*, 215.

¹¹⁶ *ibid*, 216.

¹¹⁷ *ibid*, 215.

same questions from the same subjects on the same day. Candidates' class origin was no longer a factor in eligibility but a clean political record was expected. Desire not to follow Cultural Revolution practices of recommendation, often times leading to corruption, resulted in extra effort to expose those participating in these practices.¹¹⁸ In order to further promote education availability being unrelated to class status, in areas where scores were comparable, preference was given to candidates with worker, peasant, and minority backgrounds.¹¹⁹

Levels of fairness were questioned by parents of poorly performing examinees, in spite of the new regulations put in place arguing that the system favored children of intellectuals who had time during the Cultural Revolution to coach their children. Along with discussion of equality of opportunity between rural and urban students, the unfair rapid change of policy from emphasizing the importance of political loyalty to valuing academic prowess was also a disputed topic. Due to the lack of formal, itemized regulations, people other than high school graduates (as the current system states) were allowed to take the test, allowing for another complaint that a more mature mind was better suited and therefore placed the younger examinees at a disadvantage due to allocated enrolment policies.¹²⁰ The CCP reacted to these complaints by reducing the age qualification of examinees, requiring a minimum level of formal education, insisting on foreign language and expecting unmarried students in good health. The reduction of age allowed an increased proportion of succeeding senior middle school graduates in place of

¹¹⁸ *ibid*, 223.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*.

¹²⁰ *ibid*.

other adult entrants. Students active in youth movements or having great talent in a specific area were provided with bonus points.¹²¹

The reintroduction of high-stakes testing created a rapid increase in test application throughout all education levels. Entrance exams for entry to and exit from primary, secondary, and tertiary education levels were now the norm for selecting talented children.¹²² Once these children entered school there was now a standardized curriculum, in part as consequence of the test's growing intensity and importance, which re-secured a place for history, geography and foreign language in the education system after being dropped by schools during the Cultural Revolution. Official standardized teaching materials on basic subjects were created in 1978 as a reaction to the politically unreliable and biased inaccurate information provided in the textbooks of the Cultural Revolution.¹²³ This attempt at improving the educational material, as part of China's desire for higher standards of education after the near collapse of the system through the Cultural Revolution, resulted in authorities lengthening the school cycle from ten to twelve years.¹²⁴

¹²¹ *ibid*, 224.

¹²² *Ibid*.

¹²³ *ibid*, 225.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*.

Chapter 5: The Present Systems

The Current *Gaokao*

Over the past 30 years, China has been attempting to enact reforms throughout the education system including curriculum reform, textbook and assessment reform, classroom practice and teaching reforms, in addition to *gaokao* and college admission reforms. These efforts, however, have not been entirely successful. In 2003, the Chinese state-run English newspaper of China, *China Daily*, published an article written by psychologist Xu Haoyuan who said, “Whether it is the vaunted concept of quality education or the reform of the exam-oriented system, I would say education reform is the most unsuccessful of all reforms in China since the 1980’s.”¹²⁵ This view is shared by many Chinese people, shown by a 2005 study finding that 77 percent of the public was either “very dissatisfied” or “somewhat dissatisfied” with Chinese education.¹²⁶ The intention of the reforms was to provide more flexibility in curriculum with the encouragement of cultivating the whole child by including more creative talents revolving around independent thinking with the anticipated result being less stress on students. However, as a result of continued test-oriented education, “competition among students remains fierce, schools and teachers continue to test at the expense of the students’ physical and mental health, test preparation overrides national curriculum requirements, and some schools resort to militaristic ways of managing their students” which perpetuates the practice of students spending all time and energy on schoolwork.¹²⁷

Recently, as more and more middle school to graduate students are opting to

¹²⁵ Zhao, *Catching Up or Leading the Way*, 96.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *ibid*, 97.

study overseas, the Chinese MOE is attempting to make changes in English language education. The Beijing Municipal Commission of Education announced that the value of scores for language sections of the test (Chinese and English) on Beijings *gaokao* will change as of 2016. The new reforms will place more emphasis on Chinese language opposed to English language with Chinese language highest possible scores increasing from 150 to 180 and English language sections highest possible scores decreasing from 150 to 100.¹²⁸ Though some say this reform will allow students to enjoy learning English more, due to decreased emphasis place on learning English for the *gaokao*, and thus allowing learning without pressure, some parents have opposed the changes. They claim, “Lowering the importance of English has not fixed the fundamental problem of Chinese Higher Education at all.”¹²⁹ With larger emphasis being placed on Chinese national culture (Chinese language), this reform appears to be an attempt at further preserving the importance of Chinese tradition while thwarting Chinese students desire to subscribe to a different Western education system. This paradox of China’s desire to be considered equal with the West and fear of losing Chinese people to the West is a constant struggle for China and can especially be seen in the *gaokao* testing system

With attempted *gaokao* reform also comes reforms on college admissions procedure. By 2009, the MOE granted approval for 76 selected universities (all Project 211 institutions) to be able to recruit students through university-specific interview and examination processes. This development intends to give universities the ability to

¹²⁸ Jay Biggs, Veronica Liang, and Linda Lu, eds. “Chinese Education Reform,” *China Education Newsletter*, January 2014, accessed October 16, 2013, http://export.gov/China/build/groups/public/@eg_cn/documents/webcontent/eg_cn_069517.pdf.

¹²⁹ *ibid.*

identify talent that the mainstream *gaokao* system does not acknowledge. Though the small-scale change in college admissions more directly mirrors that of a comprehensive Western system, the MOE limits the amount of students able to participate in university recruitment to just 5% and allowing institutions with 3-year previous success to intake 10%.¹³⁰ This interview system in practice however reverts back to China's reliance on examinations. Fudan University in Shanghai finds interest in this system due to the allowance of finding not only top students, but also the ability to "identify talent that may not be present through the Gaokao system."¹³¹ The schools self-designed system (approved by MOE) holds regional examinations and interviews, with the option to offer enrollment spots to students prior to sitting for *gaokao*. However, these accepted students are required to reach over the provincial *gaokao* cut-off scores for Tier One entry in addition to having nominated Fudan as their first preference.

Shanghai University also experimented with alternatives to undergraduate enrollment policies by recruiting 100 Shanghai registered students from 25 key schools who each nominated four students who showed exemplary skills and talents. The intention of this is to identify students with skills too broad to be demonstrated solely through *gaokao* test scores. Nonetheless, these 100 students were still required to not only sit *gaokao*, but also to score above the provincial Tier One cut-off.

One of China's most renowned universities, Qinghua, also participates in conducting their own style of enrollment. A student accepted through the university's recruitment plan might be given 20 extra bonus points to add to their *gaokao* score. Due

¹³⁰ Australian Education International, *Research on China's National College Entrance Examination (the Gaokao)*, 19.

¹³¹ *ibid*, 14.

to the competitive nature of the *gaokao* along with the intense competition for admission to Qinghua, generally speaking a student needs to score at least 100 points above the provincial Tier One cut-off score to be offered admission. Therefore, this bonus could be the deciding factor in a student's opportunity to secure enrollment into one of China's top universities.

As of January 1, 2013 major Chinese cities created policies to loosen the restrictions on the *gaokao* related *hukou* regulations in an effort to level the playing field in college admissions for children of migrant workers. China's State Council motives aim to ensure "the education right of the children of migrant workers" believing it is "crucial to maintaining social harmony."¹³² Cities were encouraged to propose city specific plans to the State Council in accordance with these ideals. Beijing's 2013 policy allowed children of migrant workers access to further education if their parents had worked full-time in Beijing for three years and had contributed social insurance for three consecutive years. The students themselves must have competed middle school in Beijing (3 years), however, they are only qualified to take exams for secondary vocational schools. In 2014, this reform grew to allow children, who have completed high school (3 years), whose parents had worked full-time for 6 years and contributed to social insurance for six consecutive years, to take exams for higher vocational schools. Those wishing to attend higher education institutions in Beijing are able to apply for adult education, self-taught higher education and long-distance colleges.¹³³ Though this system provides further

¹³² Liyan Qi, "Easing Gaokao Restrictions: A New Year's Gift?" *China Real Time – WSJ*, January 1, 2013, accessed March 20, 2014, <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2013/01/01/easing-gaokao-restrictions-a-new-years-gift/>

¹³³ *ibid.*

learning opportunities for children of migrant workers without *hukou*, it still lacks opportunity to take the NCEE, which is where true Chinese educational success is created.

Other areas of China enacted reforms that actually do offer children of migrant workers an opportunity to take the *gaokao*. Southern Guangdong province, with more than a quarter of its residents lacking a *hukou*, guaranteed that in 2016 students whose parents have had full-time jobs for over three years and have contributed to social insurance for more than three years in total, in addition to having personally completed three years of high school in Guangdong will be eligible to take the *gaokao*. Shanghai's reforms also allow children to take the *gaokao* starting in 2014. Eligibility is reliant on proof of diploma, employment contracts exhibiting more than one year of work or evidence of investment or creating a business, and contributing to urban social insurance.

Eastern Jiangsu Province offers the system running most parallel to the State Council's goals by immediately allowing all students enrolled in grades one through nine to take the *gaokao* locally in 2013. Henan Province similarly started their system in 2013, allowing children enrolled in local high schools with at least one parent working a full-time job to take the NCEE locally.¹³⁴

Impact of High-stakes Testing on Secondary Education System

Due to the high-stakes of the *gaokao* examination system, the Chinese education system in practice is limited in many ways. The importance of this test permeates through generations and not only impacts the student's futures, but also the future of schools, administrators and teachers alike. This multi-level reaction results in high schools placing primary focus on college admission rates, which of course are dictated by testing scores.

¹³⁴ *ibid.*

“If the admission/passing rate of a school is considered unsatisfactory by parents and by the local media and local community in general, the school, the teachers, and administrators are all to be blamed. The administrators, not just the teachers, are also at risk of being dismissed from their current positions.”¹³⁵

The NCEE is not only the most important factor in evaluating student’s ability, but also in evaluating secondary education institutions as well. “The university NCEE-score-determined admissions/passing rate of the students from a particular high school has become the single most important factor in evaluating the performance of the school.”¹³⁶ The number of students an institution is able to send to college serves as an evaluative measure for promotion of teachers and administrators as well as monetary bonuses.¹³⁷ And while this evaluation criterion is not limited to certain institutions, competition among schools is prevalent. In attempts to raise school-wide NCEE exam scores, schools will compete against one another in an attempt to entice more talented students with intended results being a higher passing rate on the *gaokao*. Competition for excellent teachers among schools is also common, in hopes that recruiting teachers whose past students have had success on the *gaokao* will help encourage better students to attend, therefore increasing the schools passing average.

With the mounting pressure of the *gaokao*, parents and key high schools alike are attempting to transition schools education systems to include a Chinese interpretation of American learning. No. 1 Middle School (what U.S. would called high school) in Nanjing, a city known for top Chinese education, has introduced Advanced Placement

¹³⁵ Suen and Yu, “Exam-driven Education,” 24.

¹³⁶ *ibid.*

¹³⁷ Lin and Chen, “Academic Pressure and Impact on Students’ Development in China,” 153.

(A.P.) classes taught in English. As a western tool, the Chinese have surmised A.P. classes “automatically breeds western-type qualities like independent thinking and initiative taking.”¹³⁸ In China’s attempt to equal the playing field with the West, Nanjing’s No.1 middle schools’ adoption of A.P. courses not only serves to provide Chinese students with a loophole out of the *gaokao* and into American universities, but also performs in a way that perpetuates China’s examination dependent education problem under a veil of Western innovation.

Teaching

Due to Confucian philosophy, historically Chinese teachers in all schools were highly respected and failing students were placed as the responsible party in their failure. “The value system was such that failure was almost always blamed on the student for not putting forth enough effort; and occasionally on the officials for not being fair.”¹³⁹ While teachers are still highly respected and students are still held responsible for personal poor performance, responsibility for overall class performance falls at the feet of the teacher with society and parents alike holding teachers accountable for the students’ ability to perform. “Parents demand ‘experienced’ teachers in the high schools of their own children. Within the same school, parents compete to have their children being taught by the best teachers who are believed to have the ability to elevate their own children’s scores on the NCEE exams.”¹⁴⁰ A teacher’s passing rate will heavily dictate their next years job prospects. If a particular teacher has a large number of students that pass, they

¹³⁸ Stuart Grauer, “Gaokao Cowboy: How National Examinations Impact Student Development,” *Community Works Journal*, accessed March 6, 2014, http://www.communityworksinstitute.org/cwjonline/essays/a_essaystext/grauer_china.html

¹³⁹ Suen and Yu, “Exam-driven Education,” 24.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

receive a monetary reward in addition to gaining a great deal of respect from the community. This respect further translates into a high demand for that teacher in the coming year. However, if a low number of students pass the exam, especially a comparatively low number to the previous years scores, the teacher would be labeled “inexperienced” potentially resulting in loss of promotion opportunities as well as possibly their current teaching position.¹⁴¹

With the impact of *gaokao* results affecting more than just students, high schools focus primary attention on college admission rates. The role of a teacher is to provide their students with the tools for success. In the case of Chinese education, their score on the NCEE is the determinant of a student’s success. With the sole factor in college admission being an exemplary *gaokao* score, teachers of secondary education (as well as primary education) must place emphasis on the skills needed for their college entrance exams causing “many teachers to justify a return to teaching styles, which stressed rote learning and pupil passivity in pursuit of results.”¹⁴²

One-track Learning

The structure of the actual examination requires a student specialize in a certain area of study, science or liberal arts and impacts the teaching style of institutions as well. Students therefore dedicate all of their time and effort to the subject and related topics they will be tested on, while teachers similarly teach only topics the students will be examined on. “In China today, it is common practice that only tested subjects are offered in Grade 12 in order to full prepare for the NCEE.”¹⁴³ Following this structure, lower

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*

¹⁴² Cleverley, *The Schooling of China*, 225.

¹⁴³ Suen and Yu, “Exam-driven Education,” 27.

grade levels where tested and untested subjects are still part of the curriculum, often have teachers ignoring untested subjects as well as students skipping classes of untested subjects.¹⁴⁴

As learning tested subjects results in high-reward (success on the *gaokao*), the pure learning of tested subjects teaches students which subjects are valued by society. “Through different composition of test subjects and different coverage of test content, *gaokao* can intentionally bring more focused attention to certain subjects. For example, the part on current events in the political science section in *gaokao* is intended to guide students to be more concerned about current events around the world. This ‘baton effect’ of *gaokao* is potentially very powerful in guiding teaching and learning to an optimal direction if used properly.”¹⁴⁵ This ‘baton effect’ not only contributes to political ideology but culturally guided norms.

Competition

Schools encourage competitive behavior in students by hanging pictures of students who achieved *gaokao* greatness in previous years around the school. Celebration of students who achieved high *gaokao* scores is echoed throughout the community as well. “Top scorers on the NCEE are similarly glorified today as were those under the 科举 (kējǔ) system. Names of top NCEE scorers are frequently posted locally at public places in many cities to honor their successes in the exams.”¹⁴⁶ *Gaokao* champions are

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Liu and Wu, “Consequences of College Entrance Exams in China and the Reform Challenges,” 12.

¹⁴⁶ “In 2003, there was in fact an attempt to restart the ancient 科举 (kējǔ) tradition of parading top scoring examinees through Beijing. Currently, a project is underway to have the names of top NCEE scorers since 1978 carved on new stone steles to be erected along side those for the successful 科举 (kējǔ) candidates for the last 700

treated as local celebrities being asked for television and radio interviews regarding study suggestions for young children. For one exceptional student, the one who scores the highest on the test overall, their life will become a model for other students.

Results

However, success on the examination does not always translate into college admission. Li Taibo, a 2010 *gaokao zhuangyuan*, who took first place in Beijing's science portion of the exam, became an instant celebrity in China. A life size picture was posted in front of his high school in celebration (in addition to providing a reminder of what students need to live up to) and his quest for admission to an American university was well documented. Unfortunately, Li's success on the *gaokao* did not translate into a completely successful college admission process with news of his rejections spreading through internet media. The Global Time reported, "A high school student became a city idol overnight for scoring the highest marks on the National College Entrance Examination (*gaokao*) in Beijing. But his applications to 11 of the top 20 universities in the US, including Harvard, Yale and Stanford, had already been rejected."¹⁴⁷

Post-graduate success for high scoring *gaokao* candidates is also not guaranteed. In 1995, Qi Ke's exceptional score allowed him to attend the nine-year engineering physics program at Qinghua University (the Chinese equivalent of MIT). The program enticed Qi Ke due to its earning of a doctoral degree and further implying that as a result he would become a scientist. Though he had no knowledge of what engineering

years in the Confucius Temple in Beijing." Suen and Yu, "Exam-driven Education," 26.

¹⁴⁷ Li Yang, "Gaokao Scores Announced, Top Student Named," *Global Times*, June 25, 2010, accessed April 6, 2014, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/metro-beijing/update/society/2010-06/545486.html>.

physicists did or what engineering physics was, Qi Ke's scores alone translated into admission to the program. After graduating with a bachelor's degree, he was offered (through the program) a position at the Institute of High Energy Physics of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. However, after only half a year he was asked to resign. Following his departure from the Academy, he found a job as a porter paying less than \$100 a month (about 600 RMB). Unfortunately his career as a porter ended after two months due to his lack of physical strength, thought to be a result of all his time spent in school. With the lack of other acculturated skills, Qi Ke was unable to keep laborious jobs. Other cases of students graduating from top universities but lacking any physical ability upon completion of their academic career rendered them worthless in the workplace, and therefore unemployed, are very common.¹⁴⁸

Similarly, earning *gaokao zhuangyuan* status is also not a predictor of post-graduate success. The first study of *gaokao zhuangyuan*'s resulting career success, done by China Alumni Net, found that they were not leaders in their field and overall fell into obscurity, a strong shift from their instant celebrity status gained upon result announcements. On a list on distinguished Chinese scientists, scholars, entrepreneurs, engineers and government officials their names did not appear.¹⁴⁹

By placing high-stakes testing as the only avenue for success through the education system, the learning and teaching of subjects and skills outside the realm of the examination are completely disregarded. From the Imperial Civil Service Examinations up until present day *Gaokao* Examinations rote memorization and one track learning has been continuously performed, with an emphasis on learning through testing. The nature

¹⁴⁸ Zhao, *Catching Up or Leading the Way*, 81.

¹⁴⁹ *ibid*, 82.

of testing requires less practical application and increased regurgitation of materials. Consequently these skills are not of value in most post-graduate employment realms and thus render the Chinese test-takers at a disadvantage for their future. Though the students taking the *gaokao* have a wealth of knowledge, their ability to apply that knowledge is critically low. The historical transition of high-stakes testing has created a vicious cycle in Chinese society, creating enormous pressure to test well but lacking the inclusion of practical skills that would truly influence a student's future success.

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