

***Gaokao* in Chinese Higher Education: To Go or Not to Go?**

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Abstract: Viewed from a historical perspective, Chinese higher education can be traced back to the Zhou dynasty almost 2,500 years ago. With Emperor Wudi of the Han dynasty (140-88 BC) setting up academies, prototypes of higher education institutions came into shape. These institutions were close parallels to medieval universities in Europe. But the modern university system in the Western sense of the term was not endorsed and emulated in China until the early 1900s. As in the West, higher education in China has been in a state of flux. And with the nation's radical economic and social restructuring its higher education has been undergoing tremendous changes with challenges of all descriptions. Among all the major challenges or issues this brief discussion has highlighted Kaokao, highly characteristic of Chinese higher education, and attempted to discuss it from theoretical and practical perspectives.

Keywords: Chinese higher education; modern university system; *Gaokao*

Gaokao, formally known as the National Higher Education Entrance Examination, is a legacy of the imperial examination that only saw its demise in 1905 after its rigorous practice of about 1300 years. Held on the same days, June 7 and 8, across the nation, the examinations are dubbed as the “single wooden pole bridge” for millions of high school graduates aspiring to get into tertiary institutions. As a prerequisite for undergraduate university education, it is a chance of a life time for a decent career or meritocracy. And in this sense, its significance far exceeds education or schooling itself. It not only stretches the nerves of exam takers, but also becomes a major obsession of the students' families, as well as a significant social, cultural and political concern of the whole nation.

Let us first look at how stressed the parties concerned — students, who are high school graduates, as well as their teachers and families, in coping with Kaokao. Students sweat and toil over ten hours a day with tests piling up over 6 feet in their last year at high schools, preparing for the examinations. Teachers go to great lengths searching for and devise questions for their students to practice with, which gears teaching to tests. Their promotion, pay and prestige depend on the degree of

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success of their students. Families worry and work hard as much as the students. Hotel rooms are booked on the days of the tests for a quiet break in between with special meals ordered. Outside examination sites, parents keep vigil for hours and mothers may even make their daughters take contraceptives so that the girls will be free from the hassle of periods during the exams.

Moreover, this nationwide primary examination very often prompts local authorities to exercise traffic control, decree the reduction of sounds on construction sites, provide vehicle escorts and even reschedule work hours. This does not include the most laborious and pressure-packed grading of the exam papers, which has to meet deadlines for the determination and announcement of the cut-off marks and the threshold for subsequent university selection and admission process.

Naturally, controversies arose and strong voices of contention have become more pronounced over recent years. Is it going too far and what is more relevant and important, is this what education should be all about? Are schools educating students or turning out products? Teaching to tests instead of cultivating the creative power and developing the critical thinking skills is detrimental enough for school education. Added to that is the unfairness of this one-time examination determining the future of the teenagers, whose potential for development has yet to be tapped.

Allied with and more significant than that are issues of social justice. With this highly centralized undertaking the government becomes the major player, which is supposedly the guardian of fairness, but in the actual admission process unfairness and inequity are by no means uncommon. Since universities in cities and areas strong in higher education differentiate between the *Gaokao* results needed for local students to enter the university and those requested from students from others regions, unfairness inevitably emerges. According to an eminent educator, test-takers in Shanghai, for example, have a 53 times more chance to enter Fudan University, a premier institution unmatched by most of its counterparts for fame and resources, than the national average. And the gap is even wider if we look at test-takers in Shandong, which is one of the most populous provinces with relatively fewer institutions of higher learning. Getting into Fudan is 274 times more difficult than a Shanghai resident. One more typical example is Henan Province, which is heavily populated but has fewer colleges and universities as well. Applicants in the province need a much higher score than students in Beijing and other places to get into the same institution, as a university sets fixed admission quota for each province. It is customary that the home province or city is allocated a higher number.

Apart from regional disparity there has appeared glaring gender discrimination. Cut-off marks for admission to some universities are unabashedly announced to be

higher for girls than for boys with a difference of 65. Obviously, multiculturalism with affirmative action as is practiced in the US is not taken seriously in China.

In spite of the mounting criticisms and problems *Gaokao* is not likely going to go. Given China's test-centric culture over the centuries it has a life tenacious enough to survive economic, political, and social transformations. More importantly, it is still universally acknowledged that *Gaokao* has been so far the most untainted, the fairest among all similar, contested selection processes. When you excel in your studies and score high enough marks you have a good chance of winning a coveted place at an institution of higher education, which will ensure you a bright future. This is particularly essential for a rural kid and one from relatively lower social and economic status. As a matter of fact, *Gaokao* and its subsequent opportunity of academic pursuits is the only hope that young people from this background cherish for a different and often better career path. In other words, *Gaokao* provides the best chance for the disadvantaged young aspirants to climb the social ladder in an increasingly stratified society with widening rich-poor and urban-rural gaps. At a theoretical level, *Gaokao* reaffirms the dignity of knowledge and education, which is commonsense, but was grossly denied and trampled upon during the years of political turmoil. At a session of the 2013 National People's Congress, the minister of education made it explicit that *Gaokao* is so far the most equitable examination in the nation, though this remark triggered off a barrage of protests.

At the operational level, *Gaokao* is entrenched as much as China's political system. A slight touch in one place may lead to ripples, waves and even storms. To maintain stability for sustainable economic and social growth and to be politically correct, educational authorities have to be cautious in their pace and endeavor for major changes.

Small changes, however, do take place from time to time. Local authorities, for instance, have been called upon or allowed to work out examination papers. Preferential policies are formulated and practiced for minority nationality areas. In a most recent document by the nation's Ministry of Education outlining the 12th five-year development blueprint, an overhauling of the whole system has been called upon, proposed and specified. A multi-examination mechanism, similar to SAT, with differentiated admission criteria is suggested. For the research and reform, a national examination committee with 26 members from different disciplinary areas has been set up.

Whether *Gaokao* is going to go or not, the Chinese have reasons to be optimistic. There is increasing amount of attention to it; there are more and critical criticisms and stronger voices for its reforms, by all stakeholders. And obviously there have been constant changes, though piecemeal, mostly for the better.