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"China's Challenges and Capabilities in Educating and Training the Next Generation Workforce"

Meritocracy, Political Legitimacy, and the National College Entrance Exam in China

Introduction: The National College Entrance Exam as a Fulcrum of Political Legitimacy in China

China's National College Entrance Exam, known as the Gaokao or High-Level Exam, is a fulcrum of the Chinese Party-state's political legitimacy. The Gaokao sustains people's perception that the Party-state maintains the basic conditions of meritocracy, a system in which hard work and merit can lead to success and honor. The exam is the conducting baton of the Chinese education system and the culminating rite of passage of twelve years of schooling. As the main determinant of college admission, it provides an important path to social mobility. As people in China say, "The Gaokao changes fate." Every year some ten million high school seniors take the Gaokao, or about fifty percent of young people.[1] The exam is notoriously difficult to cheat on, leading many to see it as an island of transparency and fairness in a system rife with corruption and backroom dealing. All over China, people echo a common refrain: In a country where social connections or guanxi are crucial for social advancement, the Gaokao is the only relatively fair social competition.[2]

[1] In 2020 the population of people in China between the ages of 15 and 19 was about 80 million, and over a four-year period about 40 million currently take the Gaokao. I take my population estimates from "Does China Have an Aging Problem?" *China Power*, Center for Strategic & International Studies, February 15, 2016 (Updated March 19, 2020) <https://chinapower.csis.org/aging-problem/>.

[2] For further background on the exam and its role in political legitimacy, see Zachary M. Howlett, "The National College Entrance Exam and the Myth of Meritocracy in Post-Mao China," in *Making Meritocracy: Lessons from China and India, from Antiquity to the Present*, edited by Tarun Khanna and Michael Szonyi, 206–30 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022). See also Zachary M. Howlett, *Meritocracy and Its Discontents: Anxiety and the National College Entrance Exam in China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021a). For a general cultural overview of the Chinese schooling system, see Andrew B. Kipnis, *Governing Educational Desire: Culture, Politics, and Schooling in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

The exam, the main part of which is held every year on June 7 and 8, is especially fateful for China's hundreds of millions of rural residents and rural-to-urban migrants. Despite many reforms, China retains a de facto two-tier system of citizenship, in which people with rural household residency have inferior access to healthcare, welfare, education, and employment. For many the Gaokao provides the only viable pathway to urban citizenship and the benefits of an elite white-collar life. To be sure, preferential admissions quotas favor examinees in metropolitan cities like Beijing, Tianjin, and Shanghai. Still, the Gaokao gives ordinary people a direct though difficult route to status and power (Figure 1).

By one route or another, many leaders of government and industry are selected from high scorers. People see successful examinees as personifying the cultural virtues of diligence, persistence, composure, and good luck. From the state's perspective, even those who fail the exam learn a valuable lesson. Rather than blaming social inequality or the Party-state for their failure to transform destiny, they blame their personal failings or bad luck. Instead of rebelling, they strive to give their children a chance to succeed. People may forget the contents of their textbooks, including ideological indoctrination, but other lessons run deeper. They learn to believe in meritocracy and hitch their personal destiny to the yoke of national development led by the Party-state.

But this system is straining under rising inequality and slowing economic growth. In the post-Mao era, gaps in test scores and educational opportunities have widened between socioeconomic groups and regions.[3] Many people in rural areas do not have access to adequate nutrition, a basic requirement for healthy development let alone meritocratic competition.[4] Meanwhile, the rapid expansion of higher education in the twenty-first century has outpaced the creation of job opportunities for new college grads, who face an unprecedented crisis of un- and underemployment exacerbated by the Covid pandemic, with youth unemployment now around 20 percent.[5] Although girls and women are outperforming boys and men, they remain largely locked out of economic and political leadership positions.[6] Exacerbating these unequal trends, automation is killing jobs and

[3] See Howlett, *Meritocracy and Its Discontents,* chapter 3.
[4] See Scott Rozelle and Natalie Hell, *Invisible China: How the Urban-Rural Divide Threatens China's Rise* (University of Chicago Press, 2020).
[5] Financial Times, "China's High Youth Unemployment Stokes Student Covid Protests," November 30, 2022 <https://www.ft.com/content/7d286faf-dccd-453a-a413-470babc7f1cc>. Ka Ho Mok and Alfred M. Wu, "Higher Education, Changing Labour Market and Social Mobility in the Era of Massification in China," *Journal of Education and Work* 29.1 (2016): 77–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2015.1049028>.
[6] Xiaorong Gu and Jean Wei-jun Yeung, "Why Do Chinese Adolescent Girls Outperform Boys in Achievement Tests?" *Chinese Journal of Sociology* 7.2 (2021): 109–37 <https://doi.org/10.1177/2057150X211006586>. Zachary M. Howlett, "Tactics of Marriage Delay in China: Education, Rural-to-Urban Migration, and 'Leftover Women,'" in *Waithood: Gender, Education, and Global Delays in Marriage*, edited by Marcia C. Inhorn and Nancy S. Hefner, 177–99 (New York: Berghahn, 2021b) <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781789209006-010>.

China now faces the "silver tsunami" of rapid social aging.[7] The demographic dividend of plentiful low-wage workers is a thing of the past, but pivoting to an innovation-driven service economy requires economic liberalization and equitable access to high-quality vocational training, college-prep schools, and colleges.

Under General Secretary Xi Jinping, the Party-state is failing to address these challenges. Without a course change, it is difficult to see how China can escape the middle income trap that bedevils so many developing countries.[8] As growth slows, a whole generation of youth is confronting the idea that China's future may not be as bright as they once believed. Hard work and merit no longer seem to guarantee success. This disillusionment with meritocracy is reflected in the growing interest in "lying flat" (*tangping*), analogous to quiet quitting, and the cultural buzzword "involution" (*neijuan*), which describes escalating social competition for diminishing gains.[9]

This potential crisis of faith in meritocracy is exacerbated by contradictions inherent to the exam system. As the country attempts to pivot toward innovation and services, it faces a dilemma. People of rural origin see the exam as fair because it relies on memorization. They say that no special equipment or extraordinary opportunity is required; anyone with access to school textbooks can succeed. Reforms to focus college admissions on selecting for creativity and innovation tend to advantage relatively privileged urban children, who have access to creativity-building extracurricular activities such as hands-on scientific research experience. Already, the higher-education system is heavily stratified, with urbanites dominating the enrollment in top colleges. Every shift toward focusing more on selecting for creativity further alienates and marginalizes people of rural origin.

From a U.S. perspective, this crumbling faith in meritocracy presents both threats and opportunities. A threat is that the Party-state may use more forceful or ideological methods to sustain legitimacy. China's leadership will continue fanning the flames of nationalism and may even initiate armed conflict over Taiwan. An opportunity is that increasing numbers of educated Chinese youth are looking abroad for their futures. Whereas the majority of students from China formerly returned to the motherland, this trend may reverse as increasing numbers adopt a so-called "run philosophy" (*runxue*).[10]

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[7] Carl Minzner "China's Doomed Fight Against Demographic Decline," June 27, 2022 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2022-05-03/chinas-doomed-fight-against-demographic-decline>.

[8] Rozelle and Hell, *Invisible China*. See also David L. Shambaugh, *China's Future* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016).

[9] On "lying flat," see Elsie Chen, "These Chinese Millennials Are 'Chilling,' and Beijing Isn't Happy" *New York Times*, July 3, 2021 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/03/world/asia/china-slackers-tangping.html>. For a discussion of involution, see Qianni Wang and Shifan Ge, "How One Obscure Word Captures Urban China's Unhappiness," *Sixth Tone*, November 4, 2020 <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1006391/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.sixthtone.com%2Fnews%2F1006391%2Fhow-one-obscure-word-captures-urban-chinas-unhappiness>.

[10] Li Yuan, "'The Last Generation': The Disillusionment of Young Chinese." *New York Times*, May 24, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/24/business/china-covid-zero.html>.

China will face increasing brain drain, and countries friendly to high-skilled immigrants will see an influx of new talent.

Although the fabric of meritocracy is fraying, ordinary people in China remain widely committed to the Gaokao, China's "only relatively fair competition." They devote their days to preparing themselves, their children, and grandchildren for success in the exam. Much like the imperial era civil examinations, which the country used to select its governing elite for over a millennium (960–1905), the Gaokao serves as a cultural gyroscope, uniting diverse groups in a diligent drive for social mobility and the common pursuit of their most cherished cultural values.[11] Understanding the exam and the meritocratic system that it undergirds is crucial to understanding how the Chinese Party-state constructs and sustains political legitimacy.

Historical Background: The Gaokao in the Mirror of World History

Meritocracy is a defining characteristic of the modern world and forms a common denominator between democratic and authoritarian societies. People almost everywhere believe that hard work and intelligence, rather than hereditary privilege, should bring honor and success. They use examinations and examination-based credentials to select winners and losers in school, higher education, work, and public life.

Of course, this form of selection has always had its critics: those who say that standardized tests produce standardized minds, or those who complain that only the wealthiest have the resources to rise to the top.[12] But recent decades have witnessed a troubling rise in inequality globally.[13] In almost every country on Earth, the gap between the rich and the poor is widening, propelled by economic and technological changes that we have only just begun to grasp. This increasing stratification of society is accompanied by an increasing stratification of educational institutions. An elite few are increasingly monopolizing access to the best institutions, attendance of which is an important predictor of future opportunity and income.[14]

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[11] For a brief introduction to the imperial civil exam, see Benjamin A. Elman, "Late Traditional Chinese Civilization in Motion, 1400–1900," in *Motion and Knowledge in the Changing Early Modern World*, edited by Ofer Gal and Yi Zheng, 169–88 (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2014). For a deeper dive, see Benjamin A. Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

[12] See, for example, Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by John G. Richardson, translated by Richard Nice, 241–58 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986). For a critique of the SAT's role in U.S. college admissions, see Joseph A. Soares, ed. *SAT Wars: The Case for Test-Optional College Admissions* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2012). For a critique of the Gaokao, see Dongping Yang, *Zhongguo jiaoyu gongping de lixiang he sianshi* (The Ideal and Reality of Chinese Educational Fairness) (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2006).

[13] Branko Milanović, *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2016).

[14] Wei-Jun Jean Yeung, "Higher Education Expansion and Social Stratification in China," *Chinese Sociological Review* 45, no. 4 (July 1, 2013): 54–80. Joseph A. Soares, *The Power of Privilege: Yale and America's Elite Colleges*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007.

Although these problems are global, they have unique historical resonance in China, which preceded Europe in the transition from aristocracy to merit-based leadership by many hundreds of years (Figures 2 and 3). The development of open, anonymous, competitive civil examinations in China during the Song Dynasty (960–1279) formed a watershed event in China's early modern era (960–1912), which was characterized by widespread bureaucratization, commercialization, and urbanization.[15] But at the end of China's last imperial dynasty, the Qing (1644–1912), the Chinese state struggled with internal strife and Western colonial incursion.[16] Reformers argued that the exam system, which focused on the Confucian classics, had stymied China's modernization. It was abandoned in 1905, on the cusp of China's Republican Revolution (1911–12), although some historians contend that the Qing state might have survived if it had reformed its exam system instead of abolishing it.[17] Ironically, just as China was discarding competitive national exams, other countries were instituting them, often under the influence of Chinese models.[18]

During the Republican Era (1912–49), the country entered a period of weak central control, warlordism, and civil war. Newly founded Western-style institutions of higher education administered separate entrance exams. During this period, the absence of national examinations contributed to the alienation of Chinese elites from state power.[19] Following the Communist Revolution of 1949, one of the new government's first priorities was to implement a unified national examination system. In 1952 the Communist government held its first Gaokao, bringing elites firmly back into the orbit of a newly consolidating state.

The renationalization of examinations under Communist rule—albeit now under the influence of Soviet and Western models—accompanied the re-establishment of centralized state authority after decades of disunity. In the following years, the state has constantly tinkered with the examination to adapt it to changing circumstances, but except for the hiatus during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), the Gaokao has formed a perennial national rite to this day.

The Cultural Revolution was a period in which people earnestly questioned the belief that merit is an individual achievement rather than a collectively produced good. Students decried examinations as a "right-wing, capitalist" institution. They tore up their

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[15] John W. Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China: A Social History of Examinations*, New ed (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995); Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China*.

[16] Unlike India, China was never fully colonized, and historians generally refer to the colonial period in China (1839–1911) as "semi-colonial."

[17] Alexander Woodside, *Lost Modernities: China, Vietnam, Korea, and the Hazards of World History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[18] Woodside, *Lost Modernities*. See also Ssu-yü Teng, "Chinese Influence on the Western Examination System: I. Introduction," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 7.4 (1943), 267–312 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2717830>;

[19] Wen-Hsin Yeh, *The Alienated Academy: Culture and Politics in Republican China, 1919–1937* (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1990).

examination papers and demanded that they be allowed to take tests in teams. Following the height of activism from 1966 to 1968, universities were closed completely. For a few years from their reopening in 1972 to the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, admission to college was based on a recommendation system that gave preference to the children of workers and peasants. Looking back on the suspension of the Gaokao, critics say that it turned back the clock on China's development by throttling the training of technocratic talent.[20] But the Cultural Revolution was also a period of rapid improvement in equity of access to education.[21] In the countryside, villages mobilized to build vast numbers of new schools. Enrollments soared, with teachers emphasizing practical skills and basic literacy.

When the Gaokao was reintroduced in 1977, state planners reassembled a hierarchical ladder of success. The state established a new category of highly selective so-called keypoint schools to train the next generation of leaders.[22] But ordinary people fell behind. When children of the 1980s came of age in the early 2000s, China's literacy rates suffered a marked drop.[23] Nine years of compulsory education was declared a national policy in 1986, but China did not make real progress toward this goal until the 1990s when the effect of state-imposed controls on population growth, the Birth Planning Policy, began to be felt.[24] Introduced in 1979, this policy reduced the number of children, especially in urban areas, making it easier to implement education for all.

With the resurgence of examination-based meritocracy in post-Mao China, the composition of the elite has changed substantially. In the Maoist era (1949-1976), the elite largely consisted of Party cadres from the Communist revolution. In the post-Mao era of economic reform (1976-present), an entrepreneurial elite of wealthy business people has emerged. Simultaneously, the Party has become increasingly technocratic, filling its ranks with Communist engineers, lawyers, and economists.[25] Party membership has become strongly correlated with success in meritocratic competitions.[26]

Prior to the 1990s, college graduates were virtually guaranteed employment for life—an "iron rice bowl"—in a government work unit. People in China often compared graduates of that time to imperial era degree holders, who were guaranteed an annual stipend paid in rice. In the 1990s, however, officials accelerated the dismantling of the state-planned

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[20] Haifeng Liu, *Gaokao gaige de lilun sikao* (Theoretical reflections on reform of the Chinese College Entrance Examination) (Wuhan: Central China Normal University Press, 2007).
[21] Joel Andreas, "Leveling the Little Pagoda: The Impact of College Examinations, and Their Elimination, on Rural Education in China," *Comparative Education Review*, 48.1 (2004), 1–47 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/379840>.
[22] Stig Thøgersen, *Secondary Education in China after Mao: Reform and Social Conflict* (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 1990).
[23] Yasheng Huang, *Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics: Entrepreneurship and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 244–45.
[24] Andreas, "Leveling the Little Pagoda," p. 33.
[25] Joel Andreas, *Rise of the Red Engineers: The Cultural Revolution and the Origins of China's New Class* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).
[26] Elizabeth Perry, "Educated Acquiescence: How Academia Sustains Authoritarianism in China," *Theory and Society*, 49.1 (2020), 1–22 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-019-09373-1>.

work-assignment system and expanded higher-education enrollment, producing rapid degree inflation. Now only a degree from an elite college provides comparable prestige and security. Although the definition of an elite degree has shifted many times from the imperial era to the present, the importance of possessing one has not. Now as before, excelling on examinations secures one's status within a state-certified national hierarchy of credentials.

For these reasons, people in China often see the Gaokao as the cultural continuation of the imperial era civil exams. As a provincial level education official told me, "Like the imperial exams of old, the Gaokao gives the common people hope." And as a rural high school principal said, "Without the Gaokao, there would be a social revolution."

Because of the social and political significance of the Gaokao, the highest echelons of state power routinely interfere in its management. In 1989, the student-led Tiananmen protests—partly a response to runaway inflation—threatened to topple the regime. The state responded violently by massacring protesters. But afterwards it pursued a seemingly contradictory strategy: Instead of clamping down on college enrollment, state leaders increased the number of college students, which rose from 670,000 in 1988 to 980,000 in 1993, even as it tightened ideological controls (Table 1).[27] Around the same time, starting in 1995, the administration of then Party leader Jiang Zemin (served 1989–2002) poured billions of dollars into China's top universities to form Project 211, an abbreviation of twenty-first century and one hundred, the approximate number of participating universities. The more exclusive Project 985—named for the year (1998) and month (May) of its inception—funneled even greater sums of money into China's forty most elite research universities. These investments aimed to jumpstart China's innovation economy and to strengthen the ties between state and scholar.[28] To further stimulate innovation, the central state devolved the authority to design the Gaokao onto provinces, each of which became a laboratory for education reform. Beginning in the early 2000s until the recentralization of exam design starting in 2016, there was no single national standard for the exam. In practice, most provinces, as I note below, followed a similar format, but some, including Jiangsu Province, differed widely from that model and others, such as Zhejiang Province, piloted reforms that later became adopted nationally.[29]

In the late 1990s, the regime experienced another threat to its survival when the Asian Financial Crisis shook public confidence in Party-led national development. The politburo, the highest decision-making body of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), responded by ordering another expansion of higher-education recruitment, overriding the gradualist plans of the Ministry of Education. This time the expansion assumed epic

[27] Howlett, *Meritocracy and Its Discontents.*
[28] Perry, "Educated Acquiescence."
[29] Some argue that this form of continual experimentation and transformation forms a secret of the Chinese regime's resilience. See Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry, "Embracing Uncertainty: Guerrilla Policy Style and Adaptive Governance in China," in *Mao's Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China*, ed. by Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry, Harvard Contemporary China Series, 17 (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011), pp. 1–29.

proportions. Over the next decade, the number of students in college quadrupled from 5 million to 20 million between 1999 and 2009 and now hovers over 33 million.[30] By taking this measure, state leaders hoped to increase economic consumption by tapping into unmet demand for higher education as well as binding broader swaths of the population into the myth of meritocracy.[31] As a result of the expansion, the majority of examinees, around 80 percent, now get into some kind of college. More people than ever before are going to college, but educated unemployment is surging, and the majority of college grads now earn less than the average migrant worker.[32]

Today, China faces another brewing economic storm, which threatens to aggravate this employment crisis. The state staved off the worst of the 2008 global financial crisis by injecting credit into China's economy, but this action produced colossal levels of bad debt and exacerbated already high levels of corruption. At the same time, China's economic expansion is finally slowing after decades of double-digit growth largely fueled by cheap labor. As wages rise, many industries are automating or moving abroad, and leaders worry that China may not be able to jump over the middle-income trap that bedevils developing countries.[33] As part of their response to these challenges, officials are pursuing another round of examination reforms under Xi Jinping, the current Party leader (2012–present). Like earlier reforms, these measures aim to accelerate China's transition to a consumption-based innovation economy. But they are also congruous with the anti-corruption campaign that has largely defined Xi's leadership.[34] Reversing the devolution of exam design to the provinces in the 2000s, the state now designs the compulsory sections of the Gaokao—math, English, and Chinese—in Beijing. By reclaiming central state control over the test, which is widely perceived to have fallen prey to corrupt local politics and special interests, these reforms aim to bolster people's faith in this pillar of China's meritocracy.

The direct intervention of the highest levels of government in the exam system reveals the degree to which central-state leadership considers the legitimacy of the examination to have implications for the legitimacy of Party rule. Party leaders take the exam so seriously because of its important role in maintaining belief in meritocracy. China watchers often suggest that Chinese political legitimacy rests on a tacit bargain: People

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[30] See the National Bureau of Statistics of China's annual data at <http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/Statisticaldata/AnnualData/>, which goes up to 2019. The above numbers include only students enrolled in regular higher education institutes. If students in adult and web-based higher education institutes are included, the current number is close to 45 million.

[31] Qinghua Wang, "Crisis Management, Regime Survival and 'Guerrilla-Style' Policy-Making: The June 1999 Decision to Radically Expand Higher Education in China," *The China Journal*, 71 (2014), 132–52 (p. 151) <https://doi.org/10.1086/674557>; Howlett 2021a.

[32] Yanjie Huang, "China's Educated Underemployment," *East Asian Policy*, 5.2 (2013), 72–82 <https://doi.org/10.1142/S1793930513000172>.

[33] Shambaugh, *China's Future*.

[34] David Cohen and Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, "Anti-Privilege Campaign Hits the Chinese Middle Class," *China Brief*, 14.17 (2014), 1–3 <https://jamestown.org/program/anti-privilege-campaign-hits-the-chinese-middle-class/>.

acquiesce to Party-state rule in exchange for wealth. In this view, people in China support the Party because economic development has improved their lives. But this focus on development overlooks the significance of merit. People do not so much expect their lives to improve under Party rule as they expect to have opportunities to improve their lives. In other words, people expect the state to guarantee the conditions for the meritorious to advance. At minimum, it must ensure the perception that such conditions exist. Like the imperial exams of old, the Gaokao reinforces this perception because it forms a national fateful rite of passage that is open, anonymous, and competitive.

The Structure of the Exam System and the Nationalist Ideology of Developmentalism

Most provinces in China have a six-three-three system of education: six years of primary school, three years of junior high school (termed *chuzhong*) and three years of senior high school (termed *gaozhong*). The state now reports near universal compliance with nine-year compulsory education. In reality, however, many children in rural areas drop out to work before finishing grade nine.[35] The state now intends to roll out twelve years of free compulsory education, and has begun doing so in some cities and rural areas. But just as compliance with nine-year education was incomplete, people on the ground say that this is *a fortiori* true of attempts to institute twelve-year education, especially in rural areas. The one-child policy, which lasted from 1979 to 2015, was never strictly enforced in rural places, where household incomes are also lower and prospects bleaker.[36] Rural children who do not excel in school often face financial pressure to start supporting their families and younger siblings. Because high schools after grade nine are not free, only the most academically diligent and talented students will receive support from cash-strapped families. Young people who drop out often move to the cities to work. Lacking urban household registration, they toil as undocumented or semi-documented laborers.

After students complete junior high school, they take the high school entrance examination, termed the *zhongkao*. The quota for passage of the high school entrance examination is set around 50 percent in most places, meaning that around half of China's youth population take the Gaokao (with the caveat that an unknown number drop out before grade 9). Those who succeed go on to academic senior high schools. Some of those who fail go to vocational schools, and the government has been trying to improve vocational education. Despite massive investments and much lip service paid to improving vocational education, however, its quality remains low and it is culturally

[35] Rozelle and Hell, *Invisible China*. See also Yi, Hongmei, Linxiu Zhang, Renfu Luo, Yaojiang Shi, Di Mo, Xinxin Chen, Carl Brinton, and Scott Rozelle, "Dropping Out: Why Are Students Leaving Junior High in China's Poor Rural Areas?" *International Journal of Educational Development* 32.4 (2012): 555–63. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2011.09.002>.

[36] In many provinces, the official policy was to allow people in rural areas to have a second child if the first was a daughter, a concession to cultural preference for sons. Many families, particularly in China's southern provinces, found ways to skirt the policy. It was common for parents to "keep trying" until they produced male offspring. See, for example, Quanbao Jiang and Zhang Cuiling Jiang, "Recent Sex Ratio at Birth in China," *BMJ Global Health* 6.5: 1–11 (2021) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2021-005438>.

unattractive in a society that deems attendance of vocational school a personal and academic failure.[37]

All around China, senior high schools are organized into hierarchies by the average test score of students they admit. Families strive to send their children to the best high schools, admission to which is the best predictor of superior performance in the College Entrance Exam or Gaokao. Whereas attendance of public primary and junior high schools is free of charge, senior high schools charge tuition. Thus senior high schools operate on a "pay to play basis," with schools charging between RMB 1,000 and 5,000 per year ($150 to $740). Fees are even higher for underperforming students, who may pay extra "school selection fees" if they did not meet the cut-off score for their desired high school. Such fees are expensive for average families, especially those from rural backgrounds; however, many willingly pay them because of their faith in the Gaokao's ability to change fate and the cultural importance attached to educational credentials. Although the average migrant worker has earned more than the average college grad since 2011, people in China continue to see the attainment of advanced educational credentials and a white-collar career path as superior to blue-collar work, even if skilled and unskilled labor pay better.[38] As a time-honored Chinese saying goes, "Among all the pursuits known to humankind, learning is the noblest."

In Chinese academic high school, students study math, Chinese, a foreign language (typically English), history, geography, chemistry, biology, and "ideology and politics" (*sixiang zhengzhi*), typically shortened to "politics."[39] The latter is a mixture of Chinese Marxism and ethics and forms a core element of political indoctrination. But rather than buying into the contents, students generally see them as something that needs to be memorized to pass exams. As one boy of rural origin remarked to me with a grin and wink after getting a politics quiz back from his teacher, "It's all socialist brainwashing."

Although attempts to indoctrinate students in official ideology through the politics course and related initiatives of "patriotic education," like the weekly flag-raising ceremony, are of questionable effectiveness, official state ideology is embedded in the Chinese education system in a much more implicit and therefore effective way: The goal of doing well on the Gaokao is to get admitted to a good university in a big city, paving the way to migrate up the rural-urban hierarchy and thus to transform the fate of oneself and one's family. Those who succeed in this enterprise receive official state recognition in the form of a high Gaokao score and admission to a top university. They thus naturally tend to recognize the legitimacy of the state, which has recognized their merit. Those who fail tend not to blame structural inequalities, economic problems, or government policies but rather themselves for not possessing the grit and talent required to succeed. Many also reach to religious explanations, blaming fate or luck for their failure and crediting these powers for their success. But such religious explanations often reinforce meritocratic

[37] Rozelle and Hell 2020. See also Terry E. Woronov, *Class Work: Vocational Schools and China's Urban Youth* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).
[38] Yanjie Huang, "China's Educated Underemployment."
[39] Howlett, *Meritocracy and Its Discontents*, chapter 1.

thinking by expanding it to notions of karmic reciprocity: Success blesses those who have done good deeds in this or past lives.[40] Thus, preparing for the Gaokao, quite aside from the explicit contents of textbooks, which are often soon forgotten, can be said to instill a deeper belief in the ideology of meritocracy that forms an important cornerstone of Chinese state legitimacy.

Part of this ideology of meritocracy in China is a belief in the narrative of national development, another key element of the Party-state's legitimacy. Even if students reject Chinese Marxism as "brainwashing," they "vote with their feet" for the Party-supported narrative of national development by using education to migrate from underdeveloped rural areas to modern urban ones.

This developmentalist narrative is deeply embedded in nationalist history. Unlike many of the Marxist orthodoxies presented in Politics class, nationalist history is presented not only in school but in primary socialization within the family and in popular cultural media like movies, TV series, and computer games. Because of its broad sources of reinforcement, it has broader roots. According to nationalist history narratives, China was deeply humiliated during the first and second Opium Wars (1839–42 and 1856–60), when it was forced through gunboat diplomacy to cede trade concessions to Western powers through a series of unequal treaties and most-favored nations clauses. This humiliation was exacerbated by, among other things, China's treatment in the Treaty of Versailles (1919) following the First World War, when China was forced to cede Shandong Province to Japan, and during Japanese occupation of China in the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45).

Especially in the case of the Opium Wars, perceived as the original sin of Western colonialism in China, some historians argue that this narrative is anachronistic: From the perspective of the waning Qing dynasty, which was dealing with autochthonous structural problems such as rural-urban inequality that would last into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the problem of Westerners demanding trade concessions was dwarfed by more pressing concerns.[41] From 1850 to 1864, one of the largest civil wars in world history raged in China, the Taiping Rebellion, which nearly toppled the Qing dynasty.[42] This is not to negate or deny the depredations of Western colonialism, but to point out that nationalist histories are arguably constructed around overemphasizing Western impact and colonial violence rather than starting from a point of view that prioritizes long-term historical trends and realities that originate within China and its changing positions within a globalizing world.[43]

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[40] Howlett, *Meritocracy and Its Discontents*, chapter 6. See also Zachary M. Howlett "Performative Secularism: School-Sponsored Prayer in China's National College Entrance Exam." *Critical Asian Studies* 54.3 (2022): 441–69 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2022.2099439>.
[41] Paul A. Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).
[42] Platt, Stephen R, *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the Epic Story of the Taiping Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012).
[43] Cohen, *Discovering History in China*.

Still, the CCP reinforces the narrative of national humiliation, which resonates culturally in popular media, and few people in China question this history, which forms a sacred component of the national culture.[44] According to this culture, China and Chinese people have a national duty to overtake the West through development so that China can erase its humiliation and reassume its rightful place as the Central Kingdom, something the government refers to as "the great rejuvenation." The CCP's sacred mission is to lead the people to this goal.

By perpetuating this narrative, the CCP reinforces a form of psychological colonization, in which the West is held up as the paragon of development and China's imperial history is presented as a great but inflexible tradition that could not withstand the onslaught of Western colonialism.[45] This narrative arguably overemphasizes Western impact and forgets or dismisses China's long and dynamic history of running a complex, early modern bureaucratic state since at least the Song Dynasty (960–1279), including a meritocratic examination system that influenced the modernization of education elsewhere.[46]

The psychological colonization perpetuated by this narrative of national humiliation and the desire to "overtake the West" reinforces CCP legitimacy in several ways.[47] People in rural areas see themselves as "backward" and "inferior," desiring to move to central places, which are seen as centers of modernity, where people are closer to the goal of "overtaking the West." To be sure, this desire to move to the cities is materially reinforced by the real development gaps between countryside and city and by the hukou or household-registration system, which relegates urban residents to second-class citizenship. Yet the hukou system is a state-enforced policy, not a natural fact, and the development gap of the countryside is partly the result of policy decisions. China is lauded for its world-historical achievement of bringing hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, but the rapidest period of poverty reduction occurred in the 1980s, when state policy helped unleash the suppressed entrepreneurial energy in the countryside, whereas in the 1990s and 2000s, resources and investments have flowed into the cities, exacerbating the rural-urban gap.[48]

Thus the psychological colonialism is accompanied by a "hard" form of internal colonialism in which people of rural origin are exploited in an unequal migrant labor regime that is reinforced by their lack of urban citizenship and documentation, much as many business and farm owners in the US rely on undocumented labor migrants from Latin America. In China's southwestern and western ethnic minority peripheries, including Xinjiang and Tibet, this nationalist development narrative justifies an even harder form of internal colonialism in which people's ethnic identity, considered to be

[44] Zheng Wang. *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).
[45] Howlett, *Meritocracy and Its Discontents*, chapter 2.
[46] Cohen, *Discovering History in China*; Woodside, *Lost Modernities*.
[47] Howlett *Meritocracy and Its Discontents,* chapter 2.
[48] Yasheng Huang, *Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics*.

more "primitive" than the Han majority, is actively repressed.[49] This form of imperialism has roots in China's imperial era, when ethnic minority groups were perceived as closer to animals and the Confucian state felt a duty to humanize them by transforming them through education.[50] But whereas the last imperial dynasty, the Qing, was itself ruled by a minority group, the Manchu, and ruled China as a multi-ethnic empire that maintained many ethnic identities and hierarchies, the CCP, especially in the twenty-first century, has increasingly tended toward Sinicizing minorities.[51] As the coercive policies pursued in Tibet and Xinjiang show, this policy of cultural erasure and Sinicization can take on genocidal proportions.[52] To be sure, people in minority areas can take special versions of the Gaokao in their minority languages and are often given bonus points on the exam.[53] However, they often find themselves shuttled into low-paying and relatively marginalized occupations—for example, as translators and teachers of minority languages—which reinforces their marginalization.[54]

As the only way feasible way for most people of rural origin to acquire urban hukou or citizenship, the Gaokao gives people a way to pursue personal development and to transform the fates of their families. Although they may not believe in orthodox Marxism, the realities of national development are inescapable. By pursuing personal development and becoming a person of quality with an urban hukou, they are pursuing Party-state definitions of national development and reinforcing the Party's developmentalist narrative. At the same time, though few would say they believe in the niceties of Marxism presented in politics class, even fewer would question the narrative of national humiliation that helps to sustain the developmentalist enterprise.

The Gaokao and the Myth of Meritocracy

Gaokao-based meritocracy is a "myth" in both senses of the word: an inspiring cultural model and a popular misconception. Even as the Gaokao inspires people to personify high cultural virtues, it encourages them to cling to a chimeric dream of fairness. Those who compete in the Gaokao and those who support them—teachers, parents, and administrators—are painfully aware of this contradiction between social equity and the cultivation of merit, which is definitional to meritocratic systems. Nevertheless, they remain committed to meritocracy as a personal and social ideal. They fervently desire to achieve the recognition that the examination confers and thus willingly submit to its

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[49] Darren Byler, *Terror Capitalism: Uyghur Dispossession and Masculinity in a Chinese City*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021a). Darren Byler, *In the Camps: China's High-Tech Penal Colony* (New York, NY: Columbia Global Reports, 2021b). Charlene Makley, *The Battle for Fortune: State-Led Development, Personhood, and Power Among Tibetans in China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).
[50] Magnus Fiskesjö, "On the 'Raw' and the 'Cooked' Barbarians of Imperial China," *Inner Asia* 1 (1999): 139–68 <https://doi.org/10.1163/146481799793648004>.
[51] Byler, *Terror Capitalism*; Byler, *In the Camps*.
[52] Byler, *Terror Capitalism*; 2021b.
[53] Naomi Yamada, *Preferential Education Policies in Multi-Ethnic China* (Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2020).
[54] Howlett, *Meritocracy and Its Discontents*, chapter 3.

discipline, training themselves tirelessly in the capacities that success requires. Even many critics of the exam revere it as a fateful rite of passage that forms a quintessential part of what it means to be Chinese.

During the first two decades of the twenty-first century, students in most provinces were tested on the compulsory subjects—math, Chinese, and English—and the humanities or sciences depending on their specialization, which they declared after their first year of high school. The humanities exam consisted of history, geography, and politics (a mixture of ethics and Marxism); the sciences of chemistry, physics, and biology. Under the newest round of Gaokao reforms being gradually rolled out since 2016, Chinese, math, and English continue to be compulsory, but instead of being divided into humanities and sciences tracks, students select their non-compulsory subjects individually as electives.[55] In addition, students are being allowed more than one chance to take the English exam in some provinces. This new structure aims to give students greater autonomy and flexibility. It is also meant to help address the common complaint that a single exam performance can determine life outcomes. But many teachers and parents say that the reformed system is "the same medicine in a new soup." As before, the exam constitutes a unified national ritual. As before, it is the conducting stick of the whole education system. And as before, its main purpose is to select winners and losers.

For ordinary people, the exam remains highly consequential. By serving as a launching pad for a lifetime of white-collar, meritocratic competition, the Gaokao provides a primary route by which they seek to discharge their basic social duties under China's Confucian culture of filial piety. These duties include finding a good marriage partner, having children, and taking care of elders, all of which are built upon the foundation of high Gaokao scores and the benefits that they bring. Of course, as in imperial times, there are other ways of securing elite status than through state-sponsored examinations. For example, a lucky and privileged few enter the elite through business success or by studying abroad. And no one denies the importance of family connections. Many of China's most powerful politicians, including Xi Jinping, are the direct descendants of Communist revolutionary leaders. But those without guanxi see the Gaokao as a relatively fair and thus pure measure of merit.

Because the Gaokao has such fateful consequences, people spend their lives preparing for the exam, taking the exam, and preparing their children to take the exam. They base many important life decisions around these tasks, including saving money for education, buying a house near a good school, and choosing a spouse who can be a good parent (a good cultivator of high exam scores). Since an important goal of all these investments and decisions is to secure the educational success of the next generation, high test scores become an index not only of individual but of family accomplishment.

[55] In an update to the policy, students are now required to choose either physics or history and can select freely from the remaining electives. Before this change was implemented, few students chose physics, which they consider a difficult subject.

But if people are to see the Gaokao as a fateful rite of passage, it is not enough for them to regard the exam as consequential. It must also be perceived as having an undetermined outcome: as providing a real chance to succeed. Of course, the exam can also be chancy in the negative sense of the word. Although much can be gained in the Gaokao, the economic and opportunity costs of failure are also great, particularly for families of modest means. Compulsory schooling ends at grade 9, but many families make great sacrifices to finance the education of a promising student through high school. In a gender division of labor that forms a patriarchal legacy of China's traditional son preference, it is common for elder siblings, particularly girls, to work as migrant laborers to support the education of younger ones, particularly boys. Although high school fees have dropped following reforms in the 2000s, families incur many other educational expenses.

There are many other expenses associated with education. In 2021, General Secretary Xi suppressed the for-profit shadow education sector, which exacerbates educational inequality.[56] But skeptics of the ban on shadow education say that it has increased graduate unemployment, since so many young people worked in the industry, while wealthy parents simply hire private tutors.[57] Even after the ban, urban families seek to find tutors for their children in the expanding *underground* shadow education market that has mushroomed in its wake. In rural areas, many students travel long distances to high school and board on campus, but school dormitories are crowded and noisy, often with eight or more students to a room. Families may strap their budgets to rent a room for promising examinees during their all-important senior year. Other common outlays include various forms of licit or illicit blandishments including the expensive so-called school choice fees for students who missed the mark by a few points on the high school entrance examination, bribes to administrators to arrange for a child to be streamed into a good class, and gifts for teachers to secure favorable treatment. Finally, if a child fails the Gaokao, retaking the exam is difficult and expensive. Because the state has cracked down on public schools offering this service, it is common for repeat examinees to attend a private school at extraordinary expense.

Although many families chafe at the various ways that families of means can use their wealth to improve their children's chances on the exam, they see the final battle itself as relatively incorruptible. Cheating on the Gaokao, although not unheard of, is a criminal offence and made difficult by strict policing. When they register for the exam, test takers must undergo a physical examination, and their state-issued ID, which includes biometric identifiers, is checked again on test day. Proctors police every room, which are also monitored by camera. In many cities, signal-blocking equipment is used to foil high-tech cheats, and examination halls may even be policed by drones. Although it is possible to purchase access to a good school or class, it is notoriously difficult if not impossible to "spend money"—a euphemism for corrupt practices—to improve a Gaokao score. And the centralized design of test papers in Beijing has curbed another corrupt practice:

[56] D. Cohen and Beauchamp-Mustafaga, "Anti-Privilege Campaign Hits the Chinese Middle Class."
[57] Howlett, *Meritocracy and Its Discontents,* pp. 92–93.

Formerly, the teachers of prestigious keypoint schools were invited by provincial officials to design test questions. Though they were cloistered ahead of the exam to avoid leaks, students at their schools inevitably had a better sense of the questions that would appear on the exam because their teachers were directly involved in creating it.[58]

Diligence versus Quality: The Contradiction between Fairness and Innovation

The critique that the Gaokao does not test merit overlooks its cultural significance as a fateful rite of passage, but what about fairness? Does the Gaokao really give people of modest origins a fair chance at breaking their way into the elite?

Critics say no, pointing to, among other things, the decreasing number of people of rural origin in China's elite colleges.[59] Educational expansion has made it possible for vast numbers of people to obtain a higher-education diploma, but the education system has simultaneously become highly stratified. Places at first-tier four-year colleges are increasingly monopolized by coastal, urban, Han ethnic majority elites, while those at second-tier and two-year colleges are occupied by people of rural and ethnic minority backgrounds.[60]

The quest of reformers to make the exam a better test of merit is partly responsible for these unequal outcomes. Since the 1990s, the Chinese education system has increasingly focused on "education for quality," a nebulous concept that includes innovation and creativity.[61] As part of the quality reforms, the Gaokao was designed to include an increasing number of subjective questions, the answers to which cannot be easily memorized. Students with what are termed special abilities—such as aptitudes in art or sports—were given dedicated pathways into elite schools and could take special, easier forms of the Gaokao.[62] Principals of elite high schools were allowed to handpick some students for direct admission to elite colleges, and bonus points on the Gaokao were awarded for placing highly in academic competitions, such as the International Mathematics Olympiad. Some colleges started administering special autonomous admissions exams, allowing students a further way to rack up bonus points.

Such reforms surely help elite colleges to select students whom they deem to be of higher quality. As critics point out, however, they also tend to disadvantage underprivileged examinees, particularly those of rural background. In rural areas, few families have the financial means or cultural knowledge to train students in special abilities or participate

[58] The non-compulsory sections of the exam continue to be designed in provincial capitals, but the compulsory sections carry such weight that their centralized design has greatly improved the impression of fairness.
[59] Xiaobing Wang, Chengfang Liu, Linxiu Zhang, Yaojiang Shi, and Scott Rozelle, "College Is a Rich, Han, Urban, Male Club: Research Notes from a Census Survey of Four Tier One Colleges in China," *The China Quarterly* 214 (June 2013): 456–70.
[60] Yeung, "China's Higher Education Expansion and Social Stratification."
[61] Kipnis, *Governing Educational Desire*.
[62] Lily Chumley, *Creativity Class: Art School and Culture Work in Postsocialist China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

in academic Olympiads, and rural principals have little direct admissions largesse to distribute. By the same token, supposedly creativity-encouraging subjective questions on the Gaokao, such as the Chinese essay question, notoriously focus on topics with a marked urban bias, such as popular music or films. And on the English exam, for example, examination designers strive to include topics that they consider modern—that is, urban—such as the latest models of mobile phones. As one Chinese education researcher of rural background quipped, "If raising pigs is ever considered a special ability, then we'll finally see real admissions equality in the Gaokao."

For people of modest backgrounds, including China's hundreds of millions of rural-to-urban migrants, diligence in rote memorization forms a weapon of the weak: a way of surpassing established elites who are privileged and well-connected but may be complacent. As a popular examination slogan goes, "Without the Gaokao, how can you outcompete the second-generation rich [*fu'erdai*]?"

Ironically, however, even as it has served as a weapon of underprivileged classes and groups, diligence also reinforces their marginalization. Those who rely primarily on diligence to compete on the Gaokao, including many women and ethnic minorities as well as people of rural origin, find themselves funneled into specializing in the humanities, the exam content for which is particularly amenable to rote memorization. In Chinese schools, it is common to hear teachers and students opine that women and ethnic minorities may be very diligent but have inferior "logical ability." As a result of such prejudices and structural inequalities, these groups are overrepresented in relatively marginalized and underpaying humanistic fields, like journalism and translation.[63] By contrast, urban men dominate in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and math), from which the majority of China's leaders are drawn.

Yet for the first time in Chinese history, women, long forbidden from taking exams, now outachieve men scholastically, whether measured in terms of standardized test scores or educational attainment.[64] In the decade since 2010, women have continued to outnumber men in college. In 2020, they accounted for 54.4 percent of university students despite a distorted sex ratio at birth, 120 boys to 100 girls, and quotas favoring men in some college programs, including arts and communication as well as military and police

[63] Howlett, *Meritocracy and Its Discontents*, chapter 4; Duoduo Xu, "Is Gender Equality at Chinese Colleges a Sham?" *Sixth Tone*, 2018 <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1002051/is-gender-equality-at-chinese-colleges-a-sham%3F>.

[64] Gu and Yeung 2021, "Why do Chinese adolescent girls outperform boys in achievement tests?" In the early modern era, an unspoken gender ideology excluded women form participating in China's civil examinations. See *Susan Mann, Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). University co-education began in the Republican era (1912–49) and expanded after the 1949 Communist revolution; however, enrollment did not reach gender parity until the 2000s.

academies.[65] In 2016, women outnumbered men in graduate school enrollment for the first time in spite of despite gender discrimination in admissions.[66]

Scholars usually account for women's academic outperformance by pointing to the one-child policy (1979–2015), which empowered urban singleton daughters by forcing families to invest in them educationally.[67] But around 40 percent of women college students are from rural backgrounds, where the one-child policy was rarely strictly enforced and son preference remains common.[68] Although rural daughters took longer to achieve academic dominance, they have caught up: Among rural students, the proportion of girls going to college tripled from 1990 to 2010, and they now outnumber boys.[69] Also, women's educational outperformance is a global phenomenon, occurring in over seventy countries around the world.[70]

Rather than seeing women's educational revolution as a source of national strength, Chinese leadership perceives it as a "boys' crisis" or crisis of masculinity and scapegoats so-called leftover women, thought to be too picky and careerist to marry early, for the looming silver tsunami of social aging.[71] In response, government leaders are cracking down on feminist movements and creating hurdles to divorce while promulgating

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[65] On discriminatory gender quotas in the Gaokao, see Joy Dong, "As Chinese women seek to crack male professions, schools stand in the way," *New York Times*, October 21, 2021 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/21/world/asia/china-schools-gender-bias.html>. See also Leta Hong Fincher, *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* (London: Verso, 2016). For statistics on women in higher education, see National Bureau of Statistics, "Final statistical monitoring report on the implementation of China national program for women's development (2011–2020)" (2021) <http://www.stats.gov.cn/enGLISH/PressRelease/202112/t20211231_1825801.html> For a recent analysis of sex ratios at birth, see Quanbao Jiang and Zhang Cuiling Jiang, "Recent Sex Ratio at Birth in China," *BMJ Global Health* 6.5: 1–11 (2021) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2021-005438>. As Jiang and Zhang note, the 120:100 figure is for those born in the 2000s, who are now around university age. Since 2010, the ratio has come down, approaching 110 boys to 100 girls in 2015 data. But the sex ratio at birth remains high in southern provinces, including Fujian, and is distorted nationally for third and above births.

[66] Women accounted for 50.6 percent of graduate students in 2016 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The ratio dropped below 50 percent in 2017 and 2018 before rising again to 50.6 percent in 2019 and to 50.9 percent in 2020 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Zheng (2017) argues that women applicants to master's programs are enrolled at lower rates than men despite having superior college records; however, they continue to outnumber men overall because they apply in greater numbers, in part because it is harder for them to find jobs after college owing to gender discrimination. As Liu and Shen (2022) analyze, women are underrepresented in PhD programs.

[67] Vanessa L. Fong, "China's One-Child Policy and the Empowerment of Urban Daughters," *American Anthropologist* 104.4 (2002): 1098–1109 <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2002.104.4.1098.Gu and Yeung 2021>. See also Gu and Yeung, "Why do Chinese adolescent girls outperform boys in achievement tests?"

[68] Howlett, "Tactics of Marriage Delay." X. Wang and others, "College Is a Rich, Han, Urban, Male Club."<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741013000647>.

[69] Yang Qian and Wang Weiyi, "Gaodeng jiaoyu jihui xingbie bu pingdeng de chengxiang chayi ji qi bianhua yanjiu" (A study of gender inequality in access to higher education in urban and rural areas and its changes). *Fujian shifan daxue xue bao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* 6 (2019): 151–158.

[70] Marcia Inhorn and Nancy Smith-Hefner, "Introduction," in *Waithood: Gender, Education, and Global Delays in Marriage*, in in *Waithood: Gender, Education, and Global Delays in Marriage*, edited by Marcia C. Inhorn and Nancy S. Hefner, 1–30 (New York: Berghahn, 2021) <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781789209006-003>.

[71] Fincher, *Leftover Women*; Howlett, "Tactics of Marriage Delay"; Minzner, "China's Doomed Fight Against Demographic Decline."

traditional masculinity and family values.[72] Such policies appear to be backfiring, however, because they do not address why women choose not to have children, including unfair distributions of household labor, the rising costs of raising children, China's dimming economic outlook, and the hypercompetitive educational environment. And as a result of continued discrimination and structural inequality, women remain underrepresented in the higher echelons of government and business.[73]

Relatively few reform efforts attempt to address unequal ethnic and gender divisions of labor, probably because they are perceived as resulting from so-called natural differences despite all scientific research to the contrary. Since the 2000s, however, there has been much pushback against the quality reforms. For a long time, the West, and particularly the U.S., has been idealized as a place where the all-around quality of students is recognized.[74] But people say that a U.S.-style multifactor admissions system, which includes essays, letters of recommendation, and high school grades in addition to standardized test scores, would never work in China because it could too easily be corrupted.[75] Many contend that the Gaokao, with all its faults, is relatively fair because it gives anyone with access to public school a chance to make it into the elite.

The Gaokao reforms under Xi Jinping aim to reinforce this perception of fairness. In addition to centralizing the production of exam questions, Xi's reforms have removed many ways to game the system by accumulating bonus points or cultivating special abilities. Under Xi, it has also become easier for the children of migrant workers to take the Gaokao in their place of study rather than having to return to their native provinces to sit for the exam, a requirement that further disadvantaged this already underprivileged cohort of test-takers.[76] In addition, the reforms under Xi encourage universities to increase admission quotas for students from rural areas as well as from inland and Western provinces, where the majority of China's ethnic minorities reside. Such quotas can be conceived as a form of affirmative action, although they are not perceived as

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[72] Leta H. Fincher, *Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China* (London: Verso, 2018).
[73] See Sierra Janik, Daniel Blaugher, and Jonathan Ray, "Women in China's Leadership," U.S.-China Economic and Review Commission Issue Brief, March 30, 2022 <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2022-03/Women_in_Chinas_Leadership.pdf>.
[74] Ironically, U.S. primary and secondary education has shifted post-2000 to focus more on standardized testing, partly to counter the perceived threat of rising Chinese educational dominance.
[75] Multifactor admissions do not always seem to work in the United States either. In a 2019 admissions scandal, American parents were criminally prosecuted for paying fixers to gain entry for their children to elite colleges. This incident probably forms the tip of the iceberg. See Jennifer Medina, Katie Benner, and Kate Taylor, "Actresses, Business Leaders and Other Wealthy Parents Charged in U.S. College Entry Fraud," *New York Times*, 12 March (2019). <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/12/us/college-admissions-cheating-scandal.html>.
[76] This policy change was a hard-won accomplishment of the New Citizens' Movement (*Xingongmin yundong*), a series of grassroots civil rights campaigns that, among other actions, collected the signatures of more than 100,000 migrant workers who were impacted by Gaokao residency restrictions. See *New Citizens Movement Briefing Note* (Human Rights in China, 2014) <https://www.hrichina.org/sites/default/files/new_citizens_movement_briefing_note_2014.pdf>.

compensating disadvantaged groups for historical injustice but rather as providing development assistance for which so-called underdeveloped groups should be grateful.[77]

The increase of quotas for non-dominant groups erodes the protectionist advantage of China's largest cities, which contain the greatest number of elite universities. An oft-cited statistic is that the combined acceptance rate for China's top two universities, Tsinghua and Peking, both located in Beijing, is around 1 percent for residents of the capital city, whereas around only 1 out of 1,000 students from Shanghai and a mere few out of every 10,000 students from ordinary provinces can attend these universities.[78] But this relatively extreme example may be a poor index of overall fairness. More prosaically, between 4 and 5 percent of students in the provincial-level cities of Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin gain admission to Project 985 universities, whereas the admission rate to Project 985 universities hovers between 1 and 2 percent in ordinary provinces (Table 2).[79] The high admission rates of centrally located cities is often a result of distorted quotas that favor local residents. Thus, the quota system in China pulls both ways, providing both preferential treatment for the already privileged and modest positive policies for marginalized groups.[80]

When reforms in the mid-2010s resulted in moderate rollbacks of regional protectionism, parents in many large Chinese cities demonstrated, resulting in a rare display of middle-class protest, although arguably the citizens disadvantaged by such protectionism have more to protest about.[81] To a large degree, however, the issue of regional protectionism is a red herring: It draws attention away from local and sub-regional disparities which are even more dramatic but not as widely known. In "good" high schools in urban places, nearly all students go on to study in a first-tier university, a broader designation that includes the Project 985 institutions and Project 211 institutions. By contrast, the number who achieve this goal in ordinary, non-keypoint schools in the countryside or underperforming urban schools is often negligible, less than 1 percent if any.[82] Despite the expansion of higher education, the Gaokao remains a fierce competition for a small number of elite college seats. As people say, the test is like "a great army crossing a narrow-plank bridge"; many will fall off along the way (Figure 4).

If disparities in admission rates are so extreme, why do students nevertheless see the Gaokao as relatively fair? The answer is complex, involving at least three factors. First, although provincial-level protectionism is well-known and discussed widely in the media,

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[77] Of course, in other contexts of affirmative action, such as the United States, dominant social groups often also regard affirmative action, all rhetoric to the contrary, as a gift for which disadvantaged minorities should be grateful.
[78] Yiqin Fu, "China's Unfair College Admissions System," *The Atlantic*, 19 June 2013 <https://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/06/chinas-unfair-college-admissions-system/276995/>.
[79] Howlett 2021a, chapter 3.
[80] Minglang Zhou, "China's Positive and Preferential Policies," in *Affirmative Action in China and the U.S.: A Dialogue on Inequality and Minority Education*, ed. by Minglang Zhou and Ann Maxwell Hill (New York: Macmillan, 2010), pp. 47–70.
[81] D. Cohen and Beauchamp-Mustafaga, "Anti-Privilege Campaign Hits the Chinese Middle Class."
[82] Howlett, *Meritocracy and Its Discontents*, chapter 3.

local disparities are closely guarded secrets. Educational authorities treat admissions statistics as top secret, meaning that parents and even education researchers who want to gain an accurate picture of educational inequality must painstakingly assemble data from disparate sources. Second, because the Chinese education system is so stratified, the definition of success differs widely from place to place and school to school. For students in a peripheral rural high school, admission to any four-year university would be a coup, while for urbanites in a keypoint school success is minimally defined as admission to a Project 985 university. Finally, the remarkable individuals who rise from modest backgrounds to achieve extraordinary success help to breathe life into the myth of meritocracy. The number of these "dark horses" is not great, but their exploits are widely celebrated, which keeps hope alive.

The Emptiness of University Education

College students widely complain that university education is empty. To be sure, many college majors and programs in China, particularly at elite universities, provide excellent training. But students in ordinary universities often say that the knowledge their professors teach is out of date and disconnected with the realities of the employment market. In addition, students choose their major before attending college, usually not out of interest but because of practical considerations—for example, ease of admission or perceived quality of job prospects. Having toiled in monomaniacal fashion for twelve years to do well on the "final battle," the Gaokao, many young people have little conception of what they are interested in and find themselves locked into college majors that they do not enjoy pursuing. And whereas the Gaokao is a trial of merit, examinations in college count for little. Once students matriculate, they are virtually guaranteed to graduate. Only those who plan to pursue postgraduate education overseas must worry about performing well.[83] Employment is said to be determined not by one's grades but by the ranking of one's college and major, which is fixed upon matriculation. Since the college that one attends forms a static aspect of personhood, people ironically refer to it as their "birth status." In contrast to their hopeful expectation of the Gaokao, which they say can change fate, the college years seem devoid of fatefulness. They are hollow.

Since grades matter little and college courses often seem misaligned with the job market, many students spend their time in college preparing for further examinations, such as the national or provincial civil-service exams, the graduate-school entrance exam, or various tests required for study abroad. Other students pass their college years sojourning away from campus, working as migrant laborers in various temporary jobs only to return at the end of the semester to take their exams. Some start small businesses, selling products from their hometowns. Still others earn money as "substitute examinees" or "sharpshooters," helping people cheat on the Gaokao. Those who are less entrepreneurial often describe large portions of their college experience as "frittering away the time," a

[83] In addition, some students who earn top marks in college can receive guaranteed admission (*baosong*) to graduate school, but the numbers are relatively few.

description that includes playing video games, seeking amusement with friends, and chatting online.

Upon graduation, this feeling of emptiness may gradually transform into a more serious existential malaise. Most students have worked their whole lives with the expectation that a high score on the Gaokao will enable them to fulfill their parents' and grandparents' expectations of securing a good job and leading a stable, white-collar life. After college, however, many young people find themselves confronted with a disappointing reality. Graduates, especially of second- and third-tier universities, increasingly discover that the labor market will not reward them with jobs that can fulfill their parents' and relatives' dreams for prosperity and stability.[84]

Under China's slowing growth, even many students with a degree from a Project 985 university are having trouble finding jobs. A master's degree has almost become a prerequisite for a job, ratcheting up competition on the graduate school entrance exam to unprecedented proportions. Those without good "birth status" are even less lucky. Young college grads from second-rate schools, who are predominantly of rural origin, find themselves working as couriers, masseuses, or farmers after studying finance, marketing, or economics. The majority of college graduates now earn less than an average migrant worker.[85] The increase in graduate under- and unemployment means that the massification of higher education has exacerbated rural-urban income inequality despite expanding access to college.[86]

For these reasons, many college graduates in their twenties and thirties report experiencing a fundamental "disconnect between ideal and reality," which potentially presages growing discontent with China's established technocratic elite. Increasing numbers choose to quietly quit or "lie flat," and complaints of involution—escalating competition for inferior returns—have become rampant.[87]

In some respects, this widespread existential crisis is structural to the Chinese examination system as it functions in the post-1980s period of labor-market liberalization. The system was designed for an era when every college graduate was assigned a job. Thus people frequently speak of a corresponding disconnect—namely, that between the Gaokao and the labor market. In many ways, the Gaokao, with its admission quotas and central planning, is a holdover of the planned economy, whereas the labor market has largely already shifted to the invisible hand of supply and demand. It remains to be seen whether the current round of reforms to the Gaokao will help reconcile this contradiction.

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[84] Yanjie Huang, "China's Educated Underemployment." Mok and Wu, "Higher Education, Changing Labour Market and Social Mobility in the Era of Massification in China."
[85] Yanjie Huang, "China's Educated Underemployment."
[86] Mok and Wu, "Higher Education, Changing Labour Market and Social Mobility in the Era of Massification in China."
[87] Chen, "These Chinese Millennials Are 'Chilling,' and Beijing Isn't Happy" *New York Times*, July 3, 2021. Q. Wang and Ge, "How One Obscure Word Captures Urban China's Unhappiness."

But there are grounds for skepticism. Despite the expansion of higher education since the 2000s, the Chinese educational system remains focused on making fine distinctions between the abilities of different test-takers rather than providing broad-based and high-quality educational opportunities to all. This system excels at providing distinction to elites in the form of top educational credentials, and until recently has also effectively pulled large segments of the population into the educational gyroscope of meritocratic competition, which reinforces state legitimacy. The country has also poured massive amounts of resources into its top research institutions. But it does not seem to be successfully pivoting to providing the kind of broad-based, high-quality education at every level that will help it escape the middle-income trap. China's investment in education as a percentage of GDP remains relatively low at 3.6 percent (for comparison the U.S. invests 6.1 percent of GDP in education).[88] Because only about half of young people go the academic route and take the Gaokao, a key investment area is vocational education. But despite increasing investment in vocational training, these programs largely remain of low quality, stymied by the perception that anyone who participates in them is a failure.[89]

Expanding access to high-quality formal education is not the only key to solving China's human capital crisis. Many people in China embrace a deep ethic of entrepreneurialism, driven by a cultural preference for starting one's own business over working for others. People of rural origin are eager to learn new knowledge and to take every opportunity, formal and informal, to improve their skills and capacities. By pursuing economic liberalization and financial reform that would make it easier for people of rural origin to access credit and start businesses, the country could help to unleash this entrepreneurial energy, which was so key to its rapidest period of poverty reduction in the 1980s.

Conclusion: Meritocracy and Its Discontents

Without doubt, the story of education in modern China has been one of a "silent revolution."[90] In the twentieth century and particularly after the introduction of the Gaokao system in 1952, the competition for meritocratic credentials has become increasingly open to wider groups who had rarely or never before competed in the Chinese meritocracy: women, disadvantaged ethnic minorities, and ordinary farmers and workers. But an open competition does not mean an open elite.

To be sure, the composition of the elite has shifted several times over the past hundred years and the numbers of elite degree holders has also increased, although perhaps not as

[88] I take these figures from World Bank data: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.XPD.TOTL.GD.ZS?locations=CN>.
[89] Rozelle and Hell, *Invisible China*; Woronov, *Classwork*.
[90] Chen Liang and others, "Wusheng de geming: Beijing daxue yu Suzhou daxue shehui laiyuan yanjiu, 1952–2002 (Silent revolution: The origins of Peking University and Soochow University undergraduates, 1952–2002)', *Zhongguo shehui kexue*, 1 (2012), 101–21.

much as people imagine.[91] And the Gaokao, which reinforces a cultural belief in the fate-transforming power of diligence, probably does more to promote social mobility than college-entrance systems in many other countries, such as the United States.[92] Although people in the U.S. believe in the meritocratic value of hard work, athletic competitions, rather than academic ones, seem to be the most important fateful rite of passage for promoting this virtue in the United States. Many Americans believe that athletic talent is trainable whereas academic ability is more completely determined by what are believed to be intrinsic capacities such as IQ.[93] The relatively great faith in diligence of people in China may have important lessons for education systems elsewhere.

But the most touted successes of the Chinese system come from large urban centers like Shanghai, which are not representative of the country as a whole.[94] The Chinese education system remains extremely stratified and is becoming increasingly so as social inequality grows. The current definition of elite success, admission to a Project 985 college, is a vanishingly rare accomplishment among people of underprivileged backgrounds. Now as before, the exam system in China, rather than providing an open door to the disadvantaged, is a tool of elite social closure: It mainly serves to certify the status of people who have already accumulated enough social, economic, and cultural capital to compete.

One can reasonably ask if the best interests of society are served by such a system, which provides only a narrow segment of the population with the conditions that they need to reach their full academic potential. Of course, people of rural origin, even if they lack educational opportunity, at least have the normative expectation that they can use diligence to "transform fate." But without doubt, the education system fails to unlock the full potential of rural residents and of groups perceived to be less capable of excelling in math and sciences: women and ethnic minorities.

Yet people in China often push back against such critiques. They say that in a country with such a large population and so few spaces at the top, it is necessary to have a strong sorting mechanism. In addition to giving ordinary people hope, the Gaokao, such supporters say, encourages them to "come to terms with fate." And even people who

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[91] According to Benjamin Elman, one in 540 people in China possessed an elite degree in late Qing China. See *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China*, p. 106. Remarkably, this figure is on the same order of magnitude as elite university degree holders in China today: Today less than 1 percent of China's children achieve admission to a Project 985 university, the current hallmark of elite success.
[92] Liang and others, "Wusheng de geming."
[93] Lenora Chu, *Little Soldiers: An American Boy, a Chinese School, and the Global Race to Achieve* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2017). Chu draws on the work of psychologist James Sigler to make this point. See, for example, Harold W. Stevenson and James W. Stigler, *The Learning Gap: Why Our Schools Are Failing and What We Can Learn from Japanese and Chinese Education* (New York: Summit Books, 1992). Of course, Americans are far from monolithic. In particular, the "model minority" of Asian Americans routinely outperforms other ethnic groups, probably in part due to a greater faith in academic diligence.
[94] See Tom Loveless, "The Children PISA Ignores in China," *The Brookings Institution* (2019) <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2019/12/19/the-children-pisa-ignores-in-china/>. See also Tom Loveless, "Lessons from the PISA-Shanghai Controversy," *The Brookings Institution* (2014) <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2014/03/18-pisa-shanghai-loveless>.

believe in making a more open and diverse meritocracy still see the Gaokao as performing some useful social functions. True, the focus of the exam on rote memorization does little to encourage creativity.[95] But the examination is a fateful rite of passage in which people personify high cultural virtues: discipline, grit, composure, luck, quality, and filial devotion.

The architects of the Gaokao face a momentous challenge. If the exam is to continue to serve as a fateful rite of passage, then people must perceive it as both consequential and fair. But many in China's poor rural areas no longer see the Gaokao as providing a real opportunity for mobility. In response, students are dropping out of school; some even become possessed by spirits or join rebellious millenarian groups.[96]

Simultaneously, many in the middle classes no longer perceive the examination as an accurate test of quality and thus dispute its importance. Many members of this relatively privileged group are voting with their feet, sending their children to be educated abroad. A significant number are "Gaokao refugees" who underperform in the Chinese education system. Until recently, however, they have largely seen China as the land of opportunity. Since 2013 around 80 percent have returned home.[97] But disillusionment is now growing with China's slowing growth and the Xi Jinping administration's illiberal policies. This dissatisfaction has spiked in the wake of his draconian pandemic controls and perceived mishandling of the exit from the pandemic. As more educated middle-class people in China prepare to "run," rising numbers of top students may go abroad and the percentage of study-abroad returnees may plummet.[98]

The challenge of maintaining the fatefulness of the Gaokao is not one that is intrinsic to the examination system alone but involves many social and political problems beyond the school gates. Nor is China the only country that faces this kind of challenge. Examination-based meritocracy has become a hallmark of modern society. Many countries now use some form of open, anonymous, competitive examination to cultivate and select their governing classes. But like their counterparts elsewhere, Chinese state leaders are confronting economic and social challenges that may yet undermine some basic premises of educational meritocracy, including stagnating economic growth and increasing inequality. Educated un- and underemployment in China is already high and

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[95] However, the role of foundational knowledge in creativity is often underestimated. See Lenora Chu's discussion in *Little Soldiers*.

[96] Howlett, *Meritocracy and Its Discontents*, chapter 6 and conclusion.

[97] From 2007 to 2017, the number of Chinese college and postgraduate students studying abroad more than quadrupled from 140,000 to 610,000, with more than half studying in the United States. For China figures, see Center for China and Globalization (CCG), *Report on Employment & Entrepreneurship of Chinese Returnees* (Center for China and Globalization, 2017) < http://en.ccg.org.cn/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Report-on-Employment-Entrepreneurship-of-Chinese-Returnees-2017.pdf >. For U.S. figures, refer to "Open Doors | Institute of International Education" <http://www.iie.org/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors>. In addition, many relatively unprivileged students of urban background also study abroad if they cannot succeed on the Gaokao. See Vanessa L. Fong, *Paradise Redefined: Transnational Chinese Students and the Quest for Flexible Citizenship in the Developed World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

[98] Yuan, "'The Last Generation.'"

may rise much further in the age of automation, economic transformation, and mass education. By loosening the perceived relationship between academic accomplishment and social success, the difficulty college graduates face in finding good jobs hollows out the promise of meritocracy. Facing the realities of slowing economic growth what they term an uncertain political macro-environment, many people in China will choose to "run" by emigrating to foreign countries.

It will be in the U.S.'s long-term advantage to welcome these young people, who largely maintain a positive image of the United States as a land of opportunity, freedom, and democracy. At the same time, the U.S. should continue the cultural exchanges that have reinforced these positive views. Generations of Chinese scholars and students have visited or studied in the U.S. Such exchanges counteract Chinese propaganda and help give Americans a window into social and political developments in China. These interactions are even more important in an era when it is increasingly difficult for Americans to travel to China for in-person research. For these reasons, I recommend fully restoring the China Fulbright exchange program, which was suspended in July 2020.

In the longer term, not only China but countries everywhere including the U.S. face fundamental challenges to their systems of meritocracy. The silver tsunami of social aging is washing over not only China but the whole world except for Africa. This demographic shift represents a fundamental change in political economics. Increasingly, countries will focus their economies on taking care of the very old, and the elderly may assume increasing political and economic power. Countries that are friendly to immigration, like the U.S., will have an advantage, whereas those that are culturally averse to immigration, like China, may find themselves flatfooted. Another challenge is automation. Artificial intelligence systems such as ChatGPT show that not only blue-collar labor but high-skilled creative and technical jobs can be automated. The old way of approaching automation was to focus on retraining workers for new jobs. But as increasing domains of work can be replaced by AI, the problem is unlikely to be solved by continual upskilling. At the same time, although inequality is decreasing between countries, it is increasing within them all over the world as narrower segments of the population accumulate greater wealth.[99] Such developments are leading to "involution" not only in China but in many places. Under such conditions, the middle classes become increasingly anxious about losing their social position and the poor see no chance of breaking into the elite.

A time-honored and proven solution to encouraging social mobility is affordable or free access to high-quality education. But if hard work no longer guarantees success—and, indeed, if the very social system in which such a statement is intelligible ceases to exist—then mass meritocratic competitions such as the Gaokao may no longer be meaningful. New solutions, such as redefining work and instituting universal basic income, may be required.

[99] Milanović, *Global Inequality.*

Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Students in the countryside of Fujian Province studying diligently for the “final battle,” the Gaokao. Photograph by author.

Figure 2: A mock-up of imperial era examination-hall cubicles. This style of cubicle was in use from the advent of open, anonymous, competitive civil exams in 960 CE until their abolishment in 1905. Note the strikingly modern construction, which resembles modern school desks, prison cells, or office cubicles.

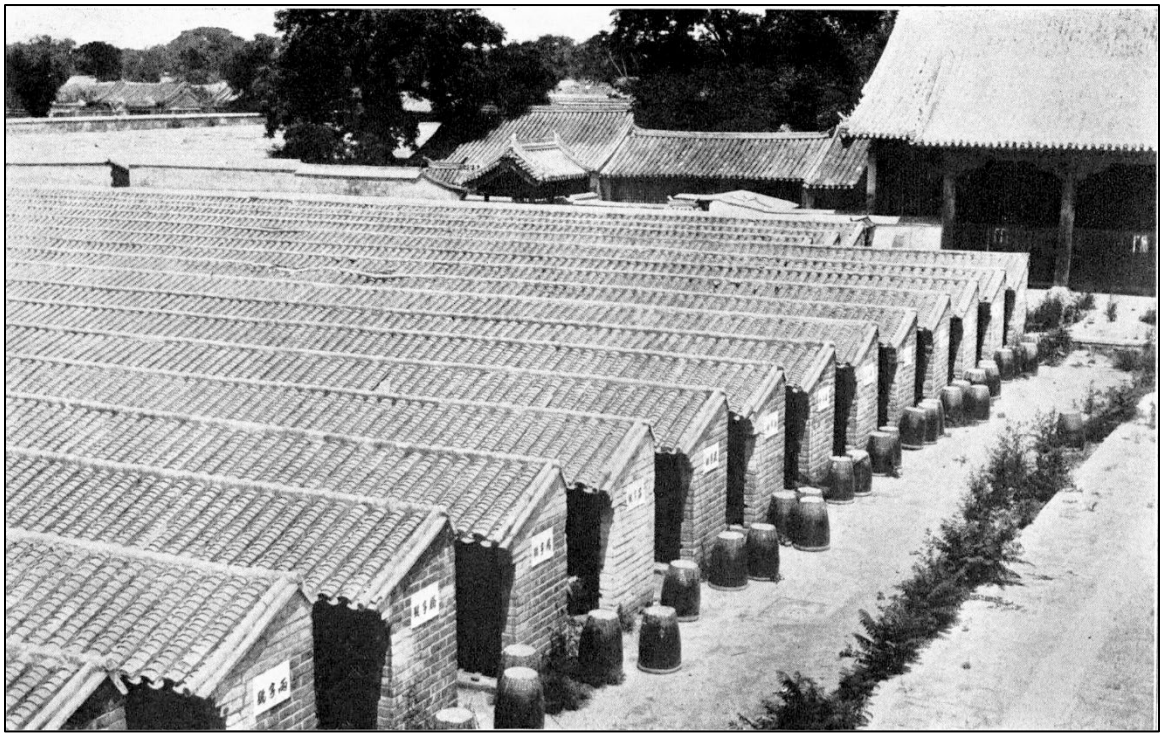

Figure 3: The imperial examination compound in Beijing, circa 1899. The exam-hall cubicles were arranged in neat rows like modern army barracks. Source: Conger, Sarah Pike. *Letters from China: With Particular Reference to the Empress Dowager and the Women of China*. Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1909, 56–57.

Figure 4: “A great army crossing a narrow plank bridge.” The sign on the desk at the end of the bridge reads “Prestigious Schools Admissions.” Cartoon by Ensheng Han.

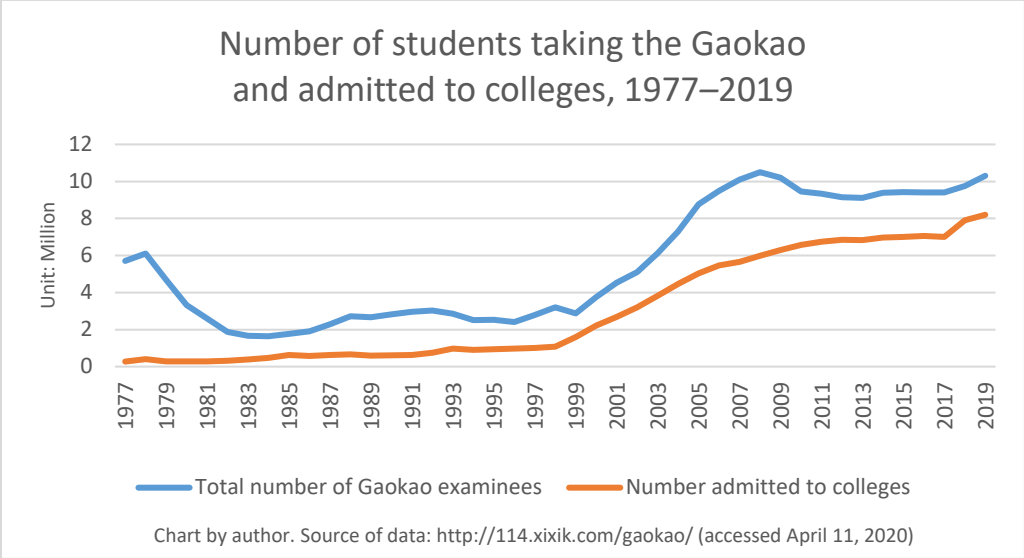

Table 1: Following an initial surge due to pent-up demand while the exam was suspended during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), the number of Gaokao examinees has steadily risen in the reform era (1976–present), accelerating dramatically in the late 1990s due to higher education expansion. Although the proportion of examinees admitted to all colleges has grown (it was nearly 80 percent in 2019), the numbers admitted to elite Project 985 universities remains low, under 2 percent in most provinces.

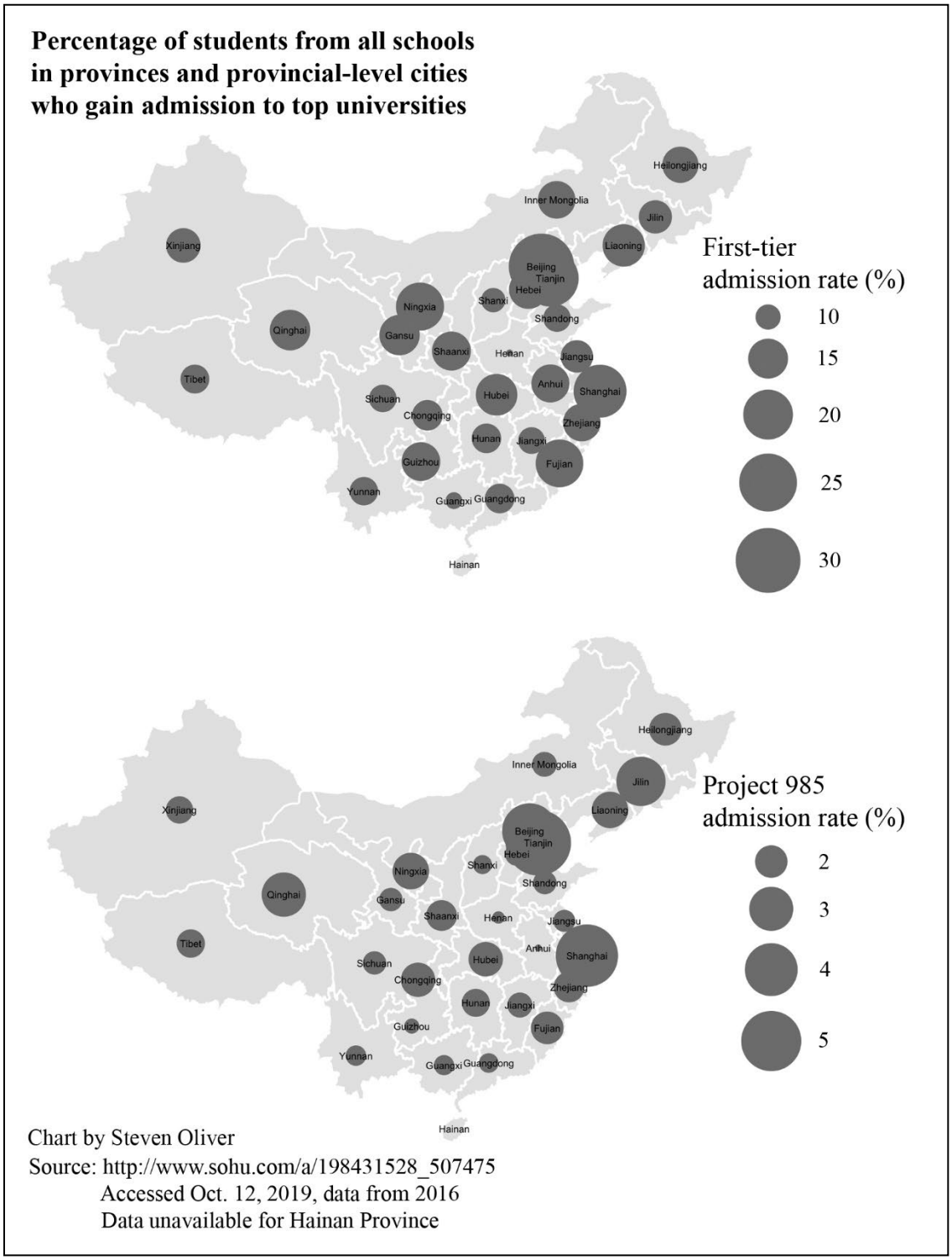
Percentage of students from all schools in provinces and provincial-level cities who gain admission to top universities
Heilongjiang
Inner Mongolia
Jilin
Liaoning
Xinjiang
Beijing
Tianjin
Hebei
Shanxi
Ningxia
Shandong
Qinghai
Gansu
Shaanxi
Henan
Jiangsu
Tibet
Anhui
Shanghai
Sichuan
Hubei
Chongqing
Zhejiang
Hunan
Jiangxi
Guizhou
Fujian
Yunnan
Guangxi
Guangdong
Hainan
First-tier admission rate (%)
10
15
20
25
30
Heilongjiang
Inner Mongolia
Jilin
Liaoning
Xinjiang
Beijing
Tianjin
Hebei
Shanxi
Ningxia
Shandong
Qinghai
Gansu
Shaanxi
Henan
Jiangsu
Tibet
Anhui
Shanghai
Sichuan
Hubei
Chongqing
Zhejiang
Hunan
Jiangxi
Guizhou
Fujian
Yunnan
Guangxi
Guangdong
Hainan
Project 985 admission rate (%)
2
3
4
5
Chart by Steven Oliver
Source: http://www.sohu.com/a/198431528_507475
Accessed Oct. 12, 2019, data from 2016
Data unavailable for Hainan Province

Table 2