

# *Gaokao: A Fate-changing Contest or the Myth of Meritocracy*

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**Abstract:** This analytical paper examined the role of Gaokao, China's college entrance examination, in reproducing an unequal and oppressive status quo. Gaokao has received mounting criticism for requiring so much rote learning and discounting individual creativity. Though there is also heated debate on the fairness of this high-stake test, Gaokao is widely believed by many Chinese students and parents as the relatively fair approach for the nation to select talents. The research brings new insights into this topic by analyzing it with Pierre Bourdieu's framework of types of capitals. It elucidates why Gaokao offers a false promise of a socially equalizing effect. Moreover, through the analysis made by this study, it gives awareness to society on how failure to realize the inequality in Gaokao will legitimates the process of social segregation and thus calls for exploring possible visions of better selection mechanisms. The paper begins by exploring the history of Gaokao and how Gaokao became the embodiment of a meritocratic ideal. Following this, this paper briefly discusses how Gaokao failed to promote an equitable education system as commonly believed. The last section highlights the harmful effects of the failure to realize the inequality and oppression inherent in Gaokao.

**Keywords:** educational inequality, Gaokao, standardized test

## 1. Introduction

Gaokao, China's college entrance examination, takes place annually in June, with millions of candidates attending every year. Since clearing the Gaokao is required for entrance into most higher education institutions, it carries much significance in the lives of Chinese youth. Although its highly pressure-packed nature aroused great controversy, the Gaokao was hailed by most Chinese, who hold a strong belief that it is a true and meritocratic examination that offers equal opportunities for students with different social origins. While admitting that nepotism plays a relatively insignificant role in Gaokao compared to other social competitions, the paper argues that the meritocracy and social equalizing effect of Gaokao is a false promise. Indeed, not only did Gaokao fail to promote an equitable education system as commonly believed, but it also reproduced an unequal and oppressive status quo.

The paper begins by exploring the history of Gaokao and how Gaokao became the embodiment of a meritocratic ideal. Following this, it briefly discusses how Gaokao failed to promote an equitable education system as commonly believed. The last section highlights the harmful effects of the failure to realize the inequality and oppression inherent in Gaokao. Conventional sociological research on educational meritocracy examines two significant aspects: how social origin affects educational

opportunities and success; and how educational qualification is related to the social destination. This paper focused primarily on examining the former aspect. The approaches adopted include examining related literatures and reflecting on the observations and personal experience in the Chinese society. This study spreads awareness in society on recognizing the flaws of standardized test and will provide valuable information for policymakers to further the educational reforms.

## 2. History of the Gaokao

The genesis of the Gaokao can be traced back to the ancient Sui dynasty, when Keju, also known as the civil service examination, was first introduced by the central government to select academicians to serve as officials in imperial China. For a commoner who aspired to ascend to the elite class, the only path seemed to be the Keju system. After serving imperial China for 1300 years, Keju was abolished in 1905. In 1952, three years after the birth of the People's Republic of China, the Gaokao was launched by the Communist government as the successor of the Keju system [1].

During the chaotic Cultural Revolution (1966-76), public education in China took a complete hiatus, and the Gaokao was suspended. After Mao's death in 1977, the Gaokao was reintroduced by vice premier Deng Xiaoping. Regardless of age or background, people rushed to attend Gaokao and embrace its reinstatement [1]. About 5.7 million candidates registered for the exam in 1977, while only 0.27 million were admitted, making the enrollment rate as low as five percent [2]. Since then, the general enrollment scale has continued to expand, bringing increased access to higher education for less privileged students.

## 3. Gaokao and Meritocracy: The Fate-changing Power of Gaokao

Meritocracy has been an enduring yet controversial theme in modern sociological scholarship. A meritocratic social system is where commonly desired opportunities and rewards, such as privilege and power, are positively associated with merit [3]. Generally speaking, merit refers to one's educational qualification, intelligence, and effort [4].

The concept of meritocracy has its deep root in the Confucius's philosophy that "those who govern should do so because of merit, not of inherited status". The centuries-long Keju tradition, the first system in the world to select government elites through an open and anonymous examination, instituted a modern form of meritocracy in Imperial China [5]. The social practice of meritocracy in China later inspired European Enlightenment thinkers and European colonizers [6]. For example, Britain experimented with a competitive civil service examinations in the Chinese style, first in its colony India and then at home [7].

In 1958, the term meritocracy was formally coined by British Sociologist Michael Young in his book *The Rise of the Meritocracy* with rapid changes in economic and occupational domains after World War II giving rise to its prevalence in post-industrial Western societies [8]. Since it represents a type of social selection that transcends ascriptive boundaries and promotes great mobility, the ideology of meritocracy has powerful political attraction and has been incorporated into a variety of political ideologies. The ideology of meritocracy was brought into China and used by the Communist Party of China (CPC) to address socio-economic and political hardships. In the post-Mao era of reform (1978-present), China's rapid economic growth has been accompanied by a sharp increase in social inequalities. To hold the society together, CPC employed a transformed ideology, which involved rejuvenating traditional values and promoting an education-based meritocracy [9]. Gaokao was introduced as a merit-based route, promising social mobility, equality and development.

The Gaokao has played a critical role in reinforcing the impression that people, regardless of their social origins, can change fate if they are self-disciplined enough and endure long-hour of schoolwork. Today, Chinese citizens regard the Gaokao as the cornerstone of meritocracy and hold strong faith

that the exam rests on a fair foundation. Most people in China are acutely aware of the prevalent social inequalities and corruptions, specifically how ordinary social competitions are determined through social connections; they, therefore, see such competitions as counterfeit and fake. By stark contrast, they perceive Gaokao as true and genuine, owing to the fact that Gaokao scores are decided during the examination frontstage publicly, according to rules-based and universal measures of merit [10]. It is also widely believed that Gaokao shields admission decisions from interference by political connections among people, and thus it improves equity and credibility of college enrollment [11]. Deeply convinced of the educational meritocracy and its life-changing power, many Chinese teachers and parents tell their children, “The way of heaven is to reward hard work; if there is no pain, there is no gain”.

#### 4. Gaokao: The False Promise of Meritocracy

Despite the commonly held belief that the Gaokao is true and fair, it actually failed to promote an equitable educational system and reproduced an unequal and oppressive status quo. The Gaokao is far removed from the meritocratic ideals that one’s educational success is weakly related to his or her origin. Indeed, there is a wide chasm in rural and urban children’s access to social resources, which Pierre Bourdieu, an educational sociologist, refers to as the cultural, economic, and social capitals (1986) that determine educational opportunities and achievement in the Gaokao [12]. Specifically, rural children lack the embodied cultural capital to succeed in the Gaokao, which caters to the nation’s aspiration for globalization and favors knowledge pertaining to industrial lifestyles. To transfer into a knowledge-based economy and prosper in the context of globalization, China launched a series of educational reforms in recent years, propositioning shifts from the instilment of knowledge to student-centered knowledge construction [13]. At the same time, the state reprioritized knowledge, skills and competencies to be included in curriculum standards and tested in the Gaokao, and recontextualized pedagogical discourses. As the emphasis shifted to globalization, rural cultural capital became further marginalized, with the knowledge and competencies to be tested more culturally alienating for both rural children and teachers. Such alienation is reflected in rural teachers’ accounts in the book *The Demoralization of Teachers*, that “the knowledge to be learned is so distanced from rural children’s life, we can’t expect them to understand the word ‘highway’ without ever having seen one” and “we didn’t know how to teach independent exploration, investigation, and self-reflection” [14]. Being culturally marginalized and lacking support from teachers, rural children are fundamentally disadvantaged in an educational system in which globalization dominates most pedagogical discourses.

In addition to disadvantages in cultural means, the limited access to economic and social capital makes it more challenging for rural children to compete with their urban counterparts in the Gaokao. Urban children have the opportunity to frequent libraries and museums and attend private tutoring sessions to extend knowledge beyond school requirements. According to Wendy Liang, a civil servant who bought her son online English classes with a foreign tutor, it is quite common for urban parents to sign up for tutoring classes for their children in Shanghai [15]. In urban cram schools, prominent teachers and former test designers can even predict what will be covered in the Gaokao and target exam preparation to improve students’ chances of acing the exam. For rural children and families, however, access to those activities and resources that are common to urban students is unimaginable. Ms Liang, migrant worker in Shenzhen and mother of a lower-secondary school student said in an interview that she has no idea where to find suitable tutors for her child; even they manage to find a suitable tutor, it would be impossible for them to afford the tutoring fee. Indeed, the yearly tutoring cost of an urban high school student is around 8000 RMB [16], which exceeds the median household income per capita for a rural household in 2021 [17]. The divergence in access to a wide range of social and economic capitals results in a starkly different learning experience among rural and urban

children. Rural families are both geographically distanced from urban areas in which educational resources are concentrated and financially incapable of paying for private tutoring or a study tour. As a result, schools and families are the sole sources of learning for rural students. On the contrary, children in cities and counties are surrounded by social resources, such as teaching professionals and exam-preparation institutions, which enable a higher chance of success in the Gaokao. The coronavirus outbreak has put rural schoolchildren at an even greater disadvantage to their urban counterparts. According to the China Development Research Foundation, nearly half of students in rural villages didn't have access to online classes during the pandemic.

Though the Gaokao is a standardized test that disassociates itself from corruption and nepotism, it fails to mediate the pronounced rural-urban divide and ensure educational equality, owing to the fact that rural children are afforded fewer cultural, social and economic capital that fuel academic success. In fact, geographical origin plays a significant role in predicting test outcomes. Specifically, Ye Liu's multimodal analysis of factors influencing students' higher education opportunities in China indicates that students from urban areas and counties generally performed better compared to those from rural areas in the 2006 Gaokao [18]. Other studies have indicated an association between socioeconomic status, parents' educational levels, and students' educational outcomes. Therefore, the Gaokao-based meritocracy assumption that one's social origin has little impact on educational attainment is disproved. With rural children systematically disadvantaged along their learning trajectories, the Gaokao fails to promote educational inequality and close the rural-urban learning gap.

Despite the false promise of a socially equalizing effect, the meritocratic ideal of the Gaokao reinforced an inequitable and oppressive status quo by recruiting many into believing in individual merit, thus enhancing the society's tolerance towards an unequal educational system. Despite acutely recognizing the wide social inequalities in China, citizens are convinced that success and failure in the Gaokao are the outcome of a relatively fair process during which one's origin only plays an insignificant role. In fact, the effects of education on opinions about meritocracy are greater for relatively disadvantaged social groups, who tend to believe that merit plays a more important role than family origin for educational success in the Gaokao [18]. Like many rural parents, the father of Zeyu, a high-achieving student from a peripheral rural county, saw the Gaokao as China's only relatively fair competition, offering ordinary people a chance to fight back against a corrupt and unequal world [10]. In Xiang's narratives of rural children's attitudes towards schooling, rural children hold strong faith in the test's power to "change fate", seeing the Gaokao as their only hope of escaping a backward village life [19]. While being disadvantaged systemically, the belief that they can transform their own lives if they are self-disciplined enough and they only have themselves to blame if they fail is indoctrinated into rural children's psyche. In this way, the Gaokao rendered moot the contribution of urban upper and middle-class children's inherited assets, making the oppressed more tolerant of an unequal educational system.

## 5. Implications

The false meritocratic ideal of the Gaokao harms Chinese students by imposing a public form of shame on low achievers and legitimates the process of social segregation. Fascinated by the narratives of success without realizing the fact that opportunities to accumulate such merit are unevenly distributed, society positions rural low-achieving students as too stupid and idle to move up the social ladder. Students are discriminated against for simply having low scores [19], and teachers make debasing remarks on low achievers, regarding them as "junk" and "coal dusk" [14]. Many children internalize the public humiliation, seeing themselves as "inferior" and having unpromising life prospects. During my interviews with vocational school students in Guangdong, many have low self-esteem, describing themselves as losers in the system. Professor Diane Reay's ethnographic research

on British working-class students resonated with my observation: many working-class children held the belief that “a ‘rubbish’ learner was only fit to go to ‘rubbish’ schools”.

At the same time, the myth of a merit-based Gaokao justifies the process of social segregation, impairing both “losers” and “winners” in the system. Simply attributing exam success or failure to individual merit not only puts a veil on the fact that people are afforded with uneven opportunities to accumulate merit but also instills a strong sense of individualism among Chinese students [10]. The merit-based theory also justifies homogenous grouping and social segregation, which puts students into different tracks based on their “capabilities” and “chance to enter a prominent college”. As such, it renders a simplistic outlook on the world for Chinese youth, covering up the social complexity and the fact that people inevitably belong to a social construct. At the same time, students are deprived of the chance to appreciate diversity, learn from people who have different social capitals, and thus make sense of relationships and the self. In tandem with an over-emphasis on textbook knowledge, individualism hampers the meaning-making process of learning for both “winners” and “losers” in Chinese school settings.

The youth mental health problem is plaguing Chinese society, dominating pedagogical discourse. A number of research has attributed the skyrocketing mental health problems among Chinese youth to the intensive and highly competitive nature of the Gaokao. However, few have ever investigated how the divide between the false promise of meritocracy and the inequity-plagued reality is associated with the rise in mental health problems. This paper offers an unconventional view on educational meritocracy and has implications for future research on a possible relationship between educational meritocracy and students’ mental health in contemporary Chinese society.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, contrary to the commonly held belief that the Gaokao offers fair opportunities for even the most underprivileged students, it actually fails to promote an equitable educational system and reproduces an oppressive status quo. Torn between a false meritocratic promise and an unequal reality, between a belief in individual merit and the interconnected society, no one is the winner in this grueling contest.

This paper is subjective to several limitations. First, the new “3+X” mode of the Gaokao was introduced in 2020, while most literature and personal accounts that I examined are from before 2020. My claims on the Gaokao may lack credibility since I did not make a distinction between the new Gaokao and the old one. In addition, my research did not distinguish Gaokao from other standardized tests. Addressing limitations of my research, more recent literature and evidence will need to be examined to focus on the new “3+X” mode of the Gaokao and whether the shift to “3+X” remove the invisible barriers for disadvantaged groups. In addition, a comparative study on Gaokao, other forms of standardized selection, and holistic admissions could be conducted to examine what makes Gaokao different from other selection systems around the world. My research builds a foundation for exploring possible visions of better selection mechanisms.

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