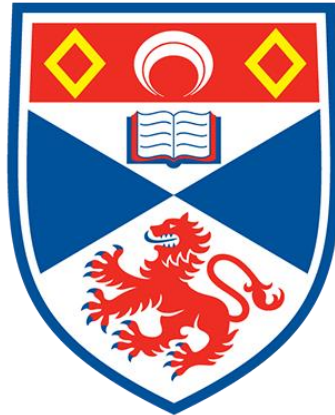


# **The *Gaokao* culture and its implications in Chinese society**



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## **Introduction**

Early June in China is a crucial time for students and families, as the high schoolers prepare themselves for Gaokao, perceived as one of the most important days throughout a student's life. Gaokao is known as China's national college entrance examination, which can be equivalent to the UK qualifications of A-levels, although considered to be much tougher than any exams in the world. Around 13 million students take this test usually over the course of three to four days; preparing for an exam that may be even tougher than university assessments. During this time, the society in China comes to a hiatus in an effort to support Gaokao candidates, as the population conforms to the saying "Gaokao can change fate". The country has set various thoughtful measures and meticulous arrangements: from stopping construction works to providing free water for exam takers, there is no other event that has equal weight and social acceptance as Gaokao. This is evident in the substantial investment by society, encompassing both resources and energy, to enhance students' opportunities for achieving high grades.

This research aims to explore the extent to which Chinese society supports the Gaokao, examining the societal changes that occur during this period, solidifying the national college entry exam as one of the most impactful phenomena in China. Drawing on personal experiences shared by interviewees from various demographic groups who have taken the exam across different periods and generations, this paper provides unique, first-hand perspectives on Gaokao. Through these interviews, the study investigates the real impact of Gaokao on society and how society, in turn, endeavours to support students, recognizing and reinforcing their hard work and dedication. The paper begins by exploring the origins of the Gaokao and its evolution into a quintessential merit-based examination within China's educational system. Following this, it examines the opportunities that Gaokao offers students, and the changes and support that the society provides during this period of time. Finally, the paper addresses the "fairness" of Gaokao, highlighting systemic flaws despite its relative impartiality, as evidenced by the personal experiences of interviewees who have undergone the exam.

**Context: a method of "climbing the social ladder"**

The history of Gaokao stems from the *Keju* (科举), a merit-based test which emerged as early as the Sui dynasty era of China (Feng, 2019). The purpose of this system was to select candidates for state bureaucracy, focusing on merit rather than birth status, with the objective of maximizing equal opportunities and a method to select the brightest individuals amongst the commoners with reduced corruption. Also known as the civil service exam or imperial exam, the *Keju* allowed for a pathway for ordinary Chinese to ascend to the upper elite class, until its abolishment in late Qing dynasty around 1905 (Feng, 2019; Gu and Magaziner, 2016). Its successor, the Gaokao, was introduced in 1952, established by the new Communist government as a meritocratic route for “climbing the social ladder”, however less political than its predecessor and focusing on academia and social advancements. The then Gaokao was short-lived, as it was abolished during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), when public education for the college enrolment system came to a halt in China under the Maoist ideology. Universities completely closed for the public, and for a few years between 1972-76, the only scholars with access to higher education were children of workers and peasants, which was based on a recommendation system that gave them preference (Howlett, 2023; Li and Meng, 2017). Gaokao was restored again under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping in 1977, who encouraged the countries’ intellectual elite. Since then, the national college examination has undergone many developments and transformations, leading it to become one of the most important examinations in modern China.

### **Social acceptance: support provided by families and the wider society**

The Gaokao exam is a deeply embedded phenomenon within Chinese society, with its support wide spreading from their families to the wider community to maximize success (CGTN, 2023). This collective effort and mobilization to help students are reflected in the significant sacrifices made by both society and families to aid students in their preparation. For example, a former Gaokao student recalled a story where candidates were offered free rides by policemen. Similarly, another interviewee mentioned that in their district, taxi drivers were offering free transportation from their homes to the exam venue, which was advertised all over the streets through leaflets with their phone numbers and WeChat QR codes (a prominent social media app in China), who were

available if students deemed necessary or if they were running late. This societal phenomenon is not rare during Gaokao; the whole society comes together to invest their resources and energy into the new generations with the common hope for them to prosper. The external environment feels as though it has paused, with all construction activities halted within 500 meters of the exam site. The significance of Gaokao is so profound that certain communities come together in collective celebration when a student from their region attains the highest grade in the province.

During the Gaokao preparation period, students often face immense pressure from their environment, including teachers, classmates, and society at large, all of whom expect high performance. This underscores the vital role of family support, both financial and emotional. Participant 3 highlighted the importance of her family's understanding of the pressures and routines she faced. They did not force her to work excessively hard and emphasized that gaining admission to the top universities was not imperative, which she believes it helped her navigate "a very dark phase" of her life. Additionally, it is common for many families who can afford it to rent apartments near their schools, despite the high costs of those accommodations, as this would maximise students' time to study and revise for exams. One participant shared that her family rented an apartment just a ten-minute walk from her school. This arrangement allowed her parents to bring her meals to the school gate, where she would eat there and thus reduce the time spent commuting home. This level of support significantly contributed to her well-being and academic performance. Alternatively, other families provided support in different ways during the Chinese national university entry exam. A typical sighting of this is the number of parents who wear red during their child's examination site. Many parents demonstrate their encouragement by wearing bright-red traditional qipaos – a traditional Chinese clothing - when dropping off their children, as this colour is believed “offer good luck” during their exams (Catterall, 2024; Yusha, 2023). This visible sign of support underscores the cultural importance of the Gaokao and the collective effort and enthusiasm to bolster student's experience through this exam.

### **Competitiveness: facts and figures**

Gaokao is not as simple as just a university entrance exam; it can be the turning point for a student's life and a tool to climb up the social ladder. The students conform to extreme schedules to maximize their learning. According to Interviewee 6, who went to "the best high school in Luoyang", had to follow a strict and rigorous routine: their day started off at 5:30 in the morning, as they had to get ready for a compulsory daily physical training at 7am. Following this, classes commenced at 8 a.m. and extended until 10 p.m. The competitiveness of Gaokao not only demonstrates the resilience and perseverance of Chinese students, but also their motivation as a society to seek constant improvement for the country. The competitiveness surrounding the Gaokao arises from the limited opportunities and scarce places available at top universities and colleges. This intense competition has led to some students adopting the "lying flat" (*tang ping*) approach, or quietly quitting; while others increasingly compete with one another, a phenomenon known as *nei juan* or "involution" (Wang and Ge, 2020). In China, the grade of the Gaokao determines the university that they can apply: the higher the grade, the better chance in getting into a prestigious university. Hence, the Gaokao is a pivotal examination that can significantly influence a student's future trajectory. Higher scores open doors to more prestigious universities, which in turn enhance opportunities for social mobility and career advancement. Attending a top-tier university often correlates with better-paying job prospects and a more prosperous future.

One of the most prestigious and sought-after institutions in China is Tsinghua University, where many students enrol in the Gaokao with hopes of gaining admission. According to the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2023), there were 12.91 million applicants for the national college entrance examination in 2023, yet the top-ranked universities offer very limited spots. For instance, Peking University (2023) admitted only 3,130 domestic undergraduate students, highlighting the intense competition for the few available places at elite institutions. Similarly, Tsinghua University accepts an average of 3,500 domestic students each year (Tsinghua University, 2023). These figures illustrate the rigorous competition that students must navigate to gain acceptance into top-ranked universities in China and worldwide. The admission rate for Chinese nationals is approximately 0.03%, one of the lowest

compared to other universities in the country. The demand for a college degree remains high, and the number of students undertaking the Gaokao continues to grow each year, creating a challenging landscape amid the scarcity of higher education resources.

### **Questioning the fairness of Gaokao**

While the Gaokao is widely understood as “China’s only relatively fair competition” (Howlett, 2023) its fairness does come with its systematic flaws (Feng, 2019). Hu (2023) contends that Gaokao has failed to promote an equitable educational system, contrary to what is commonly perceived. He asserts that the exam has inherent flaws that promotes inequality and reproduces segregation between the different social classes, offering a false hope of an equal selection of elite candidates. While this assertion holds some validity—given that varying provincial exams present differing levels of difficulty and question formats based on geographic location—the Ministry of Education has implemented numerous reforms aimed at mitigating regional disparities. For instance, adjustments regarding lowering the standards for areas with less educational resources and qualified teachers to equalise the opportunities between counties. While this might make the Gaokao passing rates fairer, students from these areas still face competition from peers nationwide who benefit from better resources and education. Thus, students from smaller towns must compete with students from more advantaged schools across China for limited university spots, rendering Gaokao less legitimate as it appears.

While it is relatively the most unbiased way to earn a position within society, many students express their doubts regarding the extent of this fairness. From an interviewee’s perspective, who sat Gaokao in Henan province, mentioned that they sit one of the hardest exams in the country, which is the “全国一卷”, or tier one exam, reflecting the regional discrimination that the exam in itself possesses. Depending on the geographic location of the school, students must sit different Gaokao papers, which vary according to different provinces and municipalities. From the perspective of interviewee 5, the higher populated the province, the harder the exam paper, with the objective to limit the amount of people who get good grades, as there are too many people for limited universities. Regarding fairness comes another issue, which consists of the availability

or lack of resources that supports the student's education. For example, teachers in less populated or popular towns may not have the qualifications as a teacher in a Tier 1 city would have, therefore the students also don't have access to higher or more advanced material or teachers to learn from. This designation also correlates with the number of resources available in each province. For instance, the national college entry examination paper in provinces such as Xinjiang and Xizang are simpler, due to the lack of resources in these towns, such as more qualified teachers and education materials. This renders competition to be relatively fairer, as they have less resources, they may have less chance to get good grades and get into a good university.

Despite its systematic flaws, the Gaokao is widely regarded as the most legitimate and the least corrupt means of achieving success in Chinese society, as it evaluates students based on personal merit and effort. Each interviewee was asked if they would advocate for any changes to the Gaokao system in China if given the opportunity. Although the majority acknowledged the system's inherent unfairness, 90% of the interviewees stated that they would not alter the rigour of the Gaokao. This contradiction highlights a complex relationship between social acceptance and personal experience; despite the recognition of Gaokao as a hard and exhausting ordeal, many interviewees yet expressed a preference for maintaining the status quo in the educational system and would not make any changes to the system. This reveals how deeply rooted Gaokao is and how it is proven to work, which, despite its inherent inequities, has demonstrated its effectiveness in maintaining educational standards. The true value of Gaokao must be recognized: a pathway to a better future. And education is the road that leads to that path.

## **Conclusion**

While the Gaokao represents one of the most challenging periods in a student's life, it is evident that society also strives to support all students to the best of its ability. Each student's effort in preparing for the exam is met with the collective sacrifices and encouragement from the broader community, reflecting a commitment to fostering a supportive educational environment. This widely accepted notion of a meritocratic

educational system has garnered broad acceptance among the Chinese population, reinforcing the belief that hard work and merit can lead to success and prosperity. Gaokao is the gateway to a reputable university, which also connotes to higher paid jobs post-graduation, thereby elevating the student's social standing and future prospects. To conclude, the depth of Gaokao is so embedded within the system due to its ability to give ordinary people a relatively fair opportunity to change the trajectory of their lives and attain status and power through their own efforts.

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