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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 the Annual National College Entrance Examination: Gaokao. Many perceive this exam as their only chance to achieve social mobility, as it is based purely on merit and therefore considered relatively the fairest way for students to change the direction of their lives. This research aims to explore the extent to which Chinese society supports the Gaokao, examining the societal changes that occur during this period, as the whole community come together to show their support for these students. The significance of Gaokao is so profound in China that it solidifies the national college entry exam as one of the most impactful phenomena nationwide.

METHODOLOGY

- Held informal interviews with former Gaokao students, delving into their daily routines when preparing for the exam.
- Participants were asked about their experience throughout their Gaokao period of their lives, and the changes that were made in society during this time.
- Collected primary data on university admissions, number of Gaokao candidates, journal entries and past existing interviews.
- Secondary sources including the history of education in China.



Thousands of parents saying farewell to the coaches where their children go to the Gaokao examination halls. The number of people is so large that police must clear the way for the buses.

“In a society that is systematically unfair, Gaokao is the closest we will get to fairness”

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS:

“It’s a challenge for the body and mind”

“it’s not about grades anymore, it’s about who has the healthiest mental state”

“Days before the exam I even forgot what my motivation to get good grades was, I just wanted to get over with it”

“My parents rented an apartment in my school area just to be closer to me”

“My daily routine consisted of waking up at 5:30am and studying the whole day at school until around 10pm”

KEY FINDINGS



Families of students prepare and deliver meals to the school gate every day

- Most of the interviewees expressed that they would not change the educational system of Gaokao, despite acknowledging its rigour and competitiveness, even stating that it impacted negatively to their mental health (90%).
- Competition for the most prestigious universities is extremely high. In 2023, among of the 12.91 million applicants for Gaokao, Peking University admitted just 3,130 undergraduate places. Similarly, Tsinghua University offered an average of 3,500 domestic students. This illustrates that the admission rate for Chinese nationals in these two elite institutions is approximately 0.03%.
- There is a complex relationship between social acceptance and personal experiences of the Gaokao: it is widely understood as the hardest exam of a student’s life, yet society encourages and reproduces its practices.

- Gaokao is considered as China’s relatively fairest exam that provides all students from different economic and social backgrounds an opportunity to climb up the social ladder, based on meritocracy.
- Students take different Gaokao papers based on their location: higher-tier cities have more difficult exams due to a larger number of students and qualified teachers, while lower-tier provinces have easier exams to offset the lack of educational resources.

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