

Young Idler, Old Beggar: Reflections on the Chinese National College Entrance Exam

Yuanmeng Zhang

Flintridge Preparatory School, California, USA

Abstract: He jerks up, gasping for air, the back of his shirt soaked with cold sweat. Not again. He turns his head to the side, to his wife who lies sound asleep next to him. Even as an alumnus of Peking University, the top university in China, my forty six year-old father still suffers from nightmares about the *Gaokao* (also known as NCEE, or the National College Entrance Examination). *Gaokao* is the graduation exam administered to millions of high school seniors in China each year. While some students avoid this test by studying abroad, students who plan to attend universities in China have no choice but to prepare for the NCEE. Even though it is terribly grueling to study for and take the NCEE, most Chinese students see the test as their sole path to future success.

Keywords: Yuan variety play; *Qihu philander his wife*; Character image

Publication date: May, 2020

Publication online: 31 May, 2020

***Corresponding author:** Yuanmeng Zhang, wangpeiyan@xyzrgroup.com

Created in 1952, the NCEE, and nothing else, determines which university students would spend their next four years in. Unlike American universities, which take a more holistic approach towards college admissions and assess standardized testing as only one factor among several, Chinese universities consider a student's NCEE scores and only those scores, to the exclusion of everything else - not application essays, not recommendation letters, not extracurricular activities. The NCEE covers Chinese, Math, and English, the three mandatory subjects for all test-takers. It also tests an individual's expertise in other subjects (physics,

history, geography, biology, etc.), depending on which major the student chooses to pursue^[1]. The test itself is nine hours long and spread out over two days^[2]. One could spend most of her senior year preparing for the test by attending endless review sessions and mock tests.

No matter how much a student prepare, it is incredibly difficult to do well on the NCEE, because more than ten million students from across the country would gather to take the examination each June. According to data from 2017, only a mere 0.00016% to 0.00469% of the test takers are accepted by top colleges like Peking University or Tsinghua University^[3]. The increased competition among students and pressure from parents push many school districts to schedule the "final sprint" a year early, giving students almost two years to prepare for a single examination, to the exclusion of everything else that a healthy high school student should do, such as sports, music, and community service. The exam has turned into a national obsession, especially when a good NCEE could ultimately translate into enormous financial success in a surging Chinese economy. For those students from disadvantaged backgrounds, scoring well on the NCEE may seem like their only opportunity to climb the social ladder.

"It was the only way for me to leave my rural community and prepare for the world," wrote Yu Minhong, founder of New Oriental Education, a major private language education provider in China. "The *Gaokao* presents many opportunities for children, in rural and urban areas. Without it, millions of children, including me, would have had no hope^[4]."

Families prepare for the NCEE preemptively before the day of the exam. Parents usually book hotels near

testing centers months before the examination date in order to avoid traffic^[5]. The entire country almost comes to a halt during exam time - thousands of taxi drivers offer free rides to exam-takers, and volunteers and police officers are deployed to give directions to those test takers who get lost looking for test centers^[6].

How do students prepare for the exam? The answer is simple: study, study, and then study some more. It's a rote memorization marathon of the highest order. For Yixue Zhang and Jingxuan Sun, two rising juniors at Tsinghua High School, a public high school located in Beijing, the pressure and workload at school more than doubles over the course the year leading up to the NCEE. Sun vividly remembers waking up exhausted at 5 a.m. on weekdays throughout her sophomore year. She had to rush to after school tutoring centers after 6:30 p.m and finish around 10:30 p.m. However, she admits that next year will be even worse. School is dismissed at 8:30 p.m. for juniors, so she's stuck in after school tutoring until 12:30 a.m.

For seniors, the stress level is further intensified. Yuanpeng Zhang is a senior from the same high school who recently took the NCEE. He recalls how "[he] wasn't the only one studying from 6 a.m. to 12 a.m.; all of [his] classmates did." Yes, it was stressful. However, he knew he had to study as much as possible because every point he lost on the exam would lower his national ranking by the tens of thousands.

When asked about his opinion on the Chinese education system, Zhang says he does not like it - not at all. Zhang received a decent NCEE score but wished his school environment was more collaborative and attributed its insularity to the NCEE exam. His classes lacked discussions because students were more focused on memorizing information to prepare for the NCEE than they were on critical thinking and discourse with peers. He believes the pressure to perform well on the NCEE takes a toll on many students. In fact, Hengshui High School, a semi-military school well known for its high NCEE scores, has windows equipped with thick wires on the outside to prevent students from trying to commit suicide amid such stress.

Things are even harder for girls. Remember, many students have to study nonstop for up to 18 hours a day for more than 365 days straight, weekends and holidays included. Female students often worry about how their menstrual cycles and painful cramps could negatively affect their scores. According to People's Daily, a Chinese state-run newspaper, a teacher in eastern

Anhui province even went as far as advising her female students to take birth control pills to postpone their periods^[7].

Schedules and overwhelming pressure also inevitably lead to mental illness that persist and get worse in the students' college years. A survey of 126,000 Chinese college students found that 16%-30% of these students suffered from depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, interpersonal relationship problems, personality disorders, and other mental health problems^[8]. No wonder more and more students are leaving China to study abroad - the so-called "young brain drain". The record for the number of students opting for overseas education is broken every year - last year, the figure reached 662,100.

In the face of physical and mental illnesses and mass defection from the Chinese educational system, it is time for the government to assess whether the NCEE should be replaced by an examination that better meets the needs of today's high school students, one that focuses less on rote memorization and allows students to demonstrate critical reasoning and analytical skills. There is no reason to crush students before they even start college and give them nightmares for the rest of their lives.

References

- [1] "The National College Entrance Examination." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, August 16, 2019. https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_National_College_Entrance_Examination.
- [2] Ibid.
- [3] Fu YQ. "Data Analysis: Regional Inequalities in Chinese College Admissions." Data Analysis: Regional Inequalities in Chinese College Admissions. <https://yiqinfu.github.io/posts/china-college-admissions-regional-inequalities-tsinghua/>.
- [4] "How One Exam Can Set the Course of a Student's Life in China." South China Morning Post, July 20, 2018. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/2097512/gaokao-how-one-exam-can-set-course-students-life-china>.
- [5] "Cashing in: Chinese Hotels 'Almost Double' Room Rates over Student Demand to Stay near Gaokao Venues." South China Morning Post, June 8, 2016. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/1969238/cashing-chinese-hotels-almost-double-room-rates-over-student>.
- [6] "Explainer: Everything You Need to Know About the Gaokao." That's Online. Accessed November 9, 2019. <http://www.thatsmags.com/china/post/13965/explainer-gaokao>.
- [7] FlorCruz, M. "Female Students In China Taking College-

Entrance Exam Encouraged To Take Birth Control By Teachers.” International Business Times, May 24, 2013. <https://www.ibtimes.com/female-students-china-taking-college-entrance-exam-encouraged-take-birth-control-teachers-1278571>.

[8] Liu FG, Nan Z, Cao HJ, et al. “Chinese College Freshmen's Mental Health Problems and Their Subsequent Help-Seeking Behaviors: A Cohort Design (2005-2011).” PloS one. Public Library of Science, October 17, 2017. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5644985/>.