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# **The Imperial Examinations of Modern China**

*The relationship between the history of education in China and  
the modern Chinese education system.*

**BA-thesis in Chinese Studies**

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## Summary

In this essay I will examine the Chinese education system, with a focus on Gaokao 高考, The National Higher Education Entrance Examination System of China. The history of China's education system is a long one and in order to give insight into the social and political importance of Gaokao and education in China I will relate to its historical predecessor, which is the Keju 科举, also known as the Imperial Examination System of imperial China.

My goal in writing this paper is to explore the similarities between the Gaokao system of modern China and its historical counterpart, the Keju system. I will consider both the merits and flaws of these two systems and what relevance it has for the education system of China today.

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## Introduction

When the time came for me to apply to university I knew next to nothing about China. I had no interest in economy or world politics, but I had an interest in learning foreign languages. Therefore, while scrolling down the list of programmes at the University of Iceland, the “Chinese studies” programme caught my eye. After studying the Chinese language for one year at Ningbo University as an exchange student, I could not say that I felt like I had gotten any kind of understanding of China. This huge country with such a long history and diverse culture was still an enigma to me. However, having studied at a Chinese university, I had gotten first-hand experience of the Chinese education system. I was fascinated by the Chinese students. Some of them had an unwavering work ethic, while others seemed to be more interested in having fun than studying. In addition to this, I noticed a more relaxed attitude towards academical ethics. Rules about plagiarism and cheating were not as strict as I was used to. By the time I came back to Iceland, an interest in the Chinese education system had been sparked within me. As I read more about it and understood the struggle most of those students I encountered in China had been through, I decided to write this paper about Gaokao, the examination which is at the core of that struggle.

Gaokao 高考, also known as The National Higher Education Entrance Examination System of China, is considered the most important part of a Chinese student’s life. Ever since the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, millions of students work hard every year in preparation for the Gaokao examination, with the hopes of creating a bright future for themselves. The function and importance of the Gaokao system in the society of China today cannot be fully understood without a historical

context. Its historical counterpart, Keju 科举, also known as the Imperial Examination System of imperial China, was similarly of great importance for the education system of imperial China. The two systems have many similarities, both in the theory they are based on and how they are practiced.

Furthermore, both systems have received heavy criticism. The Keju system was often criticized by its scholar contemporaries. Today the Chinese education system, especially Gaokao, often receives strong criticism, not only from the Chinese but also from foreign intellectuals. Gaokao and Keju share many similarities, both in their merits and flaws. In this paper, I will explore the history of Chinese education with a focus on Keju and its significance, and modern Chinese education with a focus on Gaokao. I will then make a comparison between the two systems. The purpose of this comparison is to find out whether the similarities between the two systems have any relevance for the Gaokao system and the education system of China today.

## I. Historical Background

In ancient China, pieces of turtle bones were used for divination. Questions were carved into the bones, which were subsequently burned, and the emerging cracks would be interpreted as answers to the questions. It is on such bones, called oracle bones, which the earliest evidence of some type of school in Chinese society can be found. They date back to the Shang dynasty, which lasted from approximately 1800-1050 B.C.E. More precise sources tell us that at least from the 11<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., schools existed for the children of the aristocracy, focusing on teaching young boys martial arts. Although education during the Zhou dynasty, which lasted from approximately 1050-256 B.C.E., was intended only for the children of the higher classes, there is still some evidence pointing towards the existence of education for the lower classes from the Spring and Autumn period, which lasted from approximately 771-486 B.C.E. (Lee 2000, 41-43)

In addition to this evidence we can read in *The Analects* 论语 that the Master (Confucius 孔子) said, “I have never denied instruction to anyone who, of their own accord, offered up as little as a bundle of silk or bit of cured meat” (*The Analects* 2003, 158). Confucius was a Chinese man of the Spring and Autumn period, whose teachings and philosophy have had a big influence on Chinese education. Some of his sayings, which were recorded after his death in *The Analects*, are still taught in Chinese schools today. From the statement above, we can draw the conclusion that Confucius, who is often considered to have been one of the greatest teachers of his time, did not discriminate against his students. Rich or poor, anyone had the opportunity to learn.

During the Warring States Period 战国时代 (475-221 B.C.E.) we can start to see evidence of education establishments, as the Jixia Academy 稷

下学宫 was founded by Duke Huan 田齊桓公 around year 360 B.C.E.

Although a government institution, the academy did not seem to be under direct control of its founding government, but seems to have been a free environment in which thousands of intellectuals and students from different schools of thought gathered for the sole purpose of education and academic discourse. Even though this may seem to have been an entirely charitable endeavor, it was in the best interest of each government to attract the finest scholars and thinkers, especially in the Warring States period, when several states were struggling for power in China. It was under these circumstances that the concept of higher education in China was born. (Lee 2000, 44-46)

The Han dynasty 汉朝 lasted from 206 B.C.E until 220 C.E. Emperor Wu 汉武帝 of the Han dynasty was a patron of Confucianism and made it the state ideology (Zhang 2015, 92). Education started to become an integral part of the government, as Confucian scholars were assigned to assist the emperors, and an individual's education became more relevant in the appointment of officials (Rossabi 2014, 88). In 124 B.C.E Emperor Wu established the Imperial University 太学. The Five Classics 五经, which were *The Book of Changes* 易经, *The Book of Documents* 书经, *The Book of Songs* 诗经, *The Book of Rites* 礼记, and *the Spring and Autumn Annals* 春秋, all had one erudite scholar each specializing in teaching them.

Students of the Imperial University had a chance to become government officials, and although most of the students were the children of government officials or powerful families, or were admitted on the recommendation of an official it was still theoretically possible for any promising young man to be admitted (Lee 2000, 46-51). At the end of their studies, the students of the university took an examination. This was the beginning of a long tradition of an examination culture that lasted all



through the history of China, and traces of which can still be found in the contemporary school system of China, but more about that in later chapters (Twitchett and Fairbank 2008, 756). The Imperial University prospered. It was favored by the government as they considered it a vital part in the process of recruiting staff for the government, and at one point, in the year 168, as many as 30,000 students studied at the university. It is also clear that the students were greatly involved in the politics of the government. In the year 168, students of the university protested against the palace eunuchs, who gained power through unconventional methods. This led to the “calamity of factional proscription” and as many as one thousand students were arrested (Lee 2000, 49-51). This must have been a significant blow for the university as it led to its decline and downfall in the year 184 (Lee 2000, 57).

During the Han dynasty some great progress was made in realizing the significance of education. Not only was school established as an institution, but the Han rulers also started a long tradition of valuing merit in the recruitment of government officials, one of the most prominent Confucian values in the entire history of Chinese education, and realized the value in co-operation between ruler and intellectuals (Lee 2000, 198-199)

After the fall of the Han dynasty, Cao Pi 曹丕, who had named himself “King of Wei”, ordered the reestablishment of the Imperial University in 224. By the year 272 the Wei Kingdom had fallen and been replaced by the Jin dynasty 晋朝. The number of students at the University had reached 7,000. But in the year 278, it was decided that that the sons of the ruling class needed a separate education of better quality, and the School of National Youth 国子学 was founded. From this time until the 13<sup>th</sup> century, universities in China operated under the idea of separating students into

two social classes, where the sons of the ruling class enjoyed a higher quality education (Lee 2000, 57-59).

This took place in a historical period in China that has been called the Period of Disunity 六朝, as China was not unified under one dynastic rule. Some non-Chinese peoples capitalized on this and created their own dynasties in the north. Many Chinese therefore fled to the south (Rossabi 2014, 100). Thus, a lot of these educational developments were taking place in the south of China. Although non-Chinese peoples ruled the north, they still upheld Confucian ideals and valued education greatly. An Imperial University was founded in the north in the year 399, and in the beginning of the fifth century, another School of National Youth (as mentioned earlier) was also founded (Lee 2000, 63-64).

During the Period of Disunity, the universities in the south and the north were vital for the history of education. For a good government, it was considered necessary to continue the practices of offering and developing education, which is why even the non-Chinese rulers in the north promoted education, so as to show that they were also capable of upholding a good government (Lee 2000, 67). It is clear that by the end of the Han dynasty, education had become an integral part of Chinese society. Even in times of war and threat from outside powers, Chinese rulers still saw the importance in trying to promote and uphold educational institutions. Even the non-Chinese peoples who were trying to create their own Chinese-style dynasties could identify the relation between education and good government.

The Sui dynasty 隋朝 (581-618) and the Tang dynasty 唐朝 (618-907) governments continued on the same lines as the governments in the Period of Disunity; they promoted the institutions of higher education, recruited

officials from them and used them for advisory purposes. This was considered a symbol of a good government (Lee 2000, 70-71). However, the most important development during the Sui and Tang dynasty was the implementation of the Imperial Examination 科举. The Imperial Examination system, a method for recruiting people to work for the government based on their performance on three sets of exams rather than based on their social status, would go on to last for over a thousand years. Applicants to the examinations were either students of the government-run schools or commoners, although they needed to be approved beforehand. Passing the examination made one eligible for government employment (Zhang 2015, 160-162). Even though members of the higher classes still dominated the bureaucracy, the examinations added an element of preparation for them before entering office, and in theory there was still a possibility for men of the lower classes to rise through the ranks (Ebrey 1997, 112-114).

During the Song dynasty (960-1279) the examination was an even more important part in the recruitment of government officials, and many changes were made to it during this period. The examination took place every three years at three different levels; The Provincial, The National and The Imperial Court level. The candidates were now evaluated more on the basis of the results of their exams, in contrast to the Imperial Examination of the Tang dynasty, in which candidates were also evaluated based on the recommendations of high officials before taking the examination. Great precautions were taken in order to prevent cheating or favoritism; the examiners were isolated before the examination, the identities of the candidates were checked and subsequently withheld from the examiners until they finished grading the examinations. A third party would even copy the candidates' examination paper in order to prevent the examiner to

recognize the handwriting of the candidates. Those who passed the third and most difficult level of the exams could expect to be appointed to the most prestigious positions. In this sense, the examination system was fair, as almost anyone could participate and the results were evaluated objectively. In addition to this, the type of position appointed to you depended only on your success in the examination (Zhang 2015, 168-169).

However, this also led to criticism – the whole examination system was based on the Confucian ideal of meritocracy but with the candidates enjoying total anonymity it was virtually impossible to judge their moral character, and moral integrity is at the core of Confucian thinking. In addition to this, the content of the examinations was mostly based on classical learning and poetry. This encouraged learning by rote memorization rather than focusing on skills that would be necessary for the government, such as political analysis or original thinking (Rossabi 2014, 81-83).

It is estimated that by the end of the Song dynasty, as many as 400,000 candidates were making their attempt at the examination, which made it a competitive system in nature to say the least. Printing technology, which was invented in China, was making progress as well. This made it easier for aspiring students to prepare for the examinations (Ebrey 1997, 147). Lee considers these two factors, i.e. printing technology and the increased recruitment to government through the examinations, the reason for the increased pursuit of education during the Song times (85).

As in the Period of Disunity, during the Song dynasty non-Chinese peoples, who founded their own Chinese-style dynasties, ruled northern China. The Liao dynasty 辽朝 ruled the north from 907-1125 and the Jin 金朝 ruled from 1115-1234. They ruled over territories inhabited by a

mixture of different people, some of them Chinese, and their government adopted some characteristics of the Chinese Song government. One of the things they adapted from the Chinese was the examination system. During the Liao dynasty, officials were appointed both on the grounds of familial ties and also with the help of the Imperial Examination, which was held for Han Chinese people. The system was similar to that of the Song government. The Jurchen, who founded the Jin dynasty, favored the Imperial Examinations more than the Liao dynasty. Although the Jurchen also had to go through the examination system to be recruited for government office, they faced a much easier version of the examination than the Han Chinese candidates did (Zhang 2015, 171-172).

The Mongols, with their extraordinary military power and tactics, would go on to conquer all of China and found the Yuan dynasty in the year 1271. However, up until the year 1313, the Mongols were hesitant to use the Imperial Examination system. If they were to simply reinstate the Imperial Examination system of the Song dynasty, they would limit their candidates for government positions to almost only Chinese people, and therefore preferred other methods of recruit government officials, such as by recommendation or hereditary titles (Rossabi 2014, 219). The examinations were held again in 1315 but again, Chinese were heavily discriminated as Mongols and other non-Chinese peoples would take a much easier examination, and their chances of getting a position within the government through the examinations were much higher (Rossabi 2014, 228-229).

During the Song dynasty, most government officials were recruited through the Imperial Examination, but during the Yuan dynasty most were recruited from the military or were promoted from non-official positions. Both systems had their flaws – the officials of the Song dynasty

government had a high moral standard but lacked practical experience, while the officials of the Yuan dynasty were more experienced, but were more prone to turn to corruption (Zhang 2015, 174).

In 1368, the Mongol rule of China ended and the Chinese Ming dynasty 明朝, which lasted until 1664, was founded. During the Ming dynasty and the succeeding Qing dynasty 清朝, which lasted from 1664 to 1911, the Imperial Examination system was further developed and reached its final form. Although some major changes were made in the structure of the examinations, those changes only made the examinations more standardized and adverse towards creativity. The content of the examinations were, as usual, focused on the Four Books 四书, namely *Great Learning* 大学, *Doctrine of the Mean* 中庸, *Analects* 论语 and *Mencius* 孟子. The most significant change made to the structure during these periods was the introduction of the eight-legged-essay. The eight-legged-essay was an essay-writing form that the candidates had to master in order to pass the examination. The form dictated the length, different parts, topic and stylistic nature of the essay, leaving little room for creativity. (Zhang 2015, 180-181) Other elements of the system remained mostly unchanged. The examination was held every three years, on three different levels. The examinees were granted different titles based on their performance on the examination.

The Imperial Examination system was a resilient and prominent part of Chinese government and society for over a millennium. Until China was invaded by foreign powers, western intellectuals revered the Chinese government for its stability and ethics. The French intellectual Voltaire described China's political system as "the combination of a monarch with almost unlimited powers and an official class chosen on a rational, that is

on an intellectual, basis, and noteworthy for its freedom from political corruption as well as from religious bias” (Yong 2014, 47). This comment most likely refers to the Imperial Examination system, which has also been called one of the great five inventions of China, the four other being the compass, gunpowder, printing and papermaking (Yong 2014, 50).

However, the Chinese government was not able to withstand the influence of the western powers. Some major defeats were faced, for example to the British in the Opium Wars, and the Chinese government had to accept humiliating treaties, ceding some of its territories to foreign powers (Yong 2014, 60-61). Although the Imperial Examination system has been accredited with being one of the factors that helped maintain the stability of the Chinese empire, it has also been recognized as one of the major reasons for its downfall (Yong 2014, 52).

The Chinese empire was, at its peak, the most developed and sophisticated society in existence at that time. It is believed that the conditions under which the British industrial revolution took place in the 18<sup>th</sup> century already existed in China as early as during the Ming dynasty (Yong 2014, 52-54). However, the great technological development that had taken place in China until that point in history came to an end and the Imperial Examination system has been blamed for China becoming stagnant in its scientific and technological development.

Although the part that the Imperial Examination system played in the downfall of the last Chinese empire, and the implications it has for the comparison between traditional and modern education in Chinese society is noteworthy, it is still important to consider the political and socioeconomic situation of the time. The complicated politics of the Qing dynasty, and the strained relationship between its foreign Manchu rulers and Chinese subjects cannot be ignored. Although both the Chinese scholars and the

Manchu rulers of the Qing dynasty distanced themselves from the individualist and immoral philosophy of Yang Wang-Ming and the Ming dynasty, neither of them seemed to be able to utilize one of the most important teachings of Confucius, which is to keep traditions going by being creative in an ever-changing environment. Instead, both parties decided to look back in history for guidance, the Manchu rulers choosing to draw inspiration from the Song dynasty, while the Chinese scholars looked back to the Han dynasty, trying to get as close to the original source of Confucius' teachings as possible (Sigurðsson 2010, 69-70).

The system served many different purposes. Some were intentional, while others were unintentional side effects of the system put into practice. First and foremost, it weakened the position of the powerful and rich families that had dominated the political landscape in ancient China and during its first dynasties, and gave more power to the emperor, who could instead recruit the most competent officials from a wider pool of candidates. Furthermore, it was a vehicle for social mobility, which was accessible to nearly all of the male population, inspiring hope in anyone who had ambitions to succeed in life. Thus, the emperor had greater control of both the government and the population (Yong 2014, 55-58). However, because of the great emphasis on and great attraction of the Imperial Examination, the majority of the population, including its greatest thinkers and geniuses, were mainly fixated on preparing for the examination. And the content of the examination was not progressive by any means. Those who could have instigated the necessary scientific and technological progress were instead preoccupied with studying Confucian classics and poetry (Yong 2014, 54). According to Yong, "The scholar-officials had finely trained memories, but they were not independent or critical thinkers, nor were they knowledgeable beyond the Confucian classics and certain



forms of literary writing. Although they were excellent at perpetuating the past, they failed at inventing the future. In fact, they were a powerful force resisting the invention of a new future” (59).

The examination system was in use until 1905 when it was finally abolished, after having lasted for more than a thousand years with the exceptions of brief disruptions during times of turmoil and dynastic changes. It was, ultimately, the humiliation in the wake of great military defeats against western powers that prompted government reform, including the abolishment of the Imperial Examination system in 1905. Shortly thereafter, the imperial rule of China, after having lasted for more than two millennia, was ended and the Republic of China was founded in 1911 (Yong 2014, 64).

From the results of China’s involvement with foreign military powers, it was clear that the Chinese were lacking severely in the scientific and technological fields. Even though the Imperial Examination system had been abandoned in 1905, it would still take decades for the rulers of China to change their outlook on the education system. Even in the aftermath of great military defeat, the Confucian elite of the Qing dynasty still held onto the belief that the Chinese system was perfect. Instead of trying to modernize the Chinese system, they wanted to restore the system of the older Chinese dynasties (Yong 2014, 98-101).

In 1949 the Nationalist Party Kuomintang 国民党 was defeated in a civil war against the Chinese Communist Party led by Mao Zedong. This was the end of the Republic of China in Mainland China, and its leaders fled to Taiwan and Mao founded the People’s Republic of China. Under the Chinese Communist Party 中国共产党, also known as the CCP, many changes were made to the educational system of China. The guiding light

of those changes was the Soviet model. (Yu et al. 2012, 12.) Science and technology were recognized as requirements for economic development but it could never come at the cost of social stability. Thus, Western-style education was once again deemed harmful to society and was antagonized by the leaders of China (Yong 2014, 103).

## II. Modern China and Gaokao

The Cultural Revolution 文化大革命, which started in 1966, was disastrous for the development of education and intellectualism in China. Mao was becoming less involved in the CCP and he felt that his original aspirations of political revolution were being pushed aside in favor of national economic development. He was convinced that enemies lurked within the party and decided to take drastic measures in order to purge them. University students and even young middle school students coalesced into organizations called the Red Guards 红卫兵. They took to the streets, harassing party cadres, teachers and intellectuals. They attacked anyone or anything affiliated with foreign influence, capitalism or the backwardness that Confucianism was, as they saw it (Ebrey 1997, 215-217). During the Cultural Revolution, which ended completely after Mao's death in 1976, China's educational institutions were at a standstill nation-wide (Yu et al. 2012, 14).

However, following Mao's death in 1976, many significant changes were made to the policies of the Chinese government under the Reform and Open-door policy initiated by Deng Xiaoping, including the modernization of the education system. Some of the significant changes included, according to Yu et al., "the formal establishment of the modern degree system, permitting the establishment of private institutions, the termination of the practice of job allocation to graduates, and the establishment of a system of tuition and fees to be paid by enrollees" (15). More importantly, at least for the topic of this paper, The National College Entrance Examination, shortened NCEE and commonly known as Gaokao 高考, which had originally been established in 1952, was resumed in 1977. It had, like all other educational activity, been suspended during the Cultural

Revolution. When the Gaokao was first held in 1977 after having been suspended for a decade, 5,7 million eager test takers attended the examinations. Yet only 300,000 out of those millions were accepted into university (Hsu and Yuh-Yin Wu 2015, 441). Gaokao has thus from the very beginning been fiercely competitive. With the Gaokao system back in practice, admission into higher education was now based on academic performance and an end was put to the admission of students to university based on political recommendation or social class, which had been in practice since 1970 in some higher education institutions that opened when the Cultural Revolution was starting to settle down (Yu et al. 2012, 14).

Before discussing Gaokao, I will briefly explain the education system, through which Chinese students go before, as it is also of quite importance. China's current education system consists of six years of primary school, three years of junior secondary school and three years of senior secondary school, the first nine years being compulsory (Yu et al. 2012, 18). But many Chinese children start their education in preschool. In 2014, China's 209,881 kindergartens enrolled 40,507,145 students (Ministry of Education, 2014). The high pressure of learning starts at an early age for Chinese students. According to Wang, "In the last two years at kindergartens as well as at preschool classes, Chinese children gain mathematical and linguistic knowledge that most other countries teach in the first and second year of primary schools. Many kindergarten graduates in China can add, subtract, multiply and divide sums of less than three digits (or sometimes more) as well as being able to write several hundreds of Chinese words" (130-131). The pressure continues and gets even stronger for Chinese students as they grow older. In 2007, Chinese primary and secondary school students reportedly spent an average of 8.6 hours per day in school and in some cases as many as 12 hours ("China's children too busy for

playtime”). Chinese students are not only introduced to a heavy workload and long school days at an early age, but examinations are also a main feature of the lower levels of the Chinese education system. Ever since the 1980s, the Chinese government has been trying to prevent middle schools from using examinations or other selective methods in their recruitment of primary school graduates. The government has issued policies banning middle schools to use entrance examinations and even made it illegal by law, but in 2013 as many as fifteen different methods of entering middle schools in Beijing existed, while the government only acknowledges one legitimate method - admission based on your location of residency (Yong 2014, 183-185).

During high school, the emphasis on examinations continues. During the first two years of high school, subjects that will not be tested on the Gaokao are considered unimportant and are often ignored so that the students can focus on subjects related to the Gaokao instead. Lastly, the entire third year is often spent studying only the subjects that the students will take on the Gaokao examination (Yan and Suen 2015, 15). Initially, Gaokao was identical nation-wide and students took the exact same test on the exact same dates. However, in recent years the Ministry of Education (which operates under the State Council), has shifted some of the responsibility over to the provincial governments (Yu et al. 2012, 29). Therefore, the content of Gaokao varies slightly in different provinces. According to Yu et al. “in 2005, 14 of the 31 provinces in China used their own examination papers” (29), but most provinces operate under the so-called “3+X” model, which means that all students are tested in three core subjects. Those subjects are math, Chinese and a foreign language. The “X” stands for an additional subject that the students choose on their own,

depending on whether they have chosen liberal arts or science and engineering as their specialization (Yan and Suen 2015, 6-7).

The Gaokao is then taken annually over a period spanning three days in June. The examination period is a major event not only for the students and their families, but also for society as a whole. Roads can be blocked in the vicinity of the examination sites and noise is to be kept to a minimum. In some cities taxi drivers offer free rides to take students to and from test sites. Parents are also deeply involved; most of them wait outside the test sites for their children to come out, and some will even quit their jobs in order to completely accommodate their child during the examination period. (Gong 2014, loc 69-130).

Chinese students have to endure a great amount of pressure, but they are not the only ones affected. The lives of their parents are evidently also influenced by their children's studies. In 2003, Chinese families spent 12.6% of their entire budget on education, which is more than they normally allocate to housing and clothing. The only thing deemed more important than education was food, which they spent the most on (Yu et al. 2012, 8). Some families that are well off will even consider moving to another region in the country to improve the chances of their children being admitted into a prestigious university. This is because during the admission process, institutions will favor local students. In provincial level institutions, more than half of the students are locals, while in central level institutions (e.g. universities run by the central government through agencies such as the Ministry of Education) the number is smaller at around 30% of the students being locals (Yu et al. 2012, 25-28). Although public access to modern higher education is relatively new in China, the parents' dedication to and involvement in their children's education is not a new phenomenon.

One of the many famous stories from ancient China tells us about Mencius 孟子 and his mother. Mencius, who was born around 371 B.C.E., was, after Confucius himself, the most important Confucian philosopher in Chinese history. Mencius' mother is famous because of this particular story, and she is seen as the ideal mother when it comes to dealing with your child's education. When Mencius was a young boy, he lived with his mother near a cemetery. She thought the place had a bad influence on Mencius, as she noticed him copying rituals he had witnessed at the cemetery. Instead, she brought her son to live close to a market. But when his mother noticed him copying the behavior of a salesman, she decided this place was also inappropriate for her son to live in. The third place they moved to was close to a public school. When she could see her son performing actions of politeness, which he had learned from the scholars in the school, she finally felt she had found a suitable place for her son to grow up in (Mencius, 17-18).

The story of Mencius' mother might sound irrelevant to the current situation in China, but the fact of the matter is that the dedicated parents of China will indeed go to great lengths in order to ensure their children get the best education they possibly can. Just like Mencius' mother did, some Chinese parents, who have the resources, are even willing to give up their own employment and move with their child to another province, so that they can take the Gaokao there and have a better chance at being admitted into a good university. This might sound strange to those who are not familiar with Chinese society. In China it is normal that parents rely on their children to support them financially once they are not able to work anymore. The one child-policy, which has only been lifted recently, makes it even more important for Chinese parents to get their children the best

education available; not only to ensure that their children can have a good future, but also themselves.

Teachers and their method of working are also greatly influenced by the importance of test taking in the Chinese education system, especially high school teachers. Their biggest responsibility is to prepare their students for the Gaokao examinations. The result of a student's Gaokao is not only important to himself and his family, because it also concerns his teacher. A Chinese teacher's performance is evaluated by his student's test results. Teachers who have students that perform well can expect to get a big bonus, while teachers whose students perform poorly can even lose their jobs (Yong 2014, 164-165).



### **III. Gaokao and Keju**

Just like in imperial China, high-stakes examinations are a big hurdle that needs to be overcome in order to get a good job. Parallels are often drawn between the Imperial Examination system of Imperial China and the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) of modern China. But that is not all – because just like Voltaire and his contemporaries admired the Imperial Examination system of Imperial China, many leaders and intellectuals of contemporary Western Society view China as a guiding light in educational policy. This comes as a result of Chinese students performing well in standardized testing and consistently ranking high on tests such as PISA, the Programme for International Student Assessment (Yong 2014, 32-33). But those who are eager to follow the Chinese model of education had better examine the Chinese education system more closely, specifically the Gaokao and the often striking similarities that it shares with its predecessor.

One of the similarities between the Gaokao system and the Keju system is the significant inequality between different social classes when it comes to education. This might not have been considered of great importance during imperial China but it is a flaw that should be taken seriously in any modern education system. According to the 26<sup>th</sup> article of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was written in 1948 and is available on the web, “Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.” Although it is possible to argue that China’s examination-centric education system is indeed based on merit, it is quite

clear that not everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed from the beginning.

According to Hannum and Park “the reform period has seen a steady expansion of educational access” but that, still, “socio-economic inequalities may actually be intensifying” (9). These inequalities seem to affect ethnic minorities the most: according to Hannum and Park, in the year 2000 “over 11 percent of minorities aged 25 to 34 had not attended formal schooling, compared to just 2 percent of the majority Han population” (9). In addition to this, higher education has gotten significantly more expensive in China since the open-door policy and market reform. The tuition fee of higher education in China rose from a mere 200 RMB in 1989 to more than 5,000 RMB in 2007 (Li 2011, 280). This is not a problem caused by the Gaokao system, but it is problematic for it, as equality is at the core of the meritocratic theory on which it is based. Similarly, even though the Imperial Examination system theoretically offered an equal opportunity for everyone to succeed, in reality those who were privileged had a better opportunity at succeeding. This came as a result of families forming lineages and creating environments supporting its members in their preparations for the examination (Lee, 164-165). Both systems are founded on the premise that they provide equal opportunity to all candidates. However, the fact remains that both in Imperial and modern China, some groups have access to education of a considerably higher quality than other groups, of which some have limited access to education overall.

Other than that, the Gaokao and the Keju systems share many things in common in terms of how they are arranged. Both systems are organized by the central government (Yan and Suen 2015, 7-8). The content of the tests is based on a curriculum decided by the central government and is not

changed on a regular basis. In its final form, the Keju system followed a standardized format. The Gaokao system is similar in this sense and according to Yan and Suen, its “standardized formats include multiple-choice and detailed rubrics for open-ended questions” (8).

The security around both systems is taken very seriously. Both the candidates and those working with creating, supervising and grading the tests are all scrutinized so as to prevent any cheating or unfairness. If anything is discovered that does not follow the rules or seems unfair, it will damage the image of the systems being completely equal for everyone. If it were not perceived as completely equal for everyone, the whole system would be delegitimized.

Both systems are based on an ideal of equal opportunity for everyone, and both are intended to serve meritocracy at the expense of nepotism. The outcome for a successful candidate in the two systems are different, i.e. a successful Gaokao examinee will gain access to a higher education institution, while a successful candidate of the Keju would be employed within the government. However, both systems use a similar method to decide how many candidates will pass the examination. A quota is assigned to each region within the country. This quota will differ depending on the social and political situation in each region – an attempt at making the system fairer by improving the chances for those with worse living conditions (Yan and Suen 2015, 9).

From an early age, Chinese students have to endure an excessive amount of pressure. Several cases of Chinese committing suicide have even been linked to the pressure of performing in their studies. Similarly, some historical sources testify about aspiring Keju candidates who suffered from psychological problems. Some of them spent many years of their lives pursuing a better life through the examination. It was not uncommon for

those who did not pass the examination to simply continue studying and try again at the next opportunity. Today, those students who are not satisfied with their Gaokao scores will also consider staying in high school for another year in order to improve their score and their chances of getting into a good university.

Finally, both systems have been heavily criticized because of the impact they have on the intellectual development of those who spend years of their lives preparing for the examinations. The Imperial Examination was blamed for stifling China's scientific and technological progress, while Gaokao is today often blamed for impeding the ability to think originally in Chinese students. Not only are the students completely focused on preparing for Gaokao, but it also affects the way teachers work and what material they teach. Because of the importance of Gaokao, students, who might be passionate about or excel in fields other than those that are tested on Gaokao, might never get the chance to develop those skills. This is similar to the biggest flaw of the Keju system in that it created a homogenous education system that by its nature prevented the cultivation of progressive and original thinking. It might be drastic to draw the conclusion that China's current government will deteriorate because of the many flaws of the Gaokao system, just like imperial China fell largely because of the Keju system. Nevertheless, the Gaokao system has many flaws. Everyone does not have an equal opportunity to succeed and it has many bad effects on both individuals and society as a whole. Even the Chinese government acknowledges this and is trying to remove those flaws. But have they done enough?

## IV. Conclusion

One of the main criticism against modern China from the Western world, not only when it comes to education but also when it comes to business, production and innovation, has been about China's apparent lack of creativity. The term "copycat culture" has often been used when discussing China ("Copycat China Still A Problem For Brands & China's Future: Just Ask Apple, Hyatt & Starbucks") ("China is no longer a nation of tech copycats"). And while Gaokao remains the main occupation of Chinese students, concerns are being voiced not only from abroad, but also from inside Chinese society, about the inability of China's education system to produce students capable of creative and original thinking. This is perceived as a possible threat to the future advance of the nation's economy and position in global politics (Sigurðsson 2010, 61).

Creativity has thus been an important part of the discussion about education reform in China. However, this is far from being a straightforward issue, and needs to be considered from several perspectives. First of all, the aim to increase the creativity of Chinese students is not only about the will to let students be artistic or think independently, it is also about increasing the overall "quality" of the Chinese population. The term "population quality" 人口素质 in China refers to the general quality of the population, which the government has tried to improve through reform in fields such as education. Raising the population quality, part of which is concerned with Chinese people's creativity, is considered an important part of raising a generation fit to continue the nation's progress (Woronow 2008, 401). According to Woronow, controlling the population size is directly related to raising its "quality" and thus even China's one-child policy has been a part of this long-term project. (2008, 405). Furthermore, since 1999

the Chinese government has had an official policy about “Education Quality” 素质教育, the aim of which is to increase the quality of Chinese students. (Woronow 2008, 406). The policy about Education Quality was to deal with issues such as the importance of examinations (including entrance examinations) and the prevalence of rote memorization over creative application of knowledge (Woronow 2008, 407).

It is clear that the Chinese government is trying to make the necessary changes to improve the Chinese education system. According to the CCP and their ten-year outline of China’s national plan for medium and long-term education reform and development, “matriculation reform shall serve as the breakthrough in the effort to terminate the practice that a single round of examinations decides the destiny of a student” (Ministry of Education 2010, 27). Furthermore, they affirm their intentions to take a more scientific approach to examinations and enrollment, both at the secondary and tertiary stage of education. As for enrollment to tertiary education, “higher educational institutions may, on the basis of interview or testing results, enroll candidates that have exceptional talent or professional or skills and are up to education requirements. Senior middle school graduates that excel in studies or are well developed in an all-round way may be enrolled through recommendation” (Ministry of Education 2010, 28).

The Chinese education system has many flaws, but to claim that any education system, anywhere in the world, can be flawless would be unrealistic. And when criticising the education system of a foreign country, we should not forget to take into account major cultural and philosophical differences. It can be argued that the interpretation of “creativity” in Western and Eastern societies is different. Thus, students who go through the Chinese education system might develop a kind of creativity different

from that of students of Western societies. The concept of creativity in the Western world is largely based on the idea of creating something out of nothing. The Chinese concept of creativity, on the other hand, is based on the idea of taking advantage of what you have, using it and adapting to an ever-changing situation (Sigurðsson 2010, 61-62).

At the end of imperial China, the outside world was changing while China struggled to keep up. As mentioned above, the Keju system has been recognized as a contributing factor to the downfall of imperial China, and many scholars during the Qing dynasty refused to accept any outside influence on Chinese education. The Chinese scholars of the Qing dynasty looked back towards the Confucianism of the Han dynasty because they were not willing to adapt to the changes of the outside world. Today, the leaders of China are willing to make the changes necessary to keep developing the nation. That act in itself is, according to the traditional Chinese definition mentioned above, a creative one. It is a will to change the traditions of the Chinese education system. This willingness to change is a value that was emphasized by Confucius. Ironically enough, the leaders of China today might be going back to the roots of Confucian philosophy, just like the scholars of the Qing dynasty wanted to, although for completely different reasons. Judging by the major differences in attitudes towards change in the times of Keju and Gaokao, it is unlikely that Gaokao will become a similarly negative influence on the development of Chinese society as Keju towards the end of its history.

The change has not only been in the attitude of China's leaders. In recent years, Chinese students have performed top scores in researches such as PISA. Because of this, Western countries are now not only concerned with how to keep up with China's good results, but also if there is possibly anything that the Chinese education system can contribute to the

education systems of Western countries. Sweden, a country that until recently took great pride in the quality of its education, has in recent years seen a plummeting performance of its students. Thus, the question has been raised whether some methods used in the Chinese education system can be useful for the Swedish one, as some of them clearly are yielding real results internationally ("Har Sverige något att lära av de bästa Pisa-länderna?").

Although the examination-focused education system of China, with Gaokao at its core, is producing good results, the fact still remains that only a selected few are able to succeed through this system. There are great differences in access to education because of social status and geographical location. Looking back at imperial China and the Keju system, it was under similar conditions that the regressive scholars of the Qing dynasty were produced. Today, China has the opportunity to produce a well-educated, high quality population. However, in order to achieve this, it is necessary to produce more opportunities, and more equal opportunities to a larger portion of the population.

These results show that the Chinese education system is capable of producing students with a fierce work ethic. If the leaders of China today are able to make the necessary changes to produce creative students with that kind of work ethic, China could possibly become one of the future international leaders in education. Many negative aspects of Gaokao and the education system of China today brings one back to the Keju system and its negative effects. However, the future looks bright for China, as the government has shown its willingness to make fundamental and positive changes that will affect millions of people.



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