

FATEFUL RITE OF PASSAGE:
THE NATIONAL COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMINATION
AND THE MYTH OF MERITOCRACY IN POST-MAO CHINA

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Every year around ten-million high-school seniors take China's National College Entrance Examination. Many perceive the two-day exam, known as the "Gaokao," as their only opportunity to achieve social mobility, or, as they say, to "change fate." The Gaokao occurs annually. But retaking it is difficult and expensive. Thus the stakes are high, and examinees have to cope with tremendous levels of anxiety. I am a cultural anthropologist. My book in progress investigates how this high-stakes exam forms a national rite of passage that recruits people into a belief in meritocracy.

Let me begin with some context.

The majority in China see the Gaokao as the lone island of fairness in an ocean of corruption and unequal opportunity. In particular, the exam provides people of rural origin their only hope of urban household registration or urban citizenship. And since a college education is a prerequisite for competition in the national civil-service exam, China's state leaders mainly rise from the ranks of successful Gaokao examinees. For these reasons, many in China regard the exam as the linchpin of "meritocracy." By "meritocracy" I mean a society in which the ruling elite are selected on the basis of "merit" through open competition. The entrance exam helps to maintain the impression that China is a relatively open meritocracy. Thus the Gaokao has served as a cornerstone of social stability and political legitimacy since its reinstatement in 1977

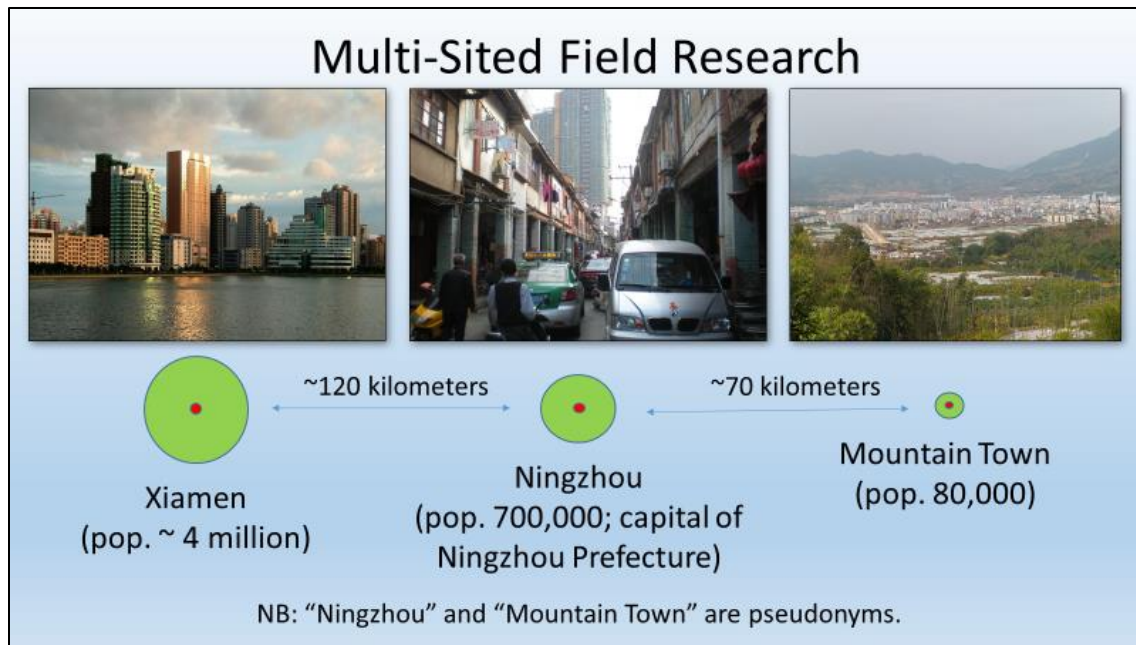


Figure 2

I conducted research across three places in China’s urban-rural hierarchy (Skinner 1964)—the coastal metropolis of Xiamen, the backwater municipality of Ningzhou, and the rural county seat of Mountain Town (figure 2). This approach enables me to draw cautious generalizations about spatial variation in experiences of the exam.

My methods were primarily “ethnographic,” by which I mean that I immersed myself in these communities to gain an intimate understanding of people’s everyday hopes and travails. Ethnographic methods enable me to account for motive in a way that quantitative or survey methods alone cannot.

In each community, I assumed a participant observer role as a volunteer teacher at under-resourced schools. I lived in student dormitories, conducted focus groups of former examinees, and interviewed parents, teachers, administrators, and government officials. I also observed classes and shadowed head teachers.

On many occasions, I accompanied head teachers on home visits to students' families. Going on these visits helped me understand how families reconcile the promise of meritocracy with the reality of social inequality.

A brief anecdote from such a home visit will help to illustrate my analysis of the Gaokao as a “fateful rite of passage.”

It was Sunday morning in the third week of April 2013 in Ningzhou. Only forty-seven days remained before the Gaokao. I was accompanying Ms. Ma, a head teacher at Ningzhou Number One High School, on home visits. One student in particular was close to Ms. Ma's heart—a boy named Zeyu. Most of her students were urbanites, but Zeyu hailed from a peripheral rural county of Ningzhou Prefecture. Despite his humble background, Zeyu had tested into Ningzhou Number One—the best high school in Ningzhou Prefecture. His father called the boy “good stuff.” Zeyu possessed, he said, great “diligence” and “persistence.”

However, the boy's composure or “psychological quality” (心理素质) was under question. As test day neared, Zeyu began to lose sleep and his performance faltered.

Herself of rural origin, Ms. Ma understood the enormous pressure that the boy felt. People from rural places see the examination as their only hope of “escaping the farm” by obtaining legal residency and white-collar employment in the city. Examination scores also determine the reputation of teachers and schools.

Keenly aware of the stakes, parents, teachers, and administrators pray for examination success (figure 3). Schools are officially secular, but they *institutionally organize* secret religious pilgrimages—a surprising finding of my research. With other head teachers, Ms. Ma visited the

temples of popular-religious deities, such as the God of Examinations (Wenchang 文昌). She prayed that Zeyu would regain composure and have “good luck” on test day.



Figure 3

Zeyu was not alone in her thoughts. Even some of Ms. Ma’s more privileged urban students were wilting under the intense pressure of the looming ordeal. By contrast, some underperforming students showed promise of “surging” to sudden renown during the “final battle.”

Thus *individual* exam results can be highly capricious or uncertain. But at the macro level, clear trends exist (figure 4). In top Xiamen high schools, more than 90 percent of students achieve admission to China’s first-tier or top-100 universities. The corresponding rate for Zeyu’s

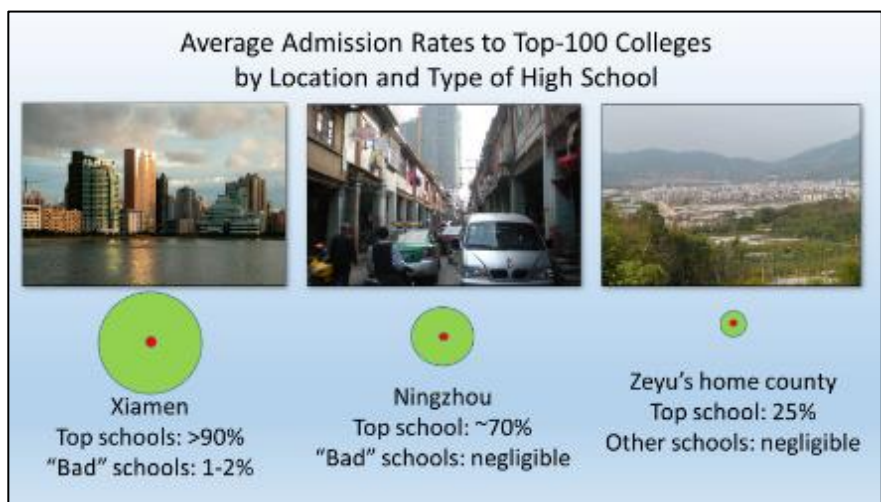


Figure 4

school in Ningzhou is 70 percent. In Mountain County or in Zeyu's home county the rate is only 25 percent. In stark contrast, the rate for low-ranking schools in the countryside *or* the city is under 2 percent.

In short, one's chances on the examination correspond closely to one's position in the geographical and school-ranking hierarchies. Unlike disparities between provinces, which are common knowledge in China, these disparities between localities constitute a state secret. And note that *despite* these disparities, the test remains an undetermined, unpredictable experience from the perspective of each individual examinee. In sum, exam results have a stochastic quality. They can be analyzed statistically, but not predicted precisely.

As it turned out, Zeyu's performance on the final exam was disappointing. He fell far short of his goal of gaining admission to an elite university. Zeyu himself attributed his subpar performance to his lack of "psychological quality." His family had little money and doubted his ability to endure the pressure of retaking the exam. Thus they decided to "come to terms with fate" (任命).

Zeyu's father, who worked as a garbage collector, complained about the social inequalities that plague the Chinese education system. But he continued to insist that the examination possesses the power to "change fate." As he explained, the Gaokao is "China's only relatively fair competition."

Most people in China share this assessment of the Gaokao. They say that the results of ordinary social competitions are determined ahead of time backstage through particularistic connections or "guanxi"; thus, they perceive such competitions as "empty," "fake," or "counterfeit." By contrast, people see Gaokao scores as determined during the event frontstage

according to universal, rules-based measures of merit; thus, they say that Gaokao scores are relatively “true,” “real,” and “genuine.”

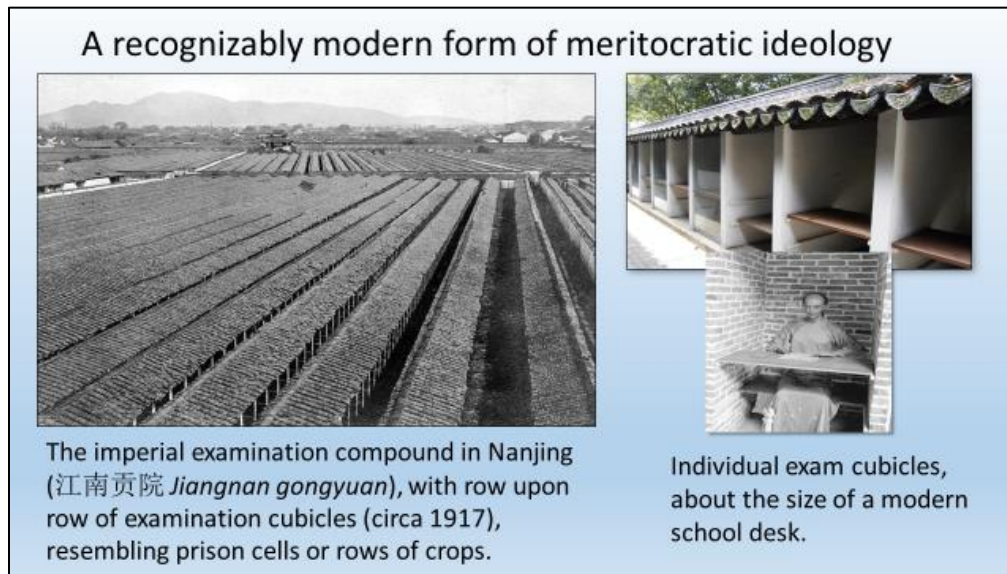


Figure 5

These perceptions have deep roots in Chinese culture. China was the first society to select its governing elite by open, competitive, anonymous examination (figure 5). The historical antecedent of the Gaokao, the imperial-era civil examinations, instituted a recognizably modern form of meritocracy in Chinese society (Woodside 2006). The ideology and social practice of meritocracy in China influenced European Enlightenment thinkers and European colonizers (Elman 2013; Jacobsen 2015; Teng 1943). For example, Britain established competitive civil-service examinations in the Chinese style first in India (in 1855) and then at home (in 1870) (Teng 1943). And the U.S. civil-service exams were directly inspired by China (Ibid.).

The ideology of meritocracy revolves around the notion that merit is individual and should be judged by rational, rules-based institutions. Ultimately, people see these institutions as founded upon greater transcendental authorities, such as the nation, divine beings, or fate. As Chinese high-school teachers tell their students, “The way of Heaven is to reward hard work; no pain, no gain” (天道酬勤, 不劳无获).

On test day, students face examinations alone, as anonymous individuals—a procedure that edits out the influence of families and schools. In fact, however, social differences—including gender, ethnicity, and class—play a large role in exam outcome. As I explain above, rural-urban disparities are particularly pronounced in China. To restate my main question, then, why do people nevertheless consider examination results legitimate?

Anthropologists and sociologists usually account for this paradox through the theory of misrecognition. According to this theory, people misrecognize *social* labor as *individual* merit—the test score (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). I generally agree with this theory. But conventional approaches to misrecognition tend to emphasize how social structure determines personal agency and subjectivity. By contrast, I join scholars who give greater emphasis to subjectivity, desire, and moral personhood (Susanne Bregnbæk; Michael Jackson; Steve Sangren; Paul Willis). In particular, I investigate how and why people use exams and similar occasions to imbue life with meaning.

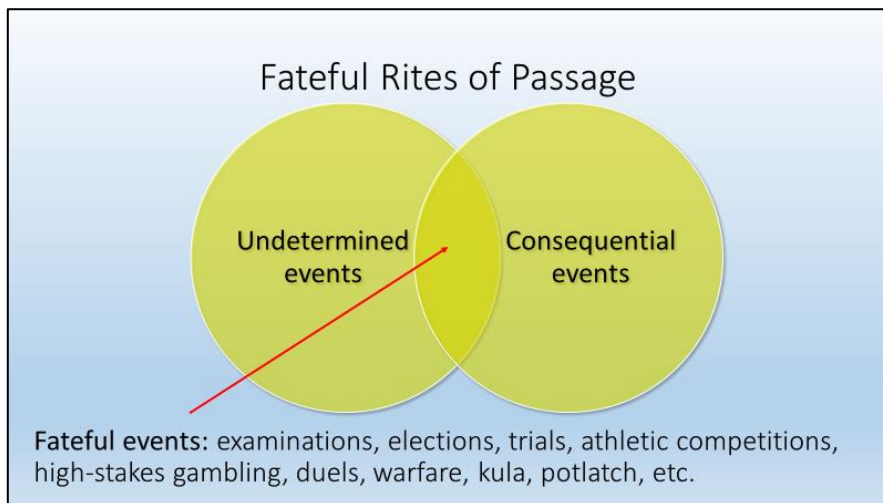


Figure 6

My argument draws inspiration from Erving Goffman's (1967) notion of *fateful events*. In contrast to everyday occurrences, fateful events are both undetermined (that is, they have unpredictable results) *and* consequential (that is, they create or destroy value) (figure 6).

Cross-culturally, fateful events include elections, trials, athletic competition, high-stakes gambles, warfare, and many other occurrences. Because they mark important changes in status, such events are rites of passage (van Gennep [1909] 1960; Turner 1977).



Figure 7


Paradoxically, fateful events provide people with a way both to challenge their place in the social order—“change fate”—and to achieve recognition within the social order. Fateful events can do this because people see them as *trials of merit*.

Conceptions of merit exhibit cultural variation but also possess important commonalities. For example, some notion of composure may be humanly common since human beings everywhere possess a body that must be mastered in the heat of the fateful moment. Note also how Chinese notions of “diligence” and “persistence” correspond closely to Western conceptions of “grit” and “resilience” (figure 7).

People also interpret these virtues as indexes of ethical aspects of personhood, which vary significantly across cultures. In China, notions of ethical character include filial devotion and scholarly nobility.

So instead of attributing success or failure to social circumstances, the majority of examinees account for their performance by reflecting on their individual moral virtues or failings. In this way, even disappointed examinees usually succeed in finding existential meaning in the exam. Thus although Zeyu and people like him may fail the Gaokao, the Gaokao does not fail them.

Conclusion: A Crisis of Legitimacy?



The **rural dispossessed** increasingly fail to see the Gaokao as undetermined.

The **middle-class elite** increasingly fail to see the Gaokao as consequential.

In conclusion, the Party stakes its legitimacy on maintaining the perception that people of merit have real hope of achieving social mobility. But most people lose the race for social mobility on the starting line. Thus meritocracy is a myth—a form of ideology. By ideology, I mean a cultural system of ideas and practices that help to reproduce an unequal and oppressive status quo.

My research illuminates the Gaokao's crucial role as the linchpin of this ideology. Critics complain about the test's relentless emphasis on rote memorization. But the majority of examinees experience the Gaokao as a fateful rite of passage in which they find existential meaning by personifying their highest cultural virtues. By comparison, people say that corruption and nepotism renders most other social competitions "empty." Against this background, belief in

the “relative fairness” of the exam has important implications for the legitimacy of Communist Party rule.

But in China today, slowing economic growth may be exacerbating the effects of high inequality. If people lose faith in the Gaokao, they will increasingly seek alternative forms of fateful action, such as emigration or even rebellion.

Like Zeyu and his family, the majority continue to “come to terms with fate.” But many in poor rural areas no longer see the Gaokao as undetermined (and thus “fair”). In response, they are dropping out of school. Some even become possessed by spirits or join rebellious millenarian groups. Simultaneously, the urban upper-middle classes no longer perceive the examination as consequential. Members of this relatively privileged group are increasingly sending their children and capital abroad. These shifts may herald a crisis of legitimacy. If people stop believing that they can change their fate with the Gaokao, they may change the fate of China.

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