EDUCATION WEEK
Published Online: January 21, 2014
Published in Print: January 22, 2014, as **Questionable Lessons From China's Recent History of Education Reform**

Questionable Education Lessons From China

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In 2010 and again in 2013, American journalists and educators, stunned by Shanghai's high scores on the Program for International Student Assessment, searched for factors that could explain the apparent success of Chinese education. However, they largely neglected to report the fact that the Chinese education system is widely criticized by its own educators and parents for producing graduates with poor academic abilities and poor health. Many also do not seem aware that, in 2011 alone, 150,000 Chinese citizens emigrated to other countries. For many of the middle-class families, the primary reason for leaving was to free their children from the perceived cruelty of the Chinese education system.

Each year in the month of June, about 10 million 12th graders in China take the gaokao, or the National College Entrance Exam, to compete for 6.5 million seats at universities, and among them fewer than one million seats at the "first category" research universities. The two-day exam is, as described by a Chinese saying, a race of "thousands of soldiers and tens of thousands of horses across a single log bridge." Alone, it determines a student's fate.

In order to be successful on the gaokao, Chinese students spend most of their waking hours on test-preparation tasks during their middle and high school years. Chinese parents spend a tremendous amount of money and energy on selecting regular schools, tutorial schools, and private tutors to put their children in the best position to succeed on the gaokao. The Chinese media is replete with reports of the harmful effect of academic stress on adolescents' physical and psychological health, with parents working themselves to the bone for their children's education, and children enslaved by parents and teachers to take classes and do homework. Chinese educators criticize the gaokao system as overemphasizing rote learning, smothering creativity, and favoring urban students. Opinion journalists in China have pleaded with policymakers to save children from the tyranny of academic competition.

And yet it is our view that the gaokao, which is far from perfect, takes too much of the blame for a series of top-down educational and social reforms that were implemented by the Chinese

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government in the 1980s and 1990s. The People's Republic of China adopted the gaokao system in 1951, but abandoned it when the Cultural Revolution—which spanned from 1966 to 1976—massively disrupted higher education. By the time colleges were reopened in the early 1970s, admission was based on political and family background instead of academic achievement. In 1977, striving toward a meritocratic approach, the gaokao system was reinstated; test scores replaced political and family backgrounds as the criterion for college admission. At the time, the reinstatement of the gaokao system was applauded as a symbol of restoring the value of fair competition and of traditional respect of learning in Chinese society. It was widely acclaimed as a history-making event that would change the fate of millions of previously excluded Chinese youth and the future of the country.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, the Chinese government initiated massive educational reforms to make secondary schools more efficient and more responsive to economic development. While the central government maintained its control over the purpose of education, system reforms, textbooks, and teaching guidelines, a series of policies were implemented to shift the responsibility for funding and managing schools to lower levels of government and to open schools in response to market forces.

Introducing "competition mechanisms" into secondary education and promoting teachers' and students' "competition consciousness" were the major themes of educational reforms. Two key policies marked the process of decentralization and marketization. In 1985, the Communist Party's Central Committee issued "The Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Reform of the Educational Structure." The decision called for linking education to economic reform, reducing rigid government control over schools, and allowing private organizations and individuals to establish and run schools. In 1993, the ministry of education issued "The Program for Education Reform and Development" to quicken the pace of educational restructuring in order to attract private funding to support educational development. In the decades that followed, the pressure to generate revenue forced schools to offer after-school classes and charge parents high fees.

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This financial decentralization of education resulted in systematic inequality and stratification among schools. Today, to compete for educational resources, Chinese schools do all they can to outperform other schools on student test scores. Schools keep students in classes for long hours, assign large amounts of homework, and organize countless simulation examinations. Schools rank students by their test scores and rank teachers by the scores of their students. Administrative districts in the same city are ranked and compared by test scores. Cities are ranked and compared with other cities in the same province. Test scores are used to evaluate the job performance of teachers, school principals, education administrators, and even local government officials. The pressure to outperform competitors exists at every level of the education system and is passed all the way down until it reaches the student. (Sound familiar?) Our own empirical research in Shanghai shows that individualistically oriented competition promoted in Chinese schools produces feelings of jealousy, distrust, and animosity among peers, especially as students

move from middle school to high school.

As China transitioned from a collective system to a state-directed market system (or "socialism with Chinese characteristics" in the official language of the Chinese government), the state no longer provided urban residents with job-related social benefits such as free housing and health care. Individuals now must rely on their own income to meet those needs. In the mid-1990s, housing became private property. Beginning in 2000, housing prices in large cities such as Beijing and Shanghai rose to unaffordable levels for income earners. Medical costs continued to rise as health benefits were cut increasingly from work benefits. A secure life in cities required a high-income job, which often required a degree from a prestigious university.

Today, toxic levels of stress on adolescents, parents, and the system are seen by many as the consequence of the high-stakes gaokao. However, hidden behind the doors of this discussion are the factors that make the gaokao so high-stakes: huge income gaps linked to educational credentials, a dysfunctional social-security system, the unequal distribution of human and material resources among schools and universities, and the loss of credibility of educational and governmental institutions. In China, as in the United States, it makes no sense to try to reform education without understanding where education policy stands on the road to the full reform of society.

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