Beyond Cynicism and Performance: State Secrecy and False Confidence in China's National College Entrance Examination

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It was August 2011. I was midway through my first year of fieldwork on China's National College Entrance Exam. I had just finished a day teaching English to high school students at my rural field site—Mountain Town, a backwater county seat of 80,000 in Ningzhou Prefecture in Southeastern China's Fujian Province. My phone rang. On the other end of the line was Prof Zhang, a prominent education researcher at the largest nearby city, Xiamen. Prof Zhang wanted to know if I could help him. He had a grad student who was writing a thesis about educational inequality in Xiamen. Prof Zhang knew that I also did fieldwork in the city, at a low-ranking high school in a recently urbanized district. He wondered if I could secure access for his student to one of the school leaders. "The principal would be great, but a vice principal will do," said Prof Zhang. "We just need to know how many students there get accepted to top universities."

I was flattered that a prominent researcher would ask me for help. But I was also perplexed. Prof Zhang was well-connected, with many former students working in the provincial Ministry of Education. Why would he need to ask a lowly foreign PhD student for help?

People in China say that the National College Entrance Exam is China's "only relatively fair competition." They say that normal competitions, such as job interviews, are decided ahead of time backstage by social connections, patronage, and corruption. By contrast, people say that the College Entrance Exam—known as the Gaokao—is determined openly on test day by individual merit. Every year around 10 million people take the Gaokao, which, despite recent reforms, remains the main factor in college admissions. The exam is especially important to people of

rural origin, who say that it offers "an opportunity to change fate." For many of China's hundreds of millions of rural-to-urban migrants, the Gaokao provides the only hope of acquiring official urban residency, which confers equal access to healthcare, welfare, and education. In addition, China's governing officials, by one route or another (usually additional examinations), are selected from among high Gaokao scorers.

For these reasons, the Gaokao enables people to see their country as an imperfect but nevertheless real meritocracy, where those who work hard can get ahead or even become a state leader. But if China is a meritocracy, it is a highly lopsided one. Local protectionism has produced byzantine college-admission quotas. Someone in Beijing or Shanghai is at least a dozen times more likely to gain admission to a top-tier national college than someone who is born in one of the provinces. This *inter*-provincial inequality is common knowledge in China. By contrast, people are less well informed about educational inequality at the *intra*-provincial level—within and between cities and between the city and the countryside. But neither are people naïve about such disparities, even if they are unaware of their true magnitude. In general, people are quite cynical about educational fairness.

Thus the exam presents a paradox. How and why do people continue to recruit themselves into a belief in meritocracy despite massive disparities in educational outcomes between different regions and socioeconomic groups? This is a complex question. My approach is to analyze the Gaokao as a fateful rite of passage—an event that is both consequential (that is, produces value) and chancy (that is, possesses an undetermined outcome). Elsewhere I argue that the Gaokao, as a large-scale fateful event, is a *total social fact* much like kula exchange in Papua New Guinea or the potlatch in the Pacific Northwest. Like these other total social facts, the Gaokao is a complex marriage of interpersonal competition and political ritual. Such fateful

events justify and reproduce social hierarchies even as they give individuals an opportunity to personify their highest cultural values, which in China include diligence, grit, composure, and luck. Here I'll focus on only one aspect of the Gaokao's fatefulness. For people to see the Gaokao as fair, they must see its outcome as undetermined, which they largely do. Despite a healthy dose of cynicism, people have a distorted perception of their Gaokao chances.

Thus meritocracy is an ideology—a set of ideas and practices that justifies an unequal and exploitative status quo. But what kind of ideology is this? On the one hand, it would be overly simplistic to say that people are totally immersed in "false consciousness" since they are skeptical of state assertions of fairness. But neither are people merely performing obeisance to an ideal that they know to be false; they believe in the transformative power of the Gaokao even if they are skeptical about many other aspects of the education system. Granted, China is largely a "post-belief" society, in which the state's official Marxist ideology rings false and government pronouncements are treated with extreme cynicism. But people nevertheless maintain sincere convictions, including beliefs in hard work, friendship, family, and the gods, to whom they pray for Gaokao success. Thus I argue that we should add a layer of nuance to the accounts of ideology as cynical performance. People are not simply victims of false consciousness, but neither are they completely cynical. Instead, people are under thrall of *false confidence*. They are cynical about the Gaokao, but not cynical enough. They think they know how bad things are, but in fact things are much worse than they suspect.

To reinforce false confidence, the state plays a confidence game with people. Presenting a rosy frontstage image of reality through propaganda and strategic omission, state actors actively ex-collude people from backstage information that they need to make accurate judgments.

As Prof Zhang later explained to me, Gaokao data wasn't easy to acquire, even for him.

"It's okay if you want aggregate pass rates for the province or for large cities," he said. "These rates are public. The government is eager to advertise them. With the rapid expansion of higher education in recent years, the aggregate admission rates show an improving trend. But social inequality is a hot-button issue. As soon as you want to look at any kind of granular data divided by sub-region or school, that's off limits. Let's not even talk about socioeconomic indicators like parental occupation. I can't even get data on how many students from which schools go into which colleges and which majors. My former students in the Ministry of Education just say, 'Sorry teacher. No can do.' Thus I have to go through all kinds of social connections and send my students running around the city if I want any real data. The authorities are particularly sensitive about educational inequality. They just want to put the whole discussion on ice."

Of course, China is not the only country where educational inequality is an important social issue. As inequality has increased globally in recent decades, fair access to education has become an important concern in many countries. In the United States, my home country, the standardized examination that is most commonly used in college admissions—the SAT—is jokingly referred to as the "Student Affluence Test." Research suggests that test scores correspond more closely to parental income than to anything else. The same appears to be true in China. Examinations thus function like a meat grinder. They transform social, cultural, and economic capital into a fetishized measure of individual merit—the test score. In this way, the labor of parents, teachers, and schools that helps to produce a successful student is misrecognized as the labor of the student alone.

This transformation of social labor into individual merit accounts for the close correspondence between test score and social origin. In my field sites, students of rural and working-class origins tend to do poorly on the exam. As I pieced together from the research of Prof Zhang's student and my own data collection, low-ranking schools in the city or the countryside, where students are overwhelmingly of rural or working-class background, only send 2 percent or less of their students to top-tier—that is, top-100—universities. By contrast, top-ranking schools in large cities like Xiamen, where students are from relatively privileged backgrounds, send nearly 100 percent of their students to top-tier universities or to colleges overseas.

Everyone knows that low-ranking schools do badly on the exam, but few know the precise numbers. Top-ranking schools often publicize their promotion rates, but low-ranking schools generally only make vague pronouncements about yearly improvements. To my knowledge, only one city in China has ever published the first-tier promotion rates for all of its high schools. But even this information paints only a very partial picture of inequality. As Prof Zhang notes, detailed socioeconomic data would be far more useful in helping researchers and parents assess the fairness of the exam. Schools collect this kind of data, but do not release it publicly.

Given how high-school admissions work in China, it is unsurprising that wide disparities exist between high schools *within* cities. Cities draw upon one pool of applicants and distribute them to different high schools hierarchically by test score. More telling than the disparities between high schools *within* any particular city are the disparities between schools in the city and schools in the countryside, which draw from different pools of applicants. If we accept that whatever it is that we mean by native intelligence falls into a normal statistical distribution

across the population, then the only way to account for such rural-urban disparities is through massive disparities in cultural capital and educational opportunity.

This perspective helps to explain why disparities between provinces, which everyone knows about, paradoxically do not pose a great danger to people's belief in the "relative fairness" of the Gaokao. All people in the provinces know that they are getting a raw deal compared to those who live in Beijing or Shanghai. That's just an unfortunate fact of life, but it doesn't undermine people's confidence in their ability to compete with their neighbors *within* their province or region. If anything, however, the disparities between a high-ranking school in the city and a low-ranking school in the countryside are even greater than the disparities between Shanghai and Beijing or the provinces. Moreover, these *intra*-provincial disparities derive wholly from real inequality rather than from artificial quotas.

Government officials told me that if such local disparities were publicized, they could lead to a crisis of confidence in the Gaokao system. In the face of such a potential crisis, one has to have sympathy with officials, who face a difficult dilemma. As one provincial educational official told me, "The Gaokao, like the imperial examinations of old, is here to give the common people hope. If parents knew how bad the disparities were, they would just try harder to get their children into good schools by hook or crook. They would buy up more property in good school districts, leading to an even greater property bubble. The economic and social consequences could be catastrophic. Publicizing examination statistics," this official said, "would just exacerbate the unfair trend."

Such concerns explain the secrecy surrounding exams. But it would be wrong to see state secrecy as an organized central-government conspiracy. During the Q&A, I'd be happy to elaborate on this point. For now I'll just note that there is not so much a lack of educational

statistics in China as a two-fold proliferation of statistics. On the one hand, state actors produce volumes and volumes of statistics for public consumption, but little information can be gleaned from these numbers that is useful for critiquing inequality. On the other hand, these same state actors produce many *useful* statistics, including socioeconomic data; but these numbers will never be released to the public and, in many cases, never to central authorities. Rather, this data is used backstage to advance local interests, such as pedagogical interventions to raise local test scores. If the production of statistics in China is a form of biopower, then this biopower is no monolith. Rather it serves a vast number of sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting state interests at different levels of the administrative and center-periphery hierarchies.

As Weber argues, the secrecy of bureaucrats is a potent form of power that thwarts and undermines democratic control of the state, which, as Marx reminds us, is the tool of the ruling classes. If the Gaokao functioned as advertised, it could be an important democratic check on ruling-class power. In principle, the meritocratic selection of leaders by open, anonymous, competitive examination has the democratic potential to open up the ranks of the country's rulers to ordinary people. In reality, however, few sons, and even fewer daughters, of farmers rise to become high-level officials. Thus meritocracy is an ideology, an ideology guarded by state secrecy, and reinforced by false confidence.

I suspect that false confidence, though taking culturally particular forms, plays an important ideological role not only in China but in many places around the world. The general rise in cynicism during late modernity in both authoritarian and liberal societies reinforces a false confidence that people understand how the state "really works." Various forms of information siloing contribute to false confidence, including not only state secrecy but censorship,

propaganda, and the echo chambers of social media. False confidence—this certitude built on cynicism—seems to be an important form that ideology takes in contemporary societies.