FATEFUL ACTION:
HIERARCHY, TRANSFORMATION, AND IDEALS OF MERIT
IN CHINA'S NATIONAL COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMINATION

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Zachary Moss Howlett

August 2016

FATEFUL ACTION: HIERARCHY, TRANSFORMATION, AND IDEALS OF MERIT IN CHINA'S NATIONAL COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMINATION

Zachary Moss Howlett, PhD

Cornell University 2016

People in China see the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) as the only island of fairness in an ocean of corruption and unequal opportunity. The majority organize their lives around attempting to use the exam to "change fate." However, social inequality has led to great chasms in examination performance between different regions and socioeconomic groups. This ethnography asks *how* and *why* the Gaokao nevertheless remains highly influential in recruiting Chinese into the ideology and social practice of meritocracy.

To investigate this question, I conducted multi-sited fieldwork in a rural town, a backwater municipality, and a large city in Fujian Province. Immersing myself in these communities for two years as a volunteer teacher, I studied the Gaokao's integral relationship with popular religion, gender ideology, and mass rural-to-urban migration.

My dissertation argues that the Gaokao constitutes a *fateful rite of passage* in which people personify high cultural values—"diligence," "persistence," "composure," and divine favor, or "luck." I conclude that most Chinese remain captivated by the examination life because they perceive the Gaokao to be *fateful* (Erving Goffman)—an event that is both consequential *and* undetermined. The rural dispossessed, however, no longer see the exam as undetermined or "fair." In response, they are dropping out of school, suffering from "lostness and confusion" (*mimang*), and even joining rebellious sectarian fringe groups. Conversely, the urban elite no

longer perceive the test as consequential. As a result, this group is increasingly pursuing education in the West.

In other cultural settings, analogous fateful events include elections, trials, business deals, athletic competition, warfare, divination, and high-stakes forms of ritual exchange like kula or potlatch. By analyzing how people interpret such events to imbue their lives with existential meaning, my research revises conventional understandings of how ideologies of meritocracy undergird political legitimacy in China and beyond. In this process, I compare the Gaokao to its historical antecedent—the Chinese imperial civil examinations (960–1905 CE), which influenced European Enlightenment thinkers and European colonizers—as well as to examinations in other countries. My dissertation thereby contributes to understanding the Gaokao's complex social role within broader historical and cross-cultural contexts.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Zach Howlett specializes in the historical and political anthropology of China. He received his BA from Brown University in German studies. Before pursuing his doctoral degree, he conducted sociolinguistic research in Berlin, Germany, and worked in China for several years as a teacher and translator. Howlett focuses on ideologies of meritocracy and their relationship to social and geographic mobility in China and beyond. He is a recipient of the Mellon/IIE (Fulbright-Hays) and Jacob K. Javits fellowships. Upon receiving his PhD from Cornell in 2016, he commenced two years of postdoctoral research at the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies in the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs.

To Brooks.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My dissertation was completed with the generous support of numerous individuals and institutions. During my fieldwork, I worked for two years as a volunteer teacher at high schools in southeastern China's Fujian Province. In the interest of confidentiality, I will not name the many people at my field sites who assisted me with my research, but their help made this dissertation possible. All my friends and contacts in China have my profound gratitude. In particular, I wish to thank my students, who taught me so much.

P. Steven Sangren, Magnus Fiskesjö, and TJ Hinrichs developed my thinking and nurtured my interests throughout my graduate apprenticeship. My dissertation demonstrates my great intellectual debt to all three. In addition, many other teachers inspired me at Cornell. Dominic Boyer, Sherman Cochran, Petrus Liu, Viranjini Munasinghe, Terence Turner, Andrew Willford, and Sofia Villenas, among others, helped make my graduate studies an exciting journey of intellectual discovery.

Financial support for my graduate training was provided by a U.S. Department of Education Jacob K. Javits Fellowship. Additional funding for fieldwork came from an International Institute of Education (IIE) Graduate Research Fellowship, which was underwritten by the Mellon Foundation to replace the Fulbright-Hays when eleventh-hour Congressional budget cuts suspended the latter in 2011. In addition, Cornell University provided funding for two summers of preliminary field research through a Mario Einaudi Center for International Studies Travel Grant and an East Asia Program Lam Family Award for South China Research. The Cornell East Asia Program also supported the writing-up phase of my research with a Hu Shih Fellowship in Chinese Studies.

During my fieldwork in China, I was affiliated with Xiamen University's Department of Anthropology. My gracious host, Zeng Shaocong, undertook great efforts to facilitate my research. I am truly grateful to him. Lin Yi, in the Department of Sociology and Social Work, likewise supported my work in numerous ways and contributed to the congeniality of my stay. I also received help and guidance from Liu Haifeng and Zheng Ruoling in Xiamen University's Institute of Education, the oldest such organization in China. Professors Liu and Zheng generously introduced me to the world of Chinese education research and policy making. Their distinctive style of scholarship, uniting investigation of the College Entrance Examination and the imperial-era civil exams, provided me with great inspiration for this study. Any mistakes or inaccuracies, however, remain entirely my own.

I am thankful to all those who read drafts of my work, including Jack Meng-Tat Chia, Vincent Ialenti, Laura Menchaca, Amir Muhammed, and James Sharrock. In addition, I have profited from the insights, suggestions, and support of many fellow graduate students at Cornell, including Kevin Carrico, Matthew Erie, Alexander Gordon, Wah Guan Lim, Pauline Limbu, Lesley Turnbull, and Erick White. Beyond Cornell, Susanne Bregnbaek and Mikkel Bunkenborg generously involved me in a publication project that helped clarify my thoughts at a crucial juncture in my dissertation writing. Their comments greatly stimulated my thinking.

Throughout my graduate studies, my friends and family provided me with a steady source of moral support. Yuanchong Wang gave me his stalwart friendship and shared his insight as historian and Gaokao veteran. Chris Kai-Jones helped me through thick and thin. My friends Kyle Rand and Joshua Morsell both visited me in the field. My mother and step-father, Judith and Brooks Mencher, encouraged me at every turn, for which I am grateful beyond words. My sister, Malinda Wagner, always believed in me. Although my father, Joe Howlett, did not live to

see the completion of my graduate studies, I know that he would be very proud. I thank everyone who helped me through the tragic circumstances of his death. Finally, I owe a special debt of gratitude to my partner, Ting Hui Lau, for her constant care, encouragement, and intellectual fellowship.

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NOTE ON ORTHOGRAPHY AND TRANSLATION

From time to time in what follows, I provide translations of important Chinese terms and phrases. In some cases, I do so to disambiguate terminology for other researchers, especially where no standard translations exist. In other cases, I do so with the understanding that the translated phrases distill important aspects of the examination experience. Such phrases represent typical discursive patterns that emerged over hundreds of hours of conversations with my Chinese interlocutors. By showing how people talk about the Gaokao, I mean to convey how they think about it. I assume that figures of speech are more than "mere" metaphors; they reveal how people conceptualize their worlds (Lakoff and Johnson 1981). It is significant, for example, that martial metaphors abound in the Gaokao, which is often described in terms of warfare, battle, or struggle. In my effort to communicate how people think, I sometimes also provide overviews of important semantic domains, for example in my discussion of "emptiness" and "fullness" in chapter 3 and in my treatment of ideal-typical social roles in chapter 4.

I use "Mandarin" and "Chinese" interchangeably to refer to the standard spoken dialect of Chinese as taught in Mainland China, which people there refer to as "the standard language" (*Putonghua*). In the few cases in which I refer to other spoken dialects, I make this explicit. I supply Chinese characters in the main text of my dissertation only where I translate longer phrases, as in my discussion of Gaokao slogans in chapter 4, or where I present highly specialized vocabulary in explanatory footnotes, as in my discussion of heterodox sects in the conclusion. In most cases, I render Chinese characters into Roman script to save space and facilitate reading. I employ the preferred transliteration system of the People's Republic of China, Hanyu Pinyin, which every schoolchild in China learns and which nearly all non-native speakers of Chinese now use to study the language. The reader will find a glossary of Chinese

characters following the main text. In this glossary, I employ “simplified” Chinese characters, which are used in Mainland China, as opposed to “traditional” characters, which are favored in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Through my use of simplified characters, I do not mean to suggest any ideological preference. Rather, this choice is merely a matter of convenience: This orthography is easily intelligible to most readers of Chinese.

INTRODUCTION

It was Sunday morning in the third week of April 2013 in Ningzhou—a backwater prefectural capital in China's southeastern Fujian Province. Only forty-seven days remained before the National College Entrance Examination—the "Gaokao." I was accompanying Ms. Liu, a head teacher at Ningzhou Number One High School, on home visits (*jiafang*) to students' families. So close to the Gaokao, Head Teacher Liu focused on those students whose practice-test scores were fluctuating wildly as the "final battle" (*zuihou yi zhan*) approached. She aimed to calm these students' nerves and boost their morale.[1]

In China, where students are Gaokao athletes, head teachers are a combination of coach, counselor, and surrogate parent. Every year around ten-million graduating high-school seniors take the standardized national exam, which many see as the only island of fairness in an ocean of corruption and unequal opportunity. As one rural high-school principal told me, "Without the Gaokao, there would be social revolution in China." Many examinees perceive the test as their only real opportunity to "change fate" (*gaibian ming*)—that is, to achieve social and geographical mobility. They understand the entire preceding twelve years of schooling as preparation for this grueling two-day trial of merit. The test occurs annually, but retaking it is difficult and expensive. Thus, the stakes are high, and examinees have to cope with tremendous levels of anxiety.

My dissertation title—"Fateful Action: Hierarchy, Transformation, and Ideals of Merit in China's National College Entrance Examination"—alludes to the above-described arrangements.

[1] The full official name of the Gaokao is "The People's Republic of China General Higher Education National Unified Student Recruitment Examination" (*Zhonghua renmin gongheguo putong gaodeng xuexiao zhaosheng quanguo tongyi kaoshi).* In ordinary speech, however, Chinese speakers abbreviate this title to "Gaokao." For the sake of brevity, therefore, I refer to the examination as the College Entrance Exam or the Gaokao.

I employ *fateful* in Erving Goffman's (1967) sense. Goffman uses this term to refer to any event that is both consequential *and* undetermined. In other words, moments of fateful action have high stakes yet uncertain outcomes. The Gaokao constitutes just such a conjunction of consequentiality and indeterminacy, thus forming a fateful rite of passage—a trial of merit.[2] As such a fateful trial, the exam provides people with the opportunity to personify socially valorized *ideals of merit*—including "filiality" (*xiao*) and "quality" (*suzhi*). As I elaborate below, people personify such ideals by demonstrating "diligence" (*nuli*), "persistence" (*jianchi*), composure or "psychological quality" (*xinli suzhi*), and divine favor or "luck." By successfully embodying these characteristics during the examination, people can achieve *transformation* of their position within the social *hierarchy*. In this way, the Gaokao gives people an opportunity to fight back against corruption and inequality.[3]

But the Gaokao does not present so great an opportunity for social mobility as many people think. To a larger degree than many suspect, examination-based mobility is a myth, as I make clear in what follows. Nevertheless, most see the exam as a real chance to "change fate." For this reason, the test persuades people to perceive their position in society as reflecting personal merit rather than social factors, such as the quality of one's school or the resources of one's parents. In this way, the exam undergirds the *ideology of meritocracy*—the notion that social success reflects individual merit. Paradoxically, therefore, the Gaokao encourages people to fight back against inequality even as the exam reinforces the very inequality against which people rebel.

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[2] I employ "indeterminacy" as a convenient noun form of "undetermined." Through my use of this term, I intend to convey that the results of the exam cannot be precisely predicted. I prefer "undetermined" to Goffman's term, "chancy," because the latter seems mainly to imply the risk of a *bad* outcome rather than the possibility of a good one. As I explain in what follows, moreover, I reserve the term "chancy" to describe a specific type of indeterminacy. Below and in chapter 1, I elaborate on my argument that the exam constitutes a trial of merit and rite of passage.

[3] My dissertation title is also a tribute to Terence Turner, whose similarly titled article ("Transformation, Hierarchy and Transcendence") inspires my thinking about rites of passage (chapter 1).

The examination also relates to hierarchy and transformation in another respect: The institution of the Gaokao is intimately connected with the great social transformations that China has experienced in recent decades, including rapid industrialization and the movement of hundreds of millions to the cities. But these transformations, while improving the lives of many, have resulted in skyrocketing inequality, producing wide gaps in examination performance between different regions and socioeconomic groups. In light of these expanding social chasms, my primary research goal consisted in determining *how* and *why* the Gaokao nevertheless recruits people in China into the ideology and social practice of meritocracy.

To investigate this question, I conducted multi-sited fieldwork for two continuous years between the fall of 2011 and summer of 2013 in a representative cross section of places in China's core–periphery hierarchy (Skinner 1964). The city of Ningzhou (pop. ~700,000), where I accompanied Ms. Liu on home visits, formed the midpoint of my regular fieldwork sojourn between the coastal metropolis of Xiamen (pop. ~4,000,000) and the rural county seat of Mountain Town (pop. ~80,000). At each of these three places, I immersed myself in the community as a volunteer teacher at low-ranking, under-resourced schools. I also shadowed head teachers at relatively privileged schools like Ms. Liu's.[4]

[4] To protect confidentiality, I employ pseudonyms for places and people throughout my dissertation with the exception of Xiamen, which is not a pseudonym. Some sources refer to Xiamen by its historical name Amoy, an Anglicized approximation of the city's name in the local Minnan (Hokkien) dialect of Chinese; however, I employ the Mandarin name, Xiamen to reflect the city's status as a major national economic center that attracts migrants from all over China. As one of only nineteen "sub-provincial divisions" (*fushengji xingzhengqu*) across China, Xiamen occupies a position one level higher on the administrative hierarchy than Ningzhou Prefecture. Such sub-provincial divisions are relatively few (nineteen to be exact). By contrast, "prefecture" (*diji xingzheng qu* or *diqu*) forms the usual designation for an administrative division between province and county. In recent decades, most prefectures have been converted into prefecture-level cities or "municipalities" (*shi*). Typically, such prefectural municipalities contain a developed urban center surrounded by many rural "counties" (*xian*). Thus the whole prefecture of Ningzhou contains a population of several million, whereas the city of Ningzhou has a much smaller population of 800,000. In such cases, Chinese generally use the title of the prefecture in synecdochic reference to its developed urban administrative center, which I have termed the prefectural "capital," allowing context to disambiguate this usage. In everyday talk, therefore, the name of prefecture and its capital city are interchangeable. For the sake of clarity, however, I use "Ningzhou" (a pseudonym) to refer to the developed urban center and "Ningzhou Prefecture" to refer to the prefecture as a whole.

Early in my fieldwork, I discovered head teachers to be important gatekeepers and treasure troves of information about China's education system. Head teachers assume administrative responsibility for a single class, usually 50 to 60 students, and follow their designated class throughout the entire three years of senior high school. Simultaneously, they instruct the class in an academic subject—in Ms. Liu's case, English. In this way, head teachers gain intimate familiarity with students' individual strengths and foibles. This knowledge complements their comprehensive statistical awareness of students' examination performance. They gain this awareness by poring over Excel spreadsheets, crunching the numbers from students' endless practice exams. This litany of examination includes weekly exams, monthly exams, mid-term exams, final exams, the "municipal quality assessment" (*shizhijian*), the "provincial quality assessment" (*shengzhijian*), and various other rehearsals for the big test—the Gaokao. As a head teacher, Ms. Liu knew exactly which students had slipped a few points in recent tests, which students were strong in one subject but weak in another. She knew who was falling in the rankings due to a personal problem or family crisis, and who did poorly on low-stakes exams but "unleashed their latent potential" (*baofa qianli*) in high-stakes ones. She used this information to provide her flock with strategic moral and scholastic guidance. The home visit—a venerable institution at most Chinese high schools—constituted an important occasion for such ministrations.

As the Gaokao loomed, one student in particular was close to Ms. Liu's heart—a boy named Zeyu.

The majority of Ms. Liu's students came from the city, but Zeyu hailed from a peripheral rural county of Ningzhou Prefecture. In front of his classmates, Zeyu referred to his parents as pig farmers, but this was a euphemism. Several years earlier, Zeyu's parents—members of the

She ethnic minority—had migrated from their rural abode to an urban shantytown in Xiamen.[5] They made a living by collecting garbage from all-night street restaurants to sell as pig slop. As with the children of many migrant parents, Zeyu and his younger brother were "left behind" (*liushou*) in the care of their grandparents in the countryside.[6]

In light of this humble background, Zeyu's scholastic accomplishments were singularly impressive. Zeyu had spent much of his childhood with his paternal grandmother, who did not speak Mandarin but only her native Minnan dialect. Zeyu's mother and grandparents could not read. Zeyu's father was forced to quit school in the third grade because his parents could no longer afford book fees and tuition.[7] Nevertheless, Zeyu tested into the best high school in Ningzhou by passing a special examination that was designed to identify top talent from the countryside. In a subsequent interview, Zeyu's father called the boy "good stuff" (*haoliao*): Zeyu possessed, he said, great "diligence," "self-discipline" (*zilü*), and "persistence." Clearly, however, the middle-aged man's unfulfilled ambitions also played an important role in Zeyu's success: Thirty years after being forced to drop out of school, Zeyu's father still proudly recounted getting perfect scores on his third-grade mathematics tests. He spoke with great regret about having foregone the opportunity to compete in the big examination. This disappointment drove him to help his children "conquer the Gaokao" (*zhengfu Gaokao*).[8]

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[5] Approximately 700,000 people spread out over northern Guangdong Province and southern Fujian Province identify themselves as members of the She minority. The She minority appears to consist of the remnants of one of the indigenous groups that intermarried with northern settlers in Song times (960–1279) to form the Hakka people (Leong 1997).

[6] For a useful and illuminating discussion of China's left-behind children, see Rachel Murphy's (2014) article on the topic.

[7] Following the introduction of the Compulsory Education Law of 1986, free compulsory education through ninth grade has been gradually mandated throughout China, although people of rural origin still struggle for equal access to primary education, an issue that I address in the following discussion and, in more detail, in chapter 1 and chapter 3.

[8] Few native speakers of the She language remains. Anecdotal data suggests that members of the group overwhelmingly occupy socioeconomically marginal positions as farmers and migrant workers like Zeyu's parents.

Without doubt, Zeyu exemplified great motivation and diligence. As the examination approached, however, his composure or "psychological quality" came into question. He began to seem nervous and distracted. He missed classes. His performance faltered. By visiting him, Ms. Liu hoped to diagnose the problem and adjust the boy's attitude.

Her visit of Zeyu was different from most in that Zeyu's parents were absent, working in Xiamen. Nevertheless, the boy had his own "home" of sorts. To provide him with an optimal study environment in the all-important year before the examination, Zeyu's parents had rented him an apartment near the school, which he shared with another high-school student. The apartment was a tremendous expense for Zeyu's family, but school dormitories were noisy—eight children to a room—and had no desks.

Zeyu showed Ms. Liu and me in, where we sat at a folding table in the otherwise empty living room. He had just returned from the pharmacy, where he had purchased a package of stomach-fortifying Chinese medicine. Ms. Liu expressed concern about Zeyu's having skipped an afternoon of classes. Breaking down into tears, the boy complained of suffering from stomach pain and insomnia. He was plagued by feelings of guilt over his parent's sacrifices. Ms. Liu encouraged him, saying "I know it's hard, but you can't slack off [*songxie*] now. Once you slack off too much, it will be difficult to get back into shape [*huifu zhuangtai*]." I joined Ms. Liu in trying to encourage Zeyu. Hoping to rouse his fighting spirit, I suggested that the children of the poor face particularly high levels of exam stress. "You have to resist the pressure [*fankang yali*]," I said.[9]

[9] Recent research of U.S. high-school students contests the assumption that disadvantaged children face higher levels of depression than do privileged ones. Psychologist Suniya Luthar's widely cited studies document the negative psychological pressures faced by disadvantaged children (Luthar 1999), but find similar rates of depression and suicide among affluent children (Luthar and Becker 2002). See also Hanna Rosin's Atlantic article on suicide in Palo Alto schools (http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/12/the-silicon-valley-suicides/413140/, accessed January 23, 2016). In the U.S., only children in the middle socioeconomic range seem (so far) relatively spared from high depression rates. To account for the plight of the privileged, Luthar points to the high levels of

After we departed, Ms. Liu and I talked about Zeyu's situation. Herself of rural origin, Ms. Liu understood the enormous burden that the boy shouldered. People from rural places see the examination as their only hope of "escaping the farm" (*tiao chu nongmen*), by which they mean obtaining white-collar employment in centrally located places. Moreover, China's household-registration system (*hukou zhidu*) restricts people of rural origin from acquiring the benefits of full urban citizenship. These benefits include better education, better social welfare, higher status, and higher income. The Gaokao provides most people with their only feasible route to obtaining urban residency in big cities. As Ms. Liu observed, "The stakes for someone like Zeyu are just different from those of most city children."

Examination scores also determine the reputation of teachers and schools. Keenly aware of these stakes, people of widely varying backgrounds turn to magic and religion for comfort and guidance. Some perform good deeds, attempting to tip the scales of karmic merit in their favor on the big exam. Others visit fortune-tellers and pray for success at the temples of popular-religious deities, such as the God of Examinations (Wenchang). In certain schools, like Ms. Liu's, administrators even organize temple visits for head teachers, hiring tour buses for the occasion, although such trips are conducted in semi-secrecy in deference to official atheism.

With the other head teachers, Ms. Liu made offerings to the gods during these school-organized pilgrimages. She prayed that Zeyu would regain composure and have "good luck" (*haoyun*) on test day. But Zeyu was not alone in her thoughts. Even some of Ms. Liu's more privileged urban students—including her top student, the daughter of a local police detective—were wilting under the intense pressure of the looming ordeal. By contrast, some underperforming students showed promise of "unleashing their latent potential." Such "dark

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competitive pressure in affluent schools and families. In China, where most high schools have high levels of pressure, one might expect to find high levels of pressure-related mental-health problems in all socioeconomic groups. But note that economically disadvantaged students face the double pressure of poverty and competition.

horses" (*heima*) achieve sudden renown by delivering a "clutch" or game-saving performance during the crucial event.

In short, individual examination performances are subject to unpredictable ups and downs. This capriciousness of the test result—a form of indeterminacy—has many sources. On one hand, exam performance is affected by the fickleness of mood or nerves. On the other hand, various uncontrollable factors influence the result, including test questions, weather on test day, and even the location of one's seat.[10] As one student said, moreover, "your hand moves a little, five points are gone, and your whole fate is different."

As I elaborate below, therefore, many activities surrounding the examination—from religious pilgrimage to home visits—can be understood as attempts to cope with indeterminacy. But note that such indeterminacy exists despite clear trends at the macro level. In other words, examination results have a stochastic quality—they can be analyzed statistically, but not predicted precisely: At Zeyu's school, close to 80 percent of students achieve admission to China's first-tier universities (*yiben yuanxiao*), which are roughly equivalent to top-100 colleges in the U.S. The corresponding promotion rate for the best school in Zeyu's home county is around 25 percent. In stark contrast, the rate for low-ranking schools in the city or the countryside is under 2 percent. But for any individual examinee, the test remains a profoundly precarious experience.

As it turned out, Zeyu did fine on the final exam, but scored 30 points lower than his teacher had expected: Instead of a predicted 620 out of a total possible score of 750 points, he

[10] Different students have different seating preferences, but many report a preference for seats that are not surrounded by others. Being surrounded on all sides increases the probability that one will be distracted, for example by one's competitors' attempting to catch a glance of one's own test paper. In addition, sitting next to a noisy examinee who, for example, taps his or her foot, is reported to be an additional source of distraction associated with an "unlucky" seat location.

Such examples of indeterminacy could be greatly multiplied. Note, for example, that some examination halls have better audio-broadcast equipment than others. At the time of my fieldwork, therefore, some examinees complained that they could not hear clearly the English listening component of the exam. Such complaints demonstrate an additional source of uncertainty or indeterminacy in student's exam performance.

scored only 590. This precipitous thirty-point drop meant a fall of over ten-thousand places in the provincial rankings—the difference between attending a Project 985 university (equivalent to a top-forty college in the U.S.) and a normal first-tier university (of which there are over one-hundred).[11]

On the one hand, Zeyu's story seems to be one of great success. He made it from a poor rural migrant background to a first-tier university, which gave him hope of pursuing a high-status white-collar job in the city. On the other hand, his story seems also to be one of disappointed hope and unrealized potential. Zeyu's past performance suggested that he had the ability to do much better—to gain entry into China's elite—but his nerves failed him at the crucial moment. His test score represented a formidable accomplishment; however, it hardly guaranteed him a smooth future in China's increasingly competitive job market. But his family had little money and doubted his ability to endure the pressure of retaking the examination. Zeyu himself attributed his poor final exam performance to an "uneven attitude" (*xintai bu wen*) and to a lack of composure or "psychological quality" (*quefa xinli suzhi*). Thus, his family decided to "come to terms with fate" (*renming*), as they put it.

Undeniably, even Zeyu's qualified level of success was highly remarkable. But Zeyu is the exception that proves the rule. Despite his son's success, moreover, Zeyu's father seemed to harbor few illusions about the great social inequalities that plague Chinese education. He condemned the system for its blatant discrimination against the poor. Over tea in his cramped

[11] Project 985 refers to a state-sponsored project that was started under former Chinese President Jiang Zemin in 1998 to create world-class research universities. The project directs special streams of funding to China's top institutions of higher education. The designation 985 refers to the date and month of Jiang Zemin's announcement of the project—May of 1998. Initially including only nine universities, the project was eventually expanded to thirty-nine campuses. The original nine are still referred to as the "C9 League" (*jiuxiao lianmeng*), sometimes called "China's Ivy League." The far more inclusive Project 211, initiated in 1995, includes over one-hundred universities. This project focuses more broadly on raising educational standards. Together, Project 985 and Project 211 constitute China's "first-tier universities" (*yiben yuanxiao*), which are also referred to as "keypoint universities" (*zhongdian daxue*).

Xiamen home, he described his struggles to obtain access to a good public school for Zeyu's younger brother.[12]

Zeyu's father is far from unusual. Most parents criticize the Chinese education system for its inequities and for its relentless focus on examinations. In spite of these complaints, however, the majority retain faith in the system's culminating rite of passage, the Gaokao. To explain this optimism, Zeyu's father invoked the widely held belief that the Gaokao has the power to "change fate" (*gaibian ming*). When asked to justify this belief, he replied with an oft-repeated refrain—a phrase that is echoed by millions across the country: "The Gaokao is China's only relatively fair competition" (*weiyi xiangdui gongping de jingzheng*), he said.

A Cultural Gyroscope

People widely agree in their reasoning for why the Gaokao is China's "only fair competition." They say that the results of other social competitions are determined ahead of time backstage through particularistic social connections or *guanxi*. Thus they deem ordinary competitions to be "empty" (*xu*), "fake" (*xujia*), or "counterfeit" (*zuojia*). By contrast, people see Gaokao scores as determined during the examination front stage according to universalistic, or rules-based, measures of merit. They say that the Gaokao, therefore, is relatively "true" (*shi*), "real" (*xianshi*), and "genuine" (*zhenshi*).

These perceptions have deep roots in Chinese culture. Chinese view the Gaokao as the cultural heir of China's imperial civil examination. Prior to the twentieth century, the imperial

[12] Two years after Zeyu gained entry to Ningzhou Number One High School through a special admissions test, the prefectural education department closed this mobility route in response to complaints from local governments that it drained the countryside of "student resources." Zeyu's father felt his younger son would have little hope of a superior performance on the Gaokao if he stayed behind in his rural school. Thus Zeyu's father brought his second son to live with him in Xiamen, hoping to secure his admission to a decent school there. Despite achieving good test performances on the entrance examination of a prestigious junior high school, his son failed the school's oral interview. "It's not fair," the man said. "My boy is not like the children of rich people—he doesn't know how to speak eloquently [*koucai bu hao*]."

predecessors of the contemporary state employed the examination with few interruptions to select their governing elites for nearly a millennium: The civil exam emerged in its mature form during the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE), then passed through various configurations in the Yuan (1271–1368), Ming (1368–1644), and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties until its eventual abolishment in 1905 on the cusp of China's transition to republican government.

The mature civil-examination system differed from previous methods for "selecting people of talent" (*xuanba rencai*), such as Han Dynasty (221 BCE–280 CE) recommendatory practices or Sui (581–605 CE) and Tang (618–907 CE) examination rituals. In contrast to these earlier methods, the Song examination system painstakingly anonymized candidates' identities: Examinees' test papers were copied and recopied by scribes on an industrial scale—a practice that eliminated any trace of individuals' names and handwriting (Miyazaki 1981). Starting in the Song, moreover, the state instituted special "avoidance laws" to limit nepotism and corruption. These laws dictated that examiners be selected from outside the jurisdiction of the examination and forbade kinship connection between examiner and examinee (Elman 2000, 201–2; Man-Cheong 2004). In theory, such innovations helped ensure that candidates advanced based on individual aptitude rather than on family connections—a strikingly modern conception of merit.

The civil examination possessed many other remarkably modern characteristics. Upon entering special examination halls, examinees were thoroughly searched for unauthorized mnemonic devices, which included such inventions as undershirts that were painstakingly hand-printed with canonical texts. One surviving such "cheat shirt" displays printing so small that it is barely legible without magnification (figure 1). Examination halls resembled modern-day prisons, with row upon row of tiny cubicles (figure 2). Inside these cubicles, examinees worked,

slept, ate, and attended to their bodily functions for the duration of the examination, which could last several days (figure 3).[13]

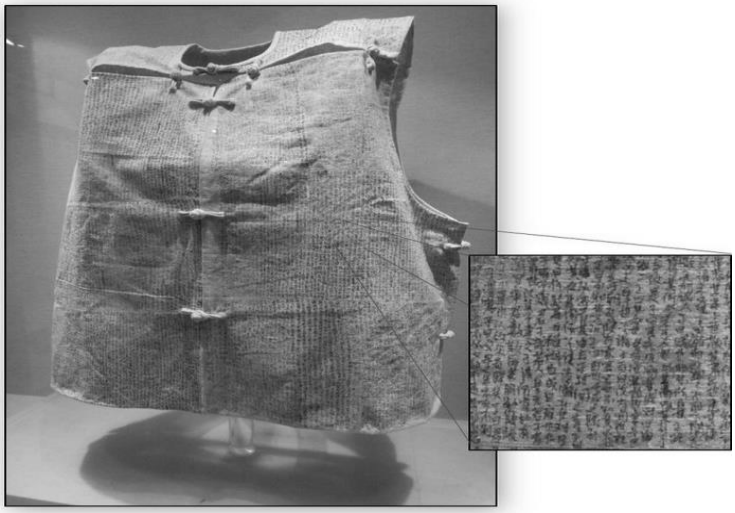

Figure 1: Imperial-era "cheat shirt"
Source: Shanghai Imperial Civil Examination Museum
(*Shanghai keju bowuguan* 上海科举博物馆). Photo by author.

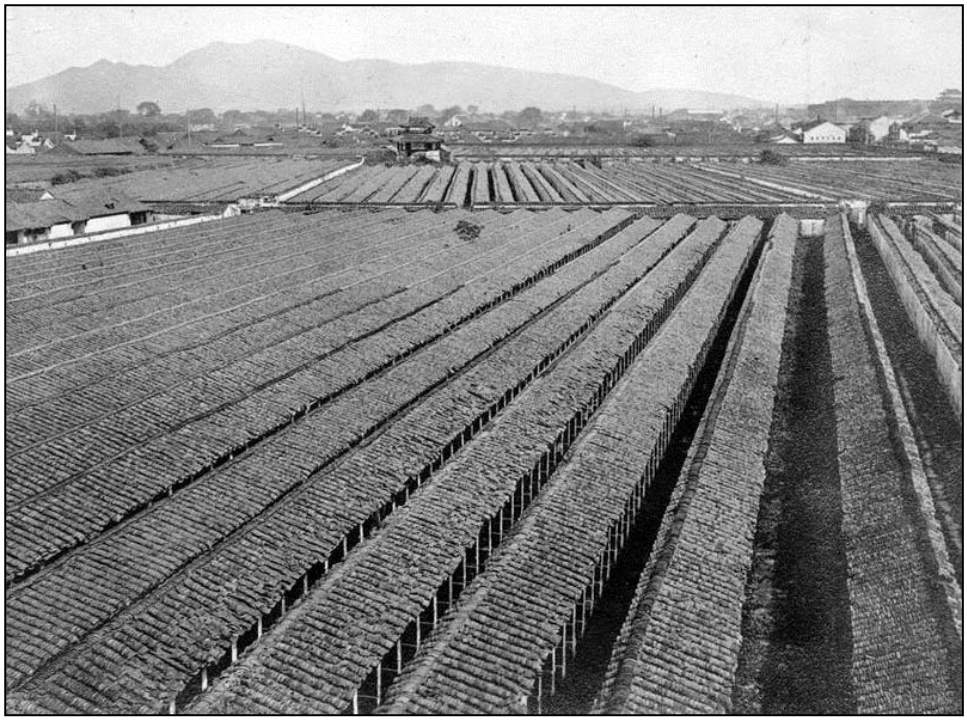

Figure 2: The imperial examination compound in Nanjing, circa 1912
Source: http://www.lzp1996.com/zpzs/20100608/335.html (accessed May 20, 2016)

[13] Benjamin Elman (2013) compares the examination system as a whole to a "cultural prison."

Figure 3: Mock-up of individual examination-hall cubicles
Source: Shanghai Imperial Civil Examination Museum (*Shanghai keju bowuguan* 上海科举博物馆).
Photo by author.

With much justification, therefore, people in China consider their country to be the birthplace of meritocratic examination. The civil examinations influenced the European Enlightenment and helped inspire the implementation of similar examination regimes in other countries (Spence 1998; Teng 1943; Woodside 2006). Enlightenment thinkers marveled at the enlightened governance of Cathay, which they learned about from Jesuit missionaries and others. (Spence 1998; Teng 1943). In the nineteenth century, British colonial administrators exported Chinese-style civil-service examinations first to India, then via India to Britain, whence they spread to continental Europe and the U.S. (Teng 1943).

Ironically, however, just as the West was adopting examinations to modernize, the Chinese state abandoned them for the same purpose: In the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries, Chinese reformers almost uniformly denounced the examination system as an outmoded tradition. In particular, the "May Fourth" generation of cultural iconoclasts deemed the civil examination to be an impediment to modernization, scientific innovation, and national self-strengthening. But historians now question these assumptions. Some even suggest that the Qing imperial state might have survived into the present if state officials had successfully reformed the exam instead of abolishing it altogether (Woodside 2006).

In imperial times, the examination bound the gentry-elite together with the state in a politics of mutual recognition: By conferring the elite with examination credentials, the state recognized the elite's status and authority. The elite thus naturally recognized the authority of the state. The abolishment of the civil examination in 1905 dissolved this relationship, presaging social chaos. During the Republican Era (1912–1949), the country entered a period of weak central control, warlordism, and civil war. Newly founded Western-style institutions of higher education administered separate entrance exams (Pepper 1996). Without national-scale examinations, Chinese elites found themselves as alienated from state power as they had been at any time since the Song dynasty (Yeh 1990). Following the Communist Revolution of 1949, one of the new government's first priorities consisted in implementing an examination system. In 1952 the Communist government held its first Gaokao, bringing elites firmly back into the orbit of state power.

In many respects, therefore, the Gaokao is similar to entry-level civil examinations of imperial times—in particular, the "licentiate" (*shengyuan*) examination, which guaranteed successful examinees elite status and provided them with the opportunity to compete in qualifying examinations for official office. Similarly, the contemporary college-entrance exam is considered a "threshold examination" (*menkan kaoshi*): Passing the exam qualifies candidates

for more advanced levels of examination competition, including the present-day national civil-service examination (*Guokao*). Moreover, prior to the dismantling of the socialist work-assignment system in the 1990s, college graduates were virtually guaranteed employment for life in a government work unit. College graduates of that era very much resembled licentiate degree holders of old, who were guaranteed an annual stipend paid in rice and provided with tax service exemptions (Elman 2013, 105).[14] As a result of degree inflation, only a degree from a Project 985 college now provides comparable status. Now as before, however, possessing an elite degree marks one's elite status within a state-certified national hierarchy of credentials.[15]

The renationalization of examinations under Communist rule—albeit now under the influence of Western models—accompanied the re-establishment of centralized state authority after decades of disunity. In the years following the establishment of Communist Party rule, the state has constantly tinkered with the examination to adapt it to changing circumstances. But except for a ten-year hiatus during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), the Gaokao has formed a perennial national ritual to this day (H. Liu 2007; R. Zheng 2011). On the sixth and seventh of every June, the examination transfixes the nation. Police guards appear in front of school gates to direct traffic and ensure order. Normally penny-pinching taxi drivers volunteer to deliver examination warriors to their battlegrounds. Schools, transformed into examination halls, become hallowed ground. Only examinees and invigilators may pass school gates. Some localities use advanced biometrics to verify examinees' identities. Others deploy special signal-blocking equipment and even aerial drones to foil cheats. In front of schools, sidewalks throng with nervous parents and gawking onlookers. TV crews and newspaper reporters interview

[14] In addition to receiving a government stipend, licentiate degree holders were exempted from corvée labor and corporeal punishment and wore special clothes to mark this status.
[15] Of course, epochal differences also exist between the imperial and present-day systems. Chapter 1 elaborates on points of similarity and difference between the imperial and contemporary examination systems.

spectators. The media hold forth on state efforts to ensure good conditions for the exam. Some municipalities are even rumored to reroute aircraft to reduce noise. Even if apocryphal, such measures testify to the ceremoniousness of the occasion. As in imperial times, examinations form a sacred rite of passage for millions of Chinese.

Then as now, the manifest purpose of examinations has been to "select people of talent," but officials, scholars, and ordinary people widely acknowledge the importance of examinations in maintaining social stability. The imperial exam provided, as historian Benjamin Elman puts it, a "cultural gyroscope" for society, "even in the minds of millions who failed" (Elman 2014, 170)—a role that the Gaokao plays today. As a provincial educational official told me, "Like the imperial civil examination of old, the purpose of the Gaokao is to give the common people hope." The notion that the Gaokao prevents revolution, mentioned earlier, underscores its social importance. Conversely, periods of social tumult, rebellion, and dynastic change are associated with breakdowns in the system (Jones and Kuhn 1978).

Now as before, the highest echelons of state power intervene directly in the management of examinations to ensure social stability. In the wake of the 1990s Asian Financial Crisis, the politburo, the highest decision-making body of the Chinese Communist Party, ordered the radical expansion of higher-education recruitment. In so doing, the politburo overrode the gradualist long-term plans of the Ministry of Education—an extraordinary exercise of autocratic, guerrilla-style control over educational policy (Q. Wang 2014). This expansion—from a recruitment of one-million college students per year in 1998 to 6.3 million per year by 2009—helped bolster the legitimacy of the Party-state and ensure regime survival in a period of economic hardship and uncertainty (Q. Wang 2014, 151). Under Xi Jinping, the current Party leader, extensive reforms to assert greater central-state control over the examination system are similarly directed toward

undergirding the legitimacy of the exam in an era of economic slowdown. Such intervention reveals the degree to which central state leadership considers the legitimacy of the examination to have implications for the legitimacy of Party rule. As a newspaper reporter told me, "The Gaokao concerns every family and is directly related to the stability and harmony of the country and to the image of the government."[16]

Party leaders worry so much about the examination because of its important role in maintaining belief in "meritocracy." China watchers widely suggest that Chinese political legitimacy rests on a tacit bargain: People acquiesce to Party-state rule in exchange for wealth. In this view, Chinese support the Party because economic development has improved their lives. But this focus on development gives short shrift to merit. People do not so much expect their lives to improve under Party rule as they expect to have opportunities to improve their lives. In other words, the Party-state's legitimacy rests on guaranteeing the conditions for the meritorious to advance. At minimum, the state must ensure the *perception* that such conditions exist.

Although the current economic slowdown may be changing this perception, people commonly say that the Party is doing a "relatively good job" at providing economic growth and social stability—the basic prerequisites for mobility. They consider this achievement to be especially admirable in light of China's "national circumstances" (*guoqing*) of "overpopulation and underdevelopment" (*renkou duo*, *dizi bao*). Widespread ambivalence exists with regard to Party rule. But alternatives to Party rule, such as electoral democracy, are viewed as fraught with risk.

[16] Other countries in East and Southeast Asia with broadly Confucian historical legacies—including Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, Vietnam, and Singapore—possess similar examination regimes. These similarities represent to some degree a common Confucian cultural memory. For example, Korea and Vietnam both possessed Chinese-style civil exams before the twentieth century (Woodside 2006). But these similarities are also connected with correspondences in social structure and with the international expansion of the ideology of meritocracy in the modern era. Nevertheless, each country displays cultural particularities with regard to its examinations. Chapter 1 addresses the issue of historical continuity and change in more detail.

As “China’s only relatively fair competition,” the exam undergirds the perception that the meritorious can advance, thereby conferring procedural legitimacy on the selection of the elite. In the Maoist era, the elite largely consisted of Party cadres who derived their legitimacy from their revolutionary credentials. In the post-Mao era of economic reform (1978–present), an entrepreneurial elite of wealthy business people has emerged. Simultaneously, the Party has become increasingly technocratic, filling its ranks with “red” engineers, lawyers, and economists (Andreas 2009). As a result of these trends, the Party now recruits its new membership from the highly educated and the wealthy. By one channel or another, new Party members are largely drawn from the ranks of high Gaokao scorers. In some respects, therefore, the Gaokao functions like an election: The examination ratifies successful examinees as deserving members of the political/technocratic/entrepreneurial Chinese power elite.

Now as before, however, only a very small percentage of people have been able to enter this elite. In 1400 during the early Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), the ratio of licentiates to the general population was one licentiate per 2,800 persons. In 1700 in the early Qing (1644–1911), this ratio was one licentiate per 540 persons (Elman 2013, 106). By the mid-Qing in 1777, the ratio had risen to about one licentiate per 50 persons.[17] Today, the comparable ratio of elite college graduates to the general population is somewhere on the order of one graduate per 100 people.[18] In other words, the percentage of people who achieve elite degrees does not seem to be

[17] I calculate this figure based on Ping-ti Ho’s (1962, 181) estimate of 500,000 licentiate degree holders in 1777, when China’s population was approximately 270 million.

[18] This comparison involves many assumptions and is meant to be suggestive rather than authoritative. First, I join others in assuming that a licentiate or *shengyuan* degree in the mid to late Qing is broadly analogous with an elite college degree today (Elman 2014, 106). In support of this assumption, note that many levels of examination distinction existed that were lower than the licentiate degree. Imperial China was the first society to have government-based schools, although these institutions were really more waystations for examinees than schools as we conceive them today. Somewhat similar to today, however, candidates worked their way up a hierarchy of school-based examinations. But as I point out in the above discussion, the licentiate degree represented a fundamental transformation of status (see also the discussion in chapter 1). Today, only an elite college degree provides people with a comparably fundamental “change of fate.” However, this comparison is complicated by the

appreciably higher than it was in Qing times. Now as before, moreover, examination success generally *follows* attainment of elite status rather than preceding it (Hartwell 1982; D. Yang 2006; Yeung 2013). In other words, most families must acquire the economic resources and social position to give their children an elite education *before* their children can ratify this elite status through educational attainment.

Some will contest this assessment. Many scholars assert that examinations produced significant mobility in the imperial era (Kracke 1947; Ho 1962; R. Zheng 2007). Without doubt, moreover, the expansion of public education in the twentieth century, especially following the Communist Revolution of 1949, broadened examination enfranchisement to a much wider cross-section of the population. In particular, women acquired the right to take examinations (Rawski 1979). These radical changes improved the literacy rates of many previously marginalized groups (Liang et al. 2013).

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fact that the definition of an "elite" degree has shifted rapidly in the past 30 years with degree inflation. In the 1980s, any four-year college degree guaranteed elite status, whereas now only a Project 985 degree confers this status. But the percentage of people to achieve this level of distinction has remained remarkably consistent. At present, only 2 percent of Gaokao examinees gain admission to Project 985 universities—the current market of elite status. (See, for example, the following useful discussion and graphic: http://news.sina.com.cn/c/t/20120606/175311.shtml [accessed May 6, 2016].) During the 1980s, when any four-year college degree marked elite status, an average of around 5 percent of high-school students achieved that goal. (Official statistics would suggest a higher number, particularly for the late 1980s. However, because of the practice of "pre-selection" [*yuxuan*], actual admission rates to college were lower than official statistics suggest. See my further discussion in chapter 1, note 53.) In sum, although the definition of "elite" college has changed, it seems reasonable to assume that the percentage of elite college grads has ranged between 2 and 5 percent since the Gaokao was reinstituted in 1977, yielding an average rate of about 3.5 percent for this time. Now, consider that currently only about 25 percent of China's labor force (individuals 25 to 64 years of age) possesses any senior high school education (Khor et al. 2016). Thus it seems fair to suppose that on average less than 25 percent or one in four Chinese over the last thirty years have acquired the right to take the Gaokao in the reform era. Multiplying 25 percent by 3.5 percent (the current percentage of elite college grads) yields a ratio of about one elite graduate per 90 people. Since these are approximate calculations, I have rounded up to one in 100.

Of course, these rough calculations are merely meant to provide a broad basis for comparison. Note, moreover, that this discussion concerns *status* not class. Although a close correspondence exists between the two, elite college grads need not be rich, just as some licentiate degree holders hailed from relatively modest backgrounds. In any case, the percentage of elite degree holders have not expanded as much as the recent expansion in examination enfranchisement might lead us to think. That is to say, the percentage of elite degree holders in contemporary times and that of licentiates in Qing times is remarkably similar.

In fact, however, the rapidest growth in literacy, and thus "culture" (*wen*), occurred while the exam was suspended during the Cultural Revolution (Andreas 2004). This educational achievement remains an underexamined dimension of that tumultuous time. In recent years, literacy is again falling, especially among women and in rural areas (Huang 2008). Moreover, the ratio of rural students at elite colleges is decreasing despite the recent higher-education expansion (X. Wang et al. 2013; Yeung 2013).

More fundamentally, a growing body of new scholarship questions the significance of examination-based mobility both in the imperial age and in the present (Elman 2013; Hartwell 1982; X. Wang et al. 2013; D. Yang 2006; Yeung 2013). This scholarship suggests that the educational striving of individuals is secondary or epiphenomenal to broader economic trends and cycles in accounting for mobility—a view that my data largely corroborate.

Thus it may be argued that the Gaokao has merely succeeded in pulling a greater proportion of the total population into the influence of its "cultural gyroscope" rather than in fundamentally altering how that gyroscope functions. In 1500, only 1.5 million out of a total population of 150 million, or about 1 percent, gathered biennially to take the imperial licentiate examination (Elman 2014).[19] In the present, around 25 percent of the population possess some senior high-school training, which is dedicated to preparing students for the Gaokao (Khor et al. 2016).[20] Thus the percentage of the population pursuing the examination life has expanded dramatically. Now as before, however, only a very small number of examinees achieve their

[19] The number of participants in the licentiate examinations must have been much higher in Qing times, when, as I discuss above, the ratio of licentiate degree holders to the general population rose to 1 in 50 or more.

[20] Kohr et. al (2016) point out that this figure is the lowest among the BRICS countries, representing a crisis in human capital. As they argue, moreover, this figure contravenes official narratives of educational progress and development, which are based on overestimated official government statistics of upper secondary education attainment. By the same token, widely reported increases in the Gaokao "pass rate" (*luqulü*) following educational expansion represents a red herring and distraction from more fundamental questions. Merely passing the Gaokao provides little guarantee of life success, nor does the Gaokao pass rate tell us much about the educational attainment of the general population.

ideals of success. In imperial times, only around 5 percent of examinees passed the licentiate exam, whereas today 5 percent or less of examinees achieve admission to an elite college.

Now as then, moreover, the examination remains influential despite great social inequality. In the reform era, rapid development has improved the lives of many, but social inequality has skyrocketed. Official narratives point toward the uninterrupted increase in per capita income that has accompanied breakneck urbanization, marketization, and industrialization. But a closer analysis of economic data suggests a more nuanced picture (Huang 2008): The rapidest phase of poverty reduction occurred in the 1980s. After this period, massive flows of capital and resources moved up the social hierarchy, from rural areas to urban areas and from small private companies to large state-sponsored enterprises. Under these conditions, people increasingly complain that the country is being run by a collusive "aristocracy" (*guizu*) of corrupted officials and business people. Many rural areas, including Mountain County, have suffered brain drain as many of the most qualified teachers and students move to the cities.

In spite of such inequities, however, families everywhere continue to make great sacrifices in pursuit of examination glory. Indeed, inequality appears to be a *motive* for such sacrifice. Teachers know this motive well. School-sanctioned slogans sometimes even include open expressions of class animus, such as, "Without the Gaokao, can you strive past the second-generation rich?" and, "Test past the Richie-riches, vanquish second-generation officials!" In many places, students chant such slogans in "mobilization rallies" (*dongyuan da hui*) that recall the mass-line politics of the Maoist era. As in imperial times, however, elite status is theoretically attainable for anyone but out of reach of nearly everyone. In both the imperial and contemporary eras, therefore, people have compared examination competition to "a great army

crossing a single-plank wooden bridge" (*qianjun wanma guo du muqiao*). For the most part, only the elite make it across (figure 4).[21]

Figure 4: "A great army crossing a single-plank wooden bridge"
The sign on the desk at the end of the bridge reads "Prestigious Schools Admissions" (*Mingxiao zhaosheng*).
Source: http://news.ks.js.cn/zt/2013/30/ (accessed February 12, 2016).

Fateful Rites of Passage and the Paradox of Legitimacy

The arrangements that I describe above are not wholly peculiar to China. Although many idiosyncrasies exist in individual cultures of meritocracy, examination-based selection now constitutes a hallmark of "modernity" and "development" worldwide. As mentioned, Chinese civil exams formed a harbinger of such systems and provided some inspiration for them (Elman 2013; Teng 1943). Similar assessments are now used all over the world in everything from college admissions to civil-service recruitment, and from military selection to intelligence

[21] In Chinese, the first slogan is *Meiyou Gaokao, ni nenggou pin de guo fu'erdai ma?* The second is *Kao guo gaofushuai, zhansheng guan'erdai.* Chapter 4 discusses slogans and mobilization rallies in greater detail.

testing. As in China, the results of such examinations everywhere dovetail with the socioeconomic backgrounds of examinees (Bourdieu 1977b; Guinier 2015; Lemann 1999; Soares 2007; Yeung 2013).

In recent decades, moreover, socioeconomic inequalities have increased not only in China but worldwide. This increase has complex causes. Among other factors, scholars point toward the spread of laissez-faire economics, which critics term "neoliberalism"; the marketization of socialist economies following the end of the Cold War; technological change; and the rise of a top-heavy, extractive financial system (Dorling 2014). Under these conditions, the power of the traditional welfare state is eroding and that of multinationals and other transnational organizations is increasing. In developing countries like China, elites are sending their children to the West to be educated in rapidly increasing numbers. These trends are producing a transnationally mobile elite of corporate technocrats even as ordinary people everywhere remain relatively restricted by national boundaries. In many places, education has begun to converge around a new consensus. In both China and the U.S., for example, teachers bemoan an intensifying ethos of technocratic professionalization and cutthroat educational competition. In both places, critics worry that this ethos devalues humanistic pursuit, causing people to worship "performance" and "utility" over "authenticity" and "wisdom" (Blum 2009). Voices on both sides of the Pacific decry the emergence of a "hereditary meritocracy."[22]

Despite such critical voices, people everywhere persistently overestimate the linkage between personal merit and examination success. Examinations thereby undergird an *ideology of meritocracy*—the belief that success reciprocates merit (Bourdieu 1977b; Soares 2007). In this way, examinations provide a justification or theodicy for social hierarchy in China and beyond.

[22] See, for example, this recent Economist article: http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21640316-children-rich-and-powerful-are-increasingly-well-suited-earning-wealth-and-power (accessed January 19, 2016). In China, educational researcher Yang Dongping (2006) is an influential source of similar jeremiads.

As scholars have pointed out, moreover, societies that embrace an ideology of meritocracy—like China and the U.S.—tolerate high levels of social inequality (McNamee 2009). But the persistence of this meritocratic ideology under predominating conditions of social inequality begs the question of why people remain committed to the ideal of universalistic selection by examination. As the birthplace of examinations, China provides a particularly good case study for such an inquiry.

As sociologist Pierre Bourdieu suggests, examinations comprise a form of "symbolic violence": They transmogrify social differences in economic, social, and cultural capital into examination scores; in this way, these scores become fetishized measures of individual merit (Bourdieu 1977b; Bourdieu 1979). Examinations thus conceal the advantages that have accrued to individuals through social background and through particularistic connections or guanxi. In short, examinations make social advantage appear to be the result of individual merit. Examinations might be likened to a cloaking technology: They conceal the benefits of privilege-based, guanxi exchange (the advantages of social and cultural capital) under the guise of rules-based, universalistic selection (a state-sanctioned examination score).[23]

Skeptics may object that individuals contribute to their own scores. Certainly this is the case. As I argue below, examination success requires heroic efforts of diligence, persistence, and composure. Indeed, the mystique of test scores derives in part from the great individual moral effort that the achievement of such scores requires—an aspect of examinations that Bourdieu tends to overlook. But an individual's contribution to his or her final score is easy to exaggerate. As Bourdieu points out, scores reflect in large part accumulated *social* labor—including that of

[23] Of course, guanxi also operates by codifiable rules, but the heuristic distinction that I make concerns similar versus differential treatment by status: Universalistic reciprocity operates according to the conceit that people of similar statuses are treated similarly; guanxi reciprocity according to the conceit that each relationship is unique. The former is generally associated with market exchange, the later with gift exchange.

parents, teachers, and the ambient culture of schools and places or, as Chinese term it, the "cultural environment" (*wenhua huanjing*). But the examination makes this social labor appear to be the achievement of one person alone. In this sense, test scores constitute alienated objectifications of the social labor that produced them.

Bourdieu provides a useful description of symbolic violence; however, his account does not fully explain *why* people grant legitimacy to such social arrangements. Bourdieu (1979) suggests that students are inclined to recognize pedagogical authorities—teachers, schools, and examinations—that recognize their achievements or "giftedness." This theory provides inspiration for my foregoing analysis of the politics of mutual recognition in Chinese state–society relations: The state recognizes the educational attainment of the elite, which is thus naturally inclined to recognize the authority of the state. However, this model neither fully accounts for why elites should be captivated by an authority that is so evidently biased in their favor, nor does it really explain why those who fail the exam should so compliantly accept that authority's verdict. In other words, why would anyone attribute objectivity to a system that is biased in favor of a wealthy few?

Note that this problem of accounting for the effectiveness of symbolic violence is both a problem of motive and a problem of legitimacy. In short, asking why people remain enthralled by the unattainable ideal of meritocratic selection by examination is asking why they grant legitimacy to social arrangements that oppress them. I term this problem the *paradox of legitimacy*.

Social-theoretical attempts to address the paradox of legitimacy span the spectrum of social-science theory, including poststructuralism, conflict theory, and practice theory, and employ an equally varied range of analytical categories, including "power," "interpellation,"

“hegemony,” “subjection,” and “habitus” (Althusser 1994; Bourdieu 1990; Butler 1997; Gramsci 1971; Willis 1981). To account for this paradox within the context of Chinese examinations, historians draw broadly from social-science theory. Some appeal to the examination’s central role in social mobility and reproduction (Elman 1991). Others emphasize the importance of status group, pointing out that even limited degrees of examination success result in great rewards of status (Bol 2008; Hartwell 1982; Rawski 1979). Still others employ many of the above-mentioned concepts—such as hegemony, habitus, “the examination field,” and “subjectification”—or emphasize the importance of Confucian culture and patriarchal social arrangements (Bol 1992; De Weerdt 2007; Man-Cheong 2004; Nylan 2001; Weber [1915] 1968).

These various explanations draw attention to the ways in which social circumstances give rise to individual motives as well as to the fact that individuals act strategically in pursuit of their own desires and interests, thereby contributing to reproducing that same social order. For the most part, however, these attempts to imagine a dialectics of social arrangements and individual motive contain an *objectivist bias*: They emphasize the determination of individual motive or agency by objective forces, or gloss over motive and agency without attempting to make these factors integral to their account. Such objectivist accounts provide a useful corrective to conservative *subjectivist positions* that blame the individual for social problems. Consider, for instance, the current penchant to blame teachers for the failure of schools—a lopsided attribution of culpability that vexes teachers in China and elsewhere (Ravitch 2010; D. Yang 2006). Such subjectivist explanations limit the possibility for social change by overlooking the social roots of such problems. But objectivist approaches may ironically serve as the other side of the subjectivist ideological coin: By failing to provide an adequate account of individual motive,

objectivist explanations hold out little hope for, and provide little explanation of, social creativity. Whereas subjectivist approaches expand agency to account for things that it should not, objectivist accounts constrain agency, condemning it either to the mechanistic fulfillment of a predetermined teleology or to the endless reproduction of the same timeless social arrangements.[24]

In the final analysis, therefore, the paradox of legitimacy revolves around the question of *structure and agency*: How much are individual destinies determined by social arrangement, how much by individual volition?

The above-mentioned attempts to address the paradox of legitimacy posed by Chinese examinations contribute to our understanding of structure and agency in China and elsewhere. However, these attempts overlook the role that the question of structure and agency plays in the examination ritual itself: *This ritual represents an attempt to answer in practice the same question that these theoretical accounts attempt to answer in theory*, namely, to what degree do people create their own fates and to what degree do their fates create them? In other words, the examination ritual, like scholarly attempts to come to terms with the paradox of legitimacy, turns around a central, probably universal question of existential meaning—namely, the question given by the fact that we are all simultaneously both individuals with discrete, mortal bodies, and members of social collectives, whose existence transcends our own.[25] In the context of Chinese

[24] Bourdieu (1990; 1992) presents useful discussions of the relative advantages of "objectivist" versus "subjectivist" approaches, although I am less sanguine than he that his sociology transcends this binary. My discussion also derives inspiration from Martin Jay's (1984) history of Western Marxism and from John Guillory's (1993) treatment of the debates surrounding the English literature canon.

[25] In other words, the contradiction of structure and agency appears to the individual in the form of an existential question. I draw particular inspiration for my formulation of this question from Winnicott's (1991) notion of "play," but much of phenomenological, existential, and psychoanalytical thought broadly revolves around similar questions, including Heidegger's ([1927] 2010) notion of "authenticity," Sartre's (1956) notion of "freedom," and Freud's ([1913] 1999) and Lacan's (2006b; 2006a) notions of "desire." In particular, Sangren's (2000) employment of the concept of desire forms another direct source of inspiration for this analysis. Sangren uses this concept to investigate how people paradoxically rebel against patriarchal social arrangements by seeking to transform their position within

examinations, people answer this existential question for themselves in the process of using examinations to personify, verify, and account for personal merit. In so doing, they recruit themselves into the ideology and social practice of Chinese meritocracy.

People can interpret the examination and similar events to imbue their lives with existential meaning because the exam forms a *fateful rite of passage.* As Erving Goffman (1967) points out, most events are either undetermined or consequential but not both. By contrast, moments of fateful action—for example, high-stakes examinations, elections, athletic competitions, duels, warfare, stock-market bets, and business deals—combine in one event *indeterminacy* and *consequentiality*. Indeterminacy means that the result of the event is not determined beforehand.[26] Consequentiality refers to the perception that the event possesses significant consequences for participants and thus creates or destroys value. The Gaokao forms just such a fateful intersection of indefinite outcome and profound consequences. In less marketized societies, forms of competitive ritual exchange such as kula or potlach might likewise be analyzed as fateful events.[27] I propose that all such fateful events constitute rites of passage because they all possess the basic three-part structure identified by van Gennep ([1909] 1960)—separation, transition, and reintegration. Simultaneously, fateful events are trials of merit because they require participants to personify their highest cultural values. In other words, people employ fateful events to embody cultural ideals, which in China include diligence and filial devotion.

As a fateful event, the Gaokao inspires feverish devotion. To an underappreciated degree, this devotion derives from indeterminacy: No one wishes to take part in a competition in which

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them. In so doing, people reinforce the very social hierarchy against which they rebel. In the following, I suggest that fateful events such as the Gaokao form the central occasions in which this humanly common, paradoxical drama of desire plays out in culturally particular forms. As I argue in chapter 1, moreover, similar theoretical and existential paradoxes may be traced through the history of Chinese philosophy and political thought.

[26] In his study of Greek gambling, Thomas Malaby (2003) employs indeterminacy in a similar sense.

[27] Influential ethnographic accounts of the potlatch (Kan 1989) and the kula (Munn 1986) suggest that both forms of exchange lend themselves to such an analysis: Both incorporate significant measures of consequentiality and indeterminacy and form trials of merit within their respective cultural contexts.

the results are already known, just as few gain satisfaction from reading a story to which they already know the ending.

Anthropologists have long studied indeterminacy in divination, noting how the randomness inherent to divinatory practices enables people to attribute supernatural authority to oracles (Evans-Pritchard 1937; Siegel 2006). In China, such practices include divination by drawing lots (*chouqian*) or casting "moon blocks" (*poe*), which are akin to dice. The aleatory element in such practices enables people to ascribe their result to something beyond human control—typically a deity. In this respect, examinations are similar to divination. Indeterminacy authorizes the examination—and cross-culturally similar tests of merit, such as elections and trials—to speak with the transcendental authority of society and, ultimately, supernatural beings or "fate" (*ming*). As elsewhere, people in China endeavor to sway these transcendental powers through prayer, magic, and the accumulation of karmic merit.

But indeterminacy possesses multiple aspects. In particular, I disaggregate indeterminacy into (1) the *chanciness* that accompanies any imperfectly controlled or aleatory event and (2) the *precariousness* that accompanies agonistic interpersonal competition. In other words, chanciness refers to happenstance factors that fall outside of individual control, such as weather on test day and the test questions one receives, whereas precariousness refers to factors conceived to be within individual control, such as level of preparation.[28] In the latter, agonistic form, indeterminacy gives people a sense of direct control over destiny: If people perceive the result of

[28] As I observe in note 2, I employ "indeterminacy" as a convenient noun form of undetermined. "Chancy" seems an apt term to describe the influence of random factors, but I am less satisfied with my use of the term "precariousness" to describe unpredictability that results from competition. However, this term seems to present itself as the least undesirable of several available options: "Unpredictability" and "uncertainty" seem too broad, since they can refer to any unforeseen event. By contrast, precarious suggests to me the significance of individual skill, calling to mind the image of a person balancing on a tightrope or beam. Such a comparison seems particularly apt given people's cultural predilection to describe Gaokao competition in terms of "a great army crossing a single-plank wooden bridge" (see above).

fateful events to be precarious in this sense, they can cherish the hope of besting their adversaries through competition.

This hope persists even when indeterminacy is largely fabricated, as I argue to be the case in the Gaokao: Every evidence suggests that the Gaokao is a game in which the cards are stacked against the poor and the peripherally located. State authorities censor the public dissemination of test data "to put the discussion of social inequality on ice [*leng chuli*]" as one Chinese examination researcher put it. Moreover, examinees tend to persuade themselves that they have a better chance than they actually do. For these reasons, few if any ordinary examinees are completely aware of the degree of educational disparity that is inherent to the examination system. They know that the game is rigged in favor of urbanites and the wealthy, but they do not fully fathom the severity of their disadvantage.

Fateful Action and Merit

To reiterate, the examination is a fateful rite of passage that enables people to address for themselves in practice the same existential and social dilemma that many social thinkers attempt to answer in theory—the question of structure and agency.

As I elaborate in chapter 1, people address this question in events conceived to be fateful by using such events to resolve or suspend the existential tension between the subjective and objective poles of existence, that is, between volition and authority, individuality and sociality, or wishes and constraints. I suggest that this tension constitutes a human commonality but expresses itself in culturally particular forms (Sangren 2012).

The ideology of meritocracy provides one such culturally particular way of approaching this humanly common existential dilemma, which consists in the question of whether we make

our own destinies or are determined by social constraints. As I describe above, meritocratic ideology centers around the belief that success reciprocates merit. But merit is not a unitary category. It involves both *performance character* and *ethical character*. The former refers to virtues required for successful performance in fateful events, the latter to aspects of moral personhood that such successful performances are seen to verify and index.[29]

As the above ethnographic anecdote illustrates, Gaokao performance character includes at least four aspects—"diligence" (*nuli*), "persistence" (*jianchi*), "composure" (*xinli suzhi*), and divine favor or "luck" (*yun*). In China and elsewhere, however, people understand cultural variations of these four personal virtues to play a central role in many fateful endeavors. Cross-culturally, these virtues manifest themselves differently, and different types of fateful events require the display of these virtues in different proportion. But insofar as people everywhere possess the same basic "equipment" of body, language, and social organization, I hypothesize that the basic virtues required for successful performance in fateful action will demonstrate much cross-cultural similarity. In short, these four attributes form important cultural values in China and—in different or transformed ways—elsewhere.

Fateful events usually demand special techniques of the body and habits of the mind. Diligence refers to the assidiousness that is required for the acquisition of such primary capacities. By the same token, success in moments of fateful action requires persistence—the ability to persevere in the face of setbacks or defeat. In growing bodies of research, psychologists refer to this capacity as "grit" (Duckworth et al. 2007) or "resilience" (Luthar, Cicchetti, and

[29] The distinction between "performance character" and "ethical" or "moral character" has become popular in discussions of "character education" in the U.S. See Lickona and Davidson (2005) for an influential formulation of this distinction. More recently, reformers of U.S. college admissions have called for a renewed emphasis on "ethical character." See, for example, the Harvard Graduate School of Education's recent report, "Turning the Tide" (http://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/files/gse-mcc/files/20160120_mcc_ttt_report_interactive.pdf?m=1453303517, accessed March 18, 2016). I employ this distinction between performance and ethical character because I find it to be a useful heuristic, on the one hand, and because doing so creates an opportunity for dialog with educators and education researchers, on the other.

Becker 2000). In fateful events everywhere, moreover, participants must conquer their nerves: In the heat of the moment, one's body confronts one as an alien power that must be mastered. Composure refers to this ability to control one's body. Finally, factors beyond individual control inevitably impact performance. In sum, fateful events are undetermined, that is, chancy and precarious. To account for indeterminacy, people resort to "luck" or other such transcendental causes. More broadly, all four types of performance character—diligence, persistence, composure, and luck—can be understood as types of explanation and practice that people employ to cope with indeterminacy.

Because of basic similarities in human capabilities (that is, body, language, and capacity for social organization), the virtues required for successful performance in fateful action demonstrate remarkable cross-cultural similarity. As I suggest, however, merit is conceived to include not only performance character but also ethical aspects of personhood. In China, the virtues of performance character—that is, diligence, persistence, composure, and luck—are taken as indexes of "all-around quality" (*zonghe suzhi*), nobility of character (*junzi zhi dao*), and filial devotion to parents (*xiaoshun*). In China as elsewhere, however, debates persist about whether or not competitive examinations can really measure moral rectitude. Moreover, other fateful events in China and beyond may emphasize different conceptions of ethical character, such as valor, self-sacrifice, teamwork, and so on.

The Ideology of Meritocracy

Although I focus predominantly on Chinese ideologies of meritocracy, this analysis has broader implications. Insofar as all human cultures socialize people into conceiving of their cultural elite

as exemplars of superior merit, all human cultures might be termed "meritocracies."[30] We might also expect trials of merit, as described above, to exhibit cross-cultural similarities or fundamental commonalities. Therefore, my analysis of fatefulness has relevance to the question of legitimacy in social theory more broadly. Primarily, however, I employ "meritocracy" in a more limited sense. Specifically, I use this term to designate the nexus of, on the one hand, a work ethic driven by desire for salvation and, on the other, an educational culture driven by universalistic or rules-based credentialism.[31]

Associated with the increasingly global reach of modernization and developmentalism, meritocracy now constitutes a predominant form of ideology worldwide. Although cultures of meritocracy display much variation across time and space, their ideological foundations possess fundamental similarities.

A culture of meritocracy started gaining dominance in Europe with the rise of the bourgeoisie during the Reformation and the Enlightenment (sixteenth through eighteenth centuries). In China, however, a recognizably modern form of meritocracy arose hundreds of years earlier with the emergence of society-wide, anonymized civil examinations. These examinations flowered during the decline of traditional aristocratic authority that accompanied an early industrial revolution in the Tang–Song transition (approximately the eight to twelfth centuries). As described above, civil examinations in late imperial China (~1368–1905 CE)

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[30] In other words, even in societies in which virtue is ascribed or considered hereditary, elites are considered exemplars of merit (Linton 1936). In this sense, therefore, even such societies might be termed meritocracies. Note, moreover, that even when virtue is ascribed to elites, people paradoxically expect them to embody and personify that merit in trials of character such as warfare or divination.

[31] "Meritocracy" first achieved widespread currency following British parliamentarian Michael Young's 1958 publication of a dystopian science fiction novel, *Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870–2033*. Written in the form of a future sociology Ph.D. dissertation, the work describes a proletariat revolution against a totalitarian social system in which all people are assigned their roles in society based on examination results (Young 1958). Ironically, however, advocates of standardized testing in the U.S. and elsewhere latched on to the term, advocating for just such a system of exam-based "meritocracy." In opposition to Michael Young's critical intent, therefore, "meritocracy" became a watchword of the 1960s movement by University of California President Clark Kerr and others to introduce test-based college admissions (Lemann 1999).

influenced the European Enlightenment and, consequently, I would argue, the development of capitalistic ideology more broadly in Europe. Indeed, the Chinese culture of meritocracy bears a remarkable resemblance to what Weber calls "the spirit of capitalism" (Weber [1905] 1992). This ideology consists in the notion that success reciprocates merit as judged by universal, rational authorities, the evidence of whose favor must be sought in the fruits of diligent earthly labor. Such authorities include rule-based institutions like the examination and the market, but people ultimately understand these institutions to be regulated by even greater transcendental authorities—the nation, the "invisible hand," nature, divine beings, or fate. As Chinese high-school teachers exhort their students, "The way of Heaven is to reward hard work; no pain, no gain" (*Tian dao chou qin; bu lao wu huo*).[32]

Meritocratic cultures assign great spiritual value to assiduous labor. In the European context, Weber points out that the German word for "profession" or "occupation"—*Beruf*—literally means God-given calling. I suggest that an analogous Chinese term might be found in *shiye*, which people usually translate as "undertaking," "cause," "occupation," or "mission." Like *Beruf*, this term evokes the notion of forging one's own fortune through diligent devotion to an occupation. In imperial China, aspirants to examination glory described preparing for the examination as their "occupation" *(ye*) (Chaffee 1995, 4). Now as then, the most sacred of all occupations consists in rearing the next generation—traditionally, sons, but increasingly also daughters: Whatever profession people pursue, they commonly assert that their real mission in life lies in fostering filial children, who will take care of them in old age and extend their lineage. In this way, children provide parents with meaning, security, and a spark of immortality. To be properly filial, children must be successful. For this reason, people typically direct whatever

[32] Of course, Weber also wrote about China. His book-length treatment of why capitalism allegedly did not arise in China ([1915] 1968) contains useful insight; however, its main conclusion seems highly Eurocentric in light of recent scholarship (chapter 2).

resources that they accumulate in other endeavors toward educational success for their children. Preparing for the exam thus constitutes a sacred life project. Following historians of China's civil exam, I term this project the *examination life* (Chaffee 1995; Elman 2013). As Zeyu's father, the garbage collector, said, "My genuine calling [*zhenzheng de shiye*] is educating my sons. All my sacrifices are for them."

As a result of these arrangements, families tend to see examination failure as evidence not of social inequality but rather of personal moral failure. By the same token, examination victors tend to understand their success as reflecting true moral value. Like Zeyu, however, most examinees do not interpret their examination result unambiguously as victory or defeat. Nevertheless, they almost inevitably see the result as delivering an enduring objective judgment on their individual character.

Will the Center Hold?

The number of people taking the Gaokao has dropped in recent years from a high of 10.5 million in 2008 to around 9.5 million today, but this number remains high and shows signs of stabilizing. Moreover, the Gaokao retains its influence not only among those who devote themselves to preparing for the examination but also among disappointed scholars, like Zeyu's father, who project their hopes of examination glory onto the next generation. Skeptics will point out that only around half of Chinese children gain admission to senior high school and thus acquire an opportunity to take the Gaokao. But many of these dropouts aspire to a better educational lot for their own children. They therefore remain captivated by the ideal of examination-based meritocracy.

At the socioeconomic extremes of society, however, people are failing to experience the Gaokao as fateful, and thus failing to find meaning in the examination. This failure of fatefulness expresses itself differently within different groups. People on the socioeconomic margins of society—the rural dispossessed—increasingly fail to perceive the exam as undetermined or "fair." In rural areas, rising numbers are dropping out of school to work (Chung and Mason 2012; Dunn 2009; H. Yi et al. 2012). Many are pursuing alternative forms of action. Some rebel against parents and teachers, fight with peers, or become addicted to gambling or video games. Others experience spirit possession or even commit suicide. The most disaffected may join rebellious secret societies or sectarian fringe groups, which anecdotal evidence suggests are increasing in number and influence. But even many high-achieving students of rural origin fail to achieve their dreams of mobility. Economic slowdown has led to increasing joblessness during a period in which educational expansion has flooded the labor markets with college grads. Their hopes dashed, increasing numbers of young people describe themselves as "lost and confused" (*mimang*)—an existential malaise that my subsequent analysis suggests may be reaching epidemic proportions.

At the other end of the social spectrum, the small but growing middle classes of relatively privileged urban elite no longer perceive Chinese college education to be of any real value in a globalizing and increasingly competitive employment market (Fong 2011). In short, members of this group have stopped seeing the examination as consequential. As a result, they are pursuing their education in increasing numbers abroad. For instance, the number of Chinese students studying in the United States more than doubled from 127,628 in 2009 to 274,439 in 2013.[33] People say that the middle class is "voting with their feet" (*yong jiao toupiao*). Like the

[33] These statistics come from the International Institute of Education (IIE). See http://www.iie.org/research-and-publications/open-doors (accessed April 29, 2014).

dispossessed, they are pursuing alternative forms of fatefulness. Though such education-based emigration is less contentious than open rebellion, the flight of the elite may have equally transformative effects on Chinese society.

At the socioeconomic margins of society, therefore, people feel increasingly ambivalent about the examination. The social fabric is fraying at the edges. For the majority, however, the examination remains a highly cathected trial of merit. Thus I return to my starting question: How do we account for this enduring fascination?

As I indicate above, my approach to this question builds on the approaches of others by highlighting the moral-cum-existential dimension of the examination—how it provides people with a platform for expressing their highest cultural values. Above I suggest that inequality spurs people in that expression: Most do not like to think of themselves as inferior to others. The exam provides people with a way to resist inequality.

An important source of the examination's appeal, therefore, derives from how it combines state authority with revolutionary desire. On the one hand, participating in the exam is recognizing the authority of the state. On the other hand, the exam enables people to rebel against the status quo. In other words, the exam enables anyone to appeal to state authority for redress against the injustices of privilege and guanxi: By competing in the exam, ordinary families are rebelling against the nepotism, corruption, and exploitation that relegates them to their undistinguished place in the division of labor. In sum, the examination constitutes a sublimated form of class conflict. But since so few are satisfied with their lot in life, this conflict unites people of broadly varying backgrounds.

Paradoxically, however, this rebellion is state-sanctioned. The examination gives authority to the central state as a universal arbiter of justice; that is, taking the examination is

appealing to a universalistic national authority for redress against local injustice. For ordinary Chinese, the examination embodies or hypostasizes the transcendental moral authority of the national collective and, ultimately, its ultimate cosmic arbiters—Heaven and fate. People understand these forces to have the power and moral authority to right the wrongs of local politics.[34]

In reality, however, the examination changes little but justifies much. Ironically, therefore, people bestow political legitimacy to the social hierarchy through the individual merit that they confer to themselves in this limited act of rebellion. Now as before, the examination constitutes an important ritual by which the state recruits individuals' utopian desires into the reproduction of social order.

When this recruitment fails, people's revolutionary desires spill out into more violent forms of open rebellion, which likewise have a venerable place in Chinese political culture. This culture enshrines the belief that Heaven (*Tian*), the supreme Chinese deity, bestows state leadership with the "mandate" (*ming*) to rule based on that leadership's unique moral perspicacity. Since early times, Chinese have construed the "Mandate of Heaven" (*Tianming*) to grant officials and commoners alike the right of protest against central authorities—officials through remonstrance and peasants through petition. People of all backgrounds have long appealed to the universalistic virtue of the emperor—and, above him, Heaven and "fate"—to right the wrongs of corrupted local officials. Indeed, the Chinese word for "fate" (*ming*) literally means "mandate."

[34]As an ethnography focusing on events of ritualized rebellion, my approach may be seen as following in the tradition of event analysis pioneered by Max Gluckman and his followers. See, for instance, Gluckman's (1954) pioneering study of the ceremonial expression of social tension and Bruce Kapferer's (2006) broader discussion of Gluckman's methodology.

In the imperial era, this Mandate of Heaven was identified with the person of the emperor. In contemporary times, people view the Communist Party according to this logic. Even the 1989 Tiananmen student protesters—well-educated elites—literally kowtowed in front of politburo leaders to present their demands. This gesture can be read simultaneously as an act of remonstrance (*jian*) against state leaders and as symbolic appeal to those leaders' "Heaven-given" moral duty (Perry 2002). Note how differently this drama unfolded from the more conflictual state–society relations that washed over the former Soviet Bloc in 1989.

However, the Mandate of Heaven is a double-edged sword. What Heaven grants, Heaven can take away. People have long interpreted the Mandate to imply the right of rebels to "prepare the way for Heaven" (*ti Tian xing dao*). According to this interpretation, ordinary people acquire the prerogative to rebel when the state becomes overly corrupted, thus failing to ensure the social conditions for "meritocracy" (Muramatsu 1960; Perry 2002; Shaughnessy 1999).

Although state leadership has changed many times over the past millennium, these fundamental arrangements have remained tenacious. If people stop believing that they can get ahead under Communist Party rule, they will increasingly seek alternative forms of fateful action, such as emigration or even rebellion. If people cannot transform their fate with the Gaokao, they will transform the fate of China.

In imperial times, the largest civil war in Chinese history—the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864)—was instigated by a millenarian Christian rebel leader, Hong Xiuquan, who experienced religious visions upon failing the imperial examination (Spence 1996; Weller 1994). Like the Taiping Rebellion, contemporary sectarian groups have recruited charismatic leaders from failed examination candidates (Dunn 2009). An irony of such movements consists in how they replicate orthodox forms of state power. When rebel leaders take power, one of their first actions

inevitably consists in establishing new examinations. Even Hong Xiuquan declared special Christian examinations for his Heavenly Kingdom. For a new regime, examinations kill two birds with one stone: They propagate politically orthodox interpretations of history and cosmos, on one hand, and recruit people into the service of the new state, on the other. By establishing the Gaokao so close upon the heels of coming into power, the Communist Party joined a long lineage of Chinese examination states.

A Word on the Chinese Education System and Corresponding Terminology

In China, compulsory education (*yiwu jiaoyu*) lasts nine years until graduation from junior high school. Thus the three years of senior high school, culminating in the Gaokao, are voluntary. To gain admission to senior high school, students must take the "high-school admission examination" (*zhongkao*), which people refer to as the "little Gaokao" (*xiao Gaokao*).

In national statistics, the state claims near complete compliance with compulsory education, but these numbers are probably vastly overstated, particularly in rural areas, where many students drop out to work (Chung and Mason 2012; H. Yi et al. 2012).[35] Nationwide, the state estimates that about 75 percent of students achieve promotion from junior to senior high school, but popular estimates run much lower, generally around 40 to 50 percent (Woronov 2015).[36] Nationally, about 75 percent of senior high-school students achieve promotion to

[35] Consider the following example: In a county not far from my field site, local officials simulated compliance with compulsory education by demanding parents of children who had dropped out of school to pay a fee for a "graduation certificate" before their children could apply for marriage licenses. Apparently, this corrupt practice served the dual purpose of producing an official record of school attendance and creating extra revenue for the county. The practice went on for years until a Xiamen journalist exposed that the county's near-perfect implementation of compulsory education was largely fabricated. This scandal resulted in this locality being very hesitant to give access to researchers of any type, including myself. A newspaper report based on this scandal can be found at http://www.fj.xinhuanet.com/news/2007-03/28/content_9632460.htm (accessed January 23, 2016).
[36] As I note above, moreover, a recent study suggests that only 25 percent of the working-age population have attended any senior secondary school (Khor et al. 2016).

college, a number that has grown astronomically since the expansion of higher education in the early 2000s (Yeung 2013).

Chinese refer to the first year of senior high (tenth grade) as "senior one" (*gaoyi*), the second year as "senior two" (*gao'er*), and the third and final year as "senior three" (*gaosan*). I employ this nomenclature throughout the dissertation. Administratively, high schools are divided into subunits by grade, each of which is termed a "year section" (*nianduan*). For the sake of brevity, however, I customarily refer to these subunits as a *year*, for example, the senior-one year, the senior-two year, and so on. Each year is headed by a "section leader" (*duanzhang*) who oversees "head teachers" (*banzhang*). Each head teacher manages one "class" (*banji*), including coordinating the efforts of "subject teachers" (*kemu laoshi*). As mentioned, teachers, including head teachers (and also section leaders), follow their students through all three years of high school, and head teachers also instruct their classes in an academic subject. After a senior-three class takes the Gaokao, teachers cycle back to instruct a new senior-one class—a welcome break from the stress and pressure of senior three.

Field Sites and Methodology

I address specific issues of methodology as they become relevant, but some initial general observations are useful in framing my larger project.

At all three field sites, I interacted with students; observed classes; accompanied worshippers to pray for examination success; and interviewed teachers, parents, administrators, and officials. In Ningzhou and Xiamen, I conducted focus groups of college students (recent college grads) and shadowed head teachers.

The type and level of access that I enjoyed to schools and communities differed among my three field sites. In Xiamen, foreigners are common. It was relatively unremarkable for a foreigner to visit Xiamen high schools, the most prestigious of which employ foreign English teachers. In my first two months of fieldwork, I was waiting to secure access to a rural field site, which required the official approval of local officials. During this time, Xiamen University professors introduced me to the principal of Dragon Gate High School—one of the lowest-ranking schools in Xiamen. Without seeking government approval, this principal agreed to let me work at Dragon Gate as a volunteer English teacher. The arrangement proved mutually beneficial. For two years, I worked closely with Dragon Gate teachers and interacted regularly with Dragon Gate students. The school benefitted from having an additional English teacher. As a foreigner, moreover, I could offer students opportunities for cross-cultural exchange that they otherwise lacked: The senior-high students in Dragon Gate came from all over the city but without exception had relatively low scores on the high-school admission examination; thus, they tended to hail from socioeconomic backgrounds that ranged from modest to impoverished. Dragon Gate High School's junior-high branch, which drew students predominantly from the local neighborhood, was attended mainly by poor migrant children.

In planning and delivering lessons, I drew on several years of previous experience teaching English in China. I typically taught around eighteen lessons per semester at Dragon Gate, rotating about once per semester through all classes in all three grades of senior high school and occasionally teaching junior-high children as well. I shadowed high-school classes and head teachers at Dragon Gate and spent much time socializing with teachers after school.[37]

[37] Mostly, I instructed students in conversational English, including treatment of grammar and usage. In my lessons, I explored various topics of general interest, such as cross-cultural differences in gender ideology, educational systems, and college admissions. However, Xiamen teachers were generally eager, even desperate, for new pedagogical impetuses. Despite my protests, they insisted in seeing me as a foreign-expert teacher—a role in which I

As my contacts within the Xiamen education world expanded, I visited many schools and spoke with parents, teachers, and ordinary people all over the city. In addition, I benefited greatly from dialog with researchers and students at Xiamen University's Educational Research Institute, which specializes in research on the Gaokao. I also joined workshops hosted by researchers in the Xiamen Municipal Institute of Educational Science (*Xiamen shi jiaoyu kexue yanjiu yuan*).

In contrast with the relative anonymity and openness that a foreign researcher enjoys in Xiamen, I faced challenges in gaining access to a rural field site. The first local government that I approached was fearful that a foreign researcher might "expose" (*baoguang*) local practices, which often depart significantly from the directives provided by central authorities. My stay in a rural area required government support, which had to be arranged through guanxi. Eventually, the county magistrate of Mountain County agreed to accommodate my stay in the county, which I started visiting in December 2012.

Mountain County is a peripherally located, relatively sparsely populated county of Ningzhou Prefecture, with about 350,000 people spread out across 2,000 square kilometers. The main crop is bananas, but the mountainous terrain does not lend itself to large-scale agriculture. In the Chinese Civil War (1927–1936), the region was a staging base for Communist guerrilla fighters. During imperial times, it was a refuge for bandits. As in other places in rural Fujian, locals fortified themselves by building rammed-earth strongholds called "earth buildings"

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felt quite uncomfortable. For one week in spring 2012, I was asked to take over the instruction of a normal English class, teaching the class in the regular high-school curriculum. In my second year, I was even requested to devise a method for instructing senior-three students in strategies for composing the English-essay section of the Gaokao, which many teachers feel to present a particular pedagogical challenge. But if my Chinese colleagues expected educational miracles from me, they were surely disappointed. My sometimes inspired but generally ham-fisted efforts to teach to the examination mainly served to reinforce Dragon Gate teachers' perception that the Gaokao is a tough test to teach. As I elaborate below, however, I believe Dragon Gate teachers' eagerness to ascribe pedagogical authority to "advanced" and "foreign" methods says much about how Chinese (particularly in urban places) imagine foreign places to be a realm that transcends ordinary Chinese problems. My greatest service thus probably consisted in partly disabusing my teacher friends of any supposition that a magical foreign wand exists for solving their pedagogical problems.

(*tulou*), which still dot the countryside. The earth buildings and surrounding villages are populated by Hakka, a Han ethnic group with a distinctive dialect and local culture (for instance, Hakka women never bound their feet). But nowadays the vast majority of Mountain County residents (approximately 90 percent) speak the Minnan dialect (Hokkien) of Mandarin. Ethnic minorities are few (less than 1 percent of the population), the largest group consisting of the She people, Zeyu's ethnic group.

I generally spent two weeks per month at Mountain County Number One High School. Located in the county's sleepy seat of Mountain Town (population 70,000), Mountain County Number One is the best of the county's three senior high schools. Because of the county's relatively small population, however, the school serves students of a broad range of ability levels and socioeconomic backgrounds. Teachers estimate that about half of the school's approximately 3,000 students come from normal farming families. Not coincidentally, about the same number, mostly of rural origin, live in dormitories.

I also stayed in a student dormitory, occupying by myself a room designed to house eight boys. I rose at 5:50 a.m. along with the students, awakened by pop-music reveille (country songstress Taylor Swift was popular for this purpose). In the mornings, I generally taught two to three lessons of conversational English, rotating through the senior-one and senior-two classes.[38] In my remaining time, I observed classes, hosted English conversation groups, interacted with teachers and students, explored the surrounding area, and wrote field notes.

Since I actually lived inside the school at Mountain County Number One and took my meals with students, I forged much closer relationships with students there than I did anywhere

[38] Unlike Dragon Gate, Mountain County Number One did not allow me to teach senior-three students, whose Gaokao performance school leaders feared I would affect; however, I was able to meet many senior-three students in the cafeteria and during other activities. Also, over the two-years of my fieldwork, my senior-two students became senior-three students.

else. In addition, school leaders felt an obligation to treat me with special hospitality since my fieldwork had been arranged through official government contacts; thus, I spent much time socializing with school leaders, some of whom became friends. As a consequence, however, rank-and-file teachers perceived me as a special guest. My relationship with teachers was generally much closer at Dragon Gate, where they saw me as something closer to an ordinary colleague.

Serendipity played an important role in the type of access that I gained to all my field sites, but played an even larger role in Ningzhou. The same government contacts who introduced me to Mountain County's magistrate introduced me to the leadership of a local teacher's college (*shifan daxue*), where I occasionally attended banquets and delivered lectures, thus coming into contact with local educators. Typically, I stopped in Ningzhou for a few days per month, sometimes longer, on my commute between Xiamen and Mountain County.

In the regional hierarchy, Ningzhou occupies an intermediary position between the peripherally located Mountain County and the centrally located Xiamen. Administratively, Ningzhou is the capital of the prefecture in which Mountain County is a subordinate country. Although Ningzhou consists of a built-up urban area with a population of about 700,000, locals describe the place as a "backwater agricultural city" (*bise nongye chengshi*). During my stays there, I socialized with teachers, visited families, and surveyed schools. I came to work particularly closely with the above-mentioned head teacher, Ms. Liu, who facilitated my access to her class at Ningzhou Number One High. Although her school was aware of my activities (I met school leaders on several occasions), the relative informality of my affiliation with Ningzhou Number One encouraged teachers and administrators there to adopt an attitude of greater candor

toward me than did their Mountain County counterparts, who felt more obliged to stick to the official line.

At all three places, my role as teacher gave me certain status and responsibilities. Teachers are traditionally regarded with great respect in Chinese society, and senior high schools are prestigious institutions in China. In most places, my association with high schools transformed me from a stranger into a known quantity, facilitating my interaction with community members. As a teacher, I was also invited to visit many students' and teachers' homes.

After my first year of fieldwork, I scaled back my teaching activities somewhat: During my second year, I maintained my presence in schools while expanding my footprint in the communities. In particular, I spent more time observing popular religious activities and socializing with parents. I also visited schools in other parts of Fujian. Eventually, governmental authorities in the Provincial Education Ministry took an interest in my research, which gave me an opportunity to converse with higher-level educational officials.

I conducted all interviews and conversations almost exclusively in Mandarin. Although I interacted frequently with English teachers, most Chinese English teachers are not competent in spoken English, with the exception of a few individuals at high-ranking schools in centrally located places. For the most part, the goal of English instruction lies in maximizing test scores, not in teaching communicative competency. In this region of Fujian Province (the "South Fujian" or *Minnan* region), the Minnan dialect or Hokkien is widely spoken. In Ningzhou and especially Mountain Town, Hokkien is the dominant language, whereas in Xiamen, which attracts migrants and tourists from all over the country, Mandarin has become dominant. In all places, however, Mandarin constitutes the sole language of school instruction, an important

mission of which is to promote its usage (in the People's Republic, Mandarin is literally termed "the standard language," or *Putonghua*).[39] During breaks between class and socialization after school, teachers and students in Mountain County prefer dialect. In Ningzhou, they mix Mandarin and Hokkien, depending on the situation. In Xiamen, they speak Mandarin at almost all times. Although my own study of Hokkien remained at a basic level, I was able to use Mandarin to conduct interviews, observe classes, and participate in school life. Without doubt, mastering the local dialect would have been advantageous, particularly in Mountain County and Ningzhou. But my interlocutors—themselves bilingual—made allowances for my linguistic abilities. With permission, I recorded some interviews and conversations, made video recordings, and took extensive photos.

It is customary for Chinese teachers to communicate with students through online messaging services. While I was at one field site, I maintained contact with students and teachers at other field sites through such services (primarily "QQ," which was popular during fieldwork). Although many rural students lack regular access to this medium, online messaging became a valuable method of collecting data and staying in touch, which I continue to do, albeit at a reduced pace, to this day.

Some of my most illuminating encounters occurred in transit between my destinations in busses or taxis that I shared with various sojourners—drivers, tourists, migrants, parents, pilgrims, teachers, students, officials, officers, salespeople, workers, and others. As mentioned, my three field sites form contiguous points in China's central-place hierarchy as described in G. William Skinner's (1964) approach to regional analysis. Mindful of this approach, I see these

[39] During instruction, teachers (particularly in Mountain County) would occasionally make jokes in dialect, but these occasions were relatively few (chapter 2). I was such a frequent observer of classes at Mountain County that students and teachers became quite used to my presence. Particularly after multiple observations of the same class, I do not believe my presence to have substantially altered classroom dynamics.

places not as static positions but as centers, or "command posts," of economic activity, broadly conceived (Skinner 1980). Much of this economic activity consists in people's sojourns between these command posts. My own regular fieldwork sojourn therefore became an occasion for joint reflections on the central-place hierarchy with other people who found themselves in transit along these circuits. These liminal periods between places thus formed important venues for contemplation and encounter.

Fujian Province, in general, and the circuit between Xiamen, Ningzhou, and Mountain Town, in particular, possesses a relatively high level of representativeness for people's experience of the Gaokao all over China. The college admission rate for Fujian Province—at about 6.4 percent in 2012—is about equivalent to the median rate for all of China's provinces. Fujian neither lags behind other provinces nor hurries ahead of them in introducing Gaokao reforms; thus, the examination in Fujian closely resembles that in most places nationwide. The southeast coastal area of China is relatively prosperous. As I argue, however, stark inequality exists between coastal Xiamen and the rural areas of inland Ningzhou Prefecture; moreover, this chasm is looming increasingly large under policies of accelerating urbanization, reflecting the general trend of rural–urban inequality nationwide.

Due to this area's relative representativeness, regional analysis enables me to draw cautious general conclusions about the Gaokao experience around China. This experience is highly standardized across the country: Like most forms of government control in China, educational administration is relatively centralized (Kipnis 2011). Moreover, geographical deviations from central-state ideals also follow regular hierarchical patterns. But wherever my field sites exhibit potentially large divergences from other areas of China—for example, in the

comparatively large influence that popular religion exerts in southeastern China—I attempt to draw attention to these differences.

Nevertheless, my investigation has limitations. In particular, I have little to say about the role that the Gaokao plays in China's ethnic politics—an important topic that merits dedicated study.[40] Additionally, I am concerned more with describing the Gaokao experience than with providing an ethnographic description of Chinese high schools. My focus on the examination also has merits: Many school-based ethnographies exist, but tend to give relatively short shrift to the raison d'être of Chinese schools—the big test.[41]

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[40] Liu (2012) provides a good Chinese-language overview of the ethnic politics of the Gaokao. Useful ethnographic-oriented English-language treatments include Borchigud's (1995) and Zhao's (Z. Zhao 2010) treatments of education and Mongolian identity; Chen's (2008) discussion of Muslim Uyghur students in a Chinese boarding school; Hansen's (1999) exploration of education and ethnic identity among ethnic groups in southwest China; Yu's (2009) recent ethnography of Naxi schooling; Yamada's (2012) discussion of China's system of college preparatory classes (*yuke ban*) for minorities; and Yi's (2008) examination of the educational ethnic politics on the Qinghai–Gansu border. Wu (2016) describes the fabrication of school reforms in ethnic Southwest China. Harrel and Ma (1999) discuss an interesting case in which elite ethnic Yi outdo local Han in educational mobility. Rowe (1994; 2001) and Woodside (2006) discuss the historical role of education in integrating China's ethnic periphery into the center during imperial times.

[41] Ethnographic accounts of Chinese schooling include Shirk's (1982) and Thøgersen's (1990) discussion of the reemergence of competitive examinations in the early post-1979 Reform and Opening Era; Lou's (2010) haunting account of how urbanization affects rural schooling; Hansen's (2015) investigation of "increasing individualization" in rural Chinese schooling; Woronov's (2015) discussion of the pursuit of the vocational track by high-school "failures"; and Wu's (2016) account of fabrication of reform in Southwest China. (Although Wu focuses on ethnic minorities, her discussion of fabrication is applicable to Chinese school reform elsewhere, and dovetails with many of my own observations in Fujian.) Useful broad-ranging ethnographic analyses of education and Chinese society include Stafford's (1995) investigation of the complex, overdetermined sources of socialization in Chinese village life; Fong's (2006) investigation of the effect of the one-child policy on parenting, schooling, and society; Kipnis' (2011) wide-ranging analysis of the role of educational desire in China's practices of governance at both the state and family levels; and Kuan's (2015) discussion of the politics and ethics of child rearing in contemporary China. Bregnbæk's (2016) useful ethnography of elite Chinese college students is notable for raising some of the same existential paradoxes that I address in this dissertation.

All of the above-mentioned studies complement my own analysis in many respects. As mentioned, however, these existing accounts tend to overlook the manifest raison d'être of schooling—the big examination itself. Focusing on the Gaokao, Zhao (2014) provides a recent popular account of Chinese disaffection with their "test-based education" (*yingshi jiaoyu*); however, Zhao's concern lies mostly in debunking some Western myths (a useful exercise) rather than in analyzing Chinese cultural assumptions. In contrast to the above works, therefore, my project attempts to relate an intimate anthropological analysis of the examination ritual, understood as a rite of passage, to the reproduction of China's most sacred values—a belief in individual merit, on one hand, and the transcendental power of "Heaven" (*Tian*) or "fate" (*ming*), on the other.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter 1 expands on the basic argument in this introduction by analyzing the examination ritual as a form of fateful action. Exploring the cultural continuities between the imperial exam and the Gaokao, I assess various attempts to explain the paradox of legitimacy. In this context, I trace the genealogical connection between examinations and divination, followed by a discussion of the history of progressive rationalization in Chinese governance from mediaeval to imperial times. Comparing the rationalization or "disenchantment" (Weber [1905] 1992) of Chinese society in the Tang–Song transition to that of Europe during the Reformation and Enlightenment, I suggest that Eurocentric assumptions about China and about "modernity" have caused some anthropologists to overlook or misinterpret the long-standing cultural significance of universalistic, rules-based forms of Chinese bureaucratic organization, such as examinations. This historical discussion sets the stage for my analysis of fateful action, which attempts to account both for the perennial social influence of examinations—the problem of motive—and for the specific forms that merit takes in the Chinese meritocracy.

Analyzing fateful moments as rites of passage, I theorize action as a fundamental locus of desire and fantasy. As in other meritocratic cultures, this notion of merit represents an attempt to purify universalistic selection of any particularistic influence. Such attempts will always prove to be fraught with paradox because "individual" merit is socially produced. People mostly encounter the social production of their selves in the form of social limits to their narcissistic fantasies of mobility and status increase. I suggest that a basic desire to transcend such human limits—symbolized and epitomized by death—undergirds the fascination with fatefulness more generally and examinations in particular (Sangren 2012). Having noted how market activity

generally takes the form of meritocratic action, I conclude by exploring the centrality of the "examination life" (Elman 2014) to the Chinese spirit of capitalism,

The purpose of chapter 1, therefore, is to provide a broad historical and sociological overview of Chinese examination meritocracy, whereas the following chapters zoom in on various components of the examination ritual. Chapter 1 thus sets the stage for the following chapters, which investigates the examination life within progressively more intimate ethnographic contexts.

Chapter 2 analyzes how people use the examination to achieve self-transformation through migration up the hierarchy of central places: Since people conceive of that hierarchy to be both social and geographical, "transformations of fortune" are inevitably associated with movement up the hierarchy. China inherits these arrangements form its imperial past. This continuity belies what I term, following Paul Cohen (1984), *Western-impact* views of Chinese history, which ascribe Chinese modernity to the influence of Western gunboat diplomacy in the nineteenth century. Within the contemporary ideology of developmentalism, however, the transformation of individual fortunes is tied to the transformation of the national one and vice versa: Just as people's movement up the hierarchy effects the "urbanization of people," the state's attempts to transform that hierarchy by incorporating rural peripheries into urban centers effects the "urbanization of places." Driven by desires for national and self-transformation, this dual process of urbanization represents an attempt to address China's purported "overpopulation" by transforming China's population "quantity" into population "quality." The belief in this unilinear teleological narrative of development, and the accompanying belief in "overpopulation," are objectified in the central-place hierarchy itself, which thus seems to provide people with objective evidence of the correctness of developmentalist ideology.

For the vast majority of Chinese, however, the reality of their *polycentric* existence belies static rural–urban binaries and teleological narratives: Most families have multiple bases of operation at different points along the geographical hierarchy. Drawing upon this experience, people increasingly view modernity not as "genuine" and "real" but rather as "counterfeit" and "fake." Thus people deem urban places—where they see modernity as *staged*—to be relatively "empty," whereas they say rural places remain bastions of "genuine humanity" (*zhenshi de renqing*). Migrants' sojourns up and down the central-place hierarchy cause them to reflect on such *hierarchical effects*. People sometimes describe these reflections in terms of the time-honored Chinese cultural imaginary of "traversing the rivers and lakes" (*zou jianghu*), which is lionized in China's imperial vernacular literature: This phrase traditionally describes the peripatetic life of bandits, fortune-tellers, wandering medicine men, and outlaws but has been borrowed by migrants of all types to describe their experience of itinerary. Mobility thus forms both the object of self-transformative desire and a potential source of social analysis or critique—in short, a method.

Whereas Chapter 2 examines consequentiality or value, Chapter 3 turns to the other aspect of fatefulness, namely, indeterminacy. Focusing mainly on the agonistic dimension of indeterminacy, which I term precariousness, this chapter investigates the gap between the ideal of "fairness" and the reality of nepotism or guanxi—a gap that causes officials and administrators to *fabricate fairness* and ordinary people to *game the system* or even "cheat" (*zuobi*). I investigate these efforts of fabrication and strategization in ethnographic contexts ranging from student conversations in the high-school cafeteria to backstage political machinations at the local, regional, and provincial levels. In the process, I describe how social actors at various points of the geographical and administrative hierarchies vie for the

accumulation of high test scores—an auditable measure of human value that is extraordinarily well suited to the purpose of ranking people, places, and institutions. In this way, students, parents, teachers, administrators, and officials form (as a student of mine called it) a "chain of interests" (*liyilian*), in which the test scores of students—or, as they are termed, "accomplishments" (*chengji*)—are transformed into the "political accomplishments" (*zhengji*) of administrators or officials.

As with initiation rituals in other cultural contexts, however, the high priests and priestesses of the examination ritual withhold knowledge from initiates about the actual degree of indeterminacy that the examination system contains: Overwhelmingly, students' test scores correspond more closely to their position in the central-place hierarchy than to their possession of "diligence" (*nuli*) or other culturally lionized individual attributes. Such spatial inequality is exacerbated both by breakneck urbanization and by the machinations of administrators and officials, who vie to extract "student resources" (*shengyuan*) from the countryside. Since secrecy and censorship hides the scope of these manipulations from public view, ordinary people operate not so much under a false consciousness (Marx) of social inequality as under a "false confidence" that they fathom the true extent of that inequality. Yet Chinese also possess widespread sincere belief in the "genuineness" (*zhenshi*) and "reality" (*xianshi*) of test scores, which they contrast to the "emptiness" (*xu*) of attempts by local governments and schools to "counterfeit" (*zuojia*) fairness. Moreover, people usually accede to—and even often collude in—such "counterfeit" performances of fairness. In spite of this complexity, conventional accounts of such social arrangements generally pursue monolithic views of ideology that conform to one of three templates—"false consciousness" (people do not know what they are doing), "cynicism" (people know what they are doing but do it anyway), or "performativity" (people produce social

reality through such "empty" performances) (Marx [1932] 1970; Sloterdijk 1988; Žižek 2008; Butler 1997; Yurchak 2006). In contrast to such monolithic approaches, this chapter describes how people's behavior is overdetermined by a *continuum of superegoistic effects*, which range from the relatively external factors of violence or fear of punishment to the relatively internalized factors of identification, loyalty, conscience, and belief. This overdetermination produces "bad faith" (Sartre 1956).

Chapter 4 moves from analyzing fatefulness in its dual components of consequentiality (chapter 2) and indeterminacy (chapter 3) to examining shifting ideals of merit. Success in the examination has long been attributed to students' "diligence" (*nuli*)—an agrarian ethic of self-discipline and hard work that draws on China's millennium-long tradition of "plowing and reading" (*gengdu*): Having learned from a young age that "the way of Heaven is to reward hard work," children of rural origin actually derive relative advantage from the traditional format of the examination. This format emphasizes diligent memorization, and thus knowledge that children can acquire explicitly and openly in public school. In urban centers, however, the growing middle class is growing increasingly skeptical toward this traditional ethic of diligence. The middle-class elite say that this emphasis on memorization neglects the instruction of "practical skills" (*shiji nengli*) and "innovativeness" (*chuangzaoxing*) necessary for success in today's globalizing world. This anxiety about China's "test-based education" has produced a raft of educational reforms since the late 1990s dedicated to improving the "all-around quality" (*zonghe suzhi*) of examinees. People in rural areas, however, largely perceive such "education-for-quality reforms" (*suzhi jiaoyu gaige*) to place them at a disadvantage: This emerging focus on "quality" emphasizes achievements that rural children have little opportunity to pursue—for instance, scientific research or the mastery of a musical instrument. For these reasons, people all

over China, but particularly those based in rural areas, see "quality" to be "empty" and "counterfeit" in contrast to the "genuineness" of test scores. At the same time, however, quality is being "examinationized"; that is, an ideal of merit that was originally associated with resistance to test-based education is being incorporated into the examination system, to the disadvantage of rural teachers and students. Such arrangements have deep historical precedents: The debates over whether or not examinations select people of merit have raged in Chinese society since the inception of the civil examination system (Chaffee 1995). I argue that these debates reflect societal negotiations about differing ideals of personhood, which, in the final analysis, reflect conflicting social interests. Mounting social inequality in recent years have caused these normally sublimated conflicts to bubble over into the public domain of high-school slogans and pronouncements. Such slogans, some of which I have already mentioned, openly call for ordinary "losers" (*diaosi*) to use their diligent preparation for the Gaokao as a weapon to combat the advantages of the "second-generation rich" (*fu'erdai*), composed of "tall-rich-handsome" (*gaofushuai*) men and "white-rich-beautiful" (*baifumei*) women—the stereotypical denizens of central urban places.

This sublimated rebellion also has a gendered dimension. Female students—widely perceived to be more "diligent" than their male counterparts—employ their superior diligence to resist their subjugation within China's traditional patriarchal social arrangements. By the same token, "innovativeness" (*chuangxin*) and "logical thinking" (*luoji siwei*) are seen to be more masculine virtues. These gendered ideals of merit, moreover, are reproduced in the curricular divide between the "humanities," which people understand to be a feminine endeavor dominated by "empty" diligent memorization, and the "sciences," which people see to be a "real" and "practical" pursuit that embodies genuine "quality." I argue that this genderization of the high-

school curriculum reproduces a patriarchal, scientistic cosmology that devalues humanistic pursuit, constrains scientistic innovation, and marginalizes women.

Chapter 5 turns from these gendered ideals of "diligence" and "quality," which describe people's acquisition of the knowledge and skills necessary for examination success, to a seemingly more transient yet equally important component of merit that makes or breaks examinees *during* the examination itself—namely, composure, "attitude" (*xintai*), or "psychological quality" (*xinli suzhi*). As teachers and students widely report, "on test day, attitude determines knowledge" (*xintai jueding zhishi*): During the two-day examination, examinees experience insomnia, crippling anxiety, and a variety of somatized illnesses. These afflictions seem disproportionately to beset relatively marginalized students of rural backgrounds, for whom the stakes of the examination are higher. For all examinees, however, the examination constitutes a consummately *individualizing* moment: Students' traumatic experience of attempting to master their bodies during the examination reinforces their perception that they are individually responsible for the results—that is, that the results are individually rather than socially produced. In this context, I examine the paradoxical role of Chinese head teachers—simultaneously coaches, counselors, and parental surrogates: On the one hand, head teachers perform a progressive social function by intervening directly in the "family environment" (*jiating huanjing*) to help parents overcome deficits of social and cultural capital. On the other hand, teachers have a conservative social effect by encouraging students in the idealistic view that "attitude determines everything" (*xintai jueding yiqie*): Paradoxically, motivating students to succeed is encouraging them to take personal responsibility for social inequality.

This chapter examines the paradoxical institution of the Chinese head teacher within a comparative context: I investigate cultural differences between the construction of merit in the

United States, where people generally conceive of merit according to the innate/acquired binary, and China, where people default to a conception of merit organized around an external/internal binary. With the increasing globalization of education, however, these two cultures of meritocracy are converging—a fact that is veiled by the ambivalently oscillating mutual demonization and idealization of policymakers on both sides of the Pacific: Chinese policymakers increasingly seek to emulate Western-style liberal-arts curricula, which they consider to be superior in cultivating people of high "quality," even as U.S. officials describe the "superiority" of China's test-based education as a "Sputnik moment" that has energized the recent expansion of assessment culture in U.S. education.

Chapter 6 analyzes how the fundamental incoherence of Chinese meritocratic ideology produces widespread popular interest in fate, luck, magic, and cosmic retribution. In contrast to chapter 3, which focuses on the agonistic dimension of indeterminacy, chapter 6 examines the aleatory dimension of indeterminacy, which I term chanciness: As mentioned, Gaokao performance is influenced by factors that lie outside of individual control, but such factors have fateful consequences for examination score. The perception that the exam incorporates a strong element of randomness is increased by the capriciousness of college selection: People liken the process of bidding for a place in university—which is called "tendering one's aspiration" (*tian zhiyuan)*—to gambling. In short, the examination heightens the impression that uncontrollable forces play a fateful role in determining the outcome of individual fortunes. Therefore I liken the examination to a machine for producing a belief in fate: In other words, people are unable to construct coherent explanations of the distribution of social goods through orthodox conceptions of social reciprocity alone ("success repays hard work"). In the absence of such coherence, people appeal to notions of cosmic reciprocity and fate to account for their lots in life. In

response, examinees endeavor to use magic, prayer, and divination to predict and control fortune. I consider that this behavior is similar to that observed in specialists in fateful action cross-culturally, ranging from fishers to astronauts and stock-market investors to candidates for high office.

In this context, chapter 6 analyzes the popular religious practices that surround the examination. To this end, I explain how and why people negotiate backstage religious belief with front-stage scientific secularism. For instance, I describe how students transform popular-religious notions of the "accumulation of merit" (*gongde*) into an idiom that is acceptable within the nominally secular context of the school: Students vie with one another to tip the cosmic balances of karma in their favor by performing good deeds—a process which they euphemistically refer to as "earning character" (*zan renpin*). Many other Gaokao-related religious practices likewise contradict official secular ideology. To account for this phenomenon, I suggest that religious pragmatism trumps the performance of secularism during this high-stakes fateful event. For example, administrators organize pilgrimages to popular local temples—including the temple to the God of Examinations, Wenchang—to pray for examination success. Similarly, schools conduct secret exorcisms to banish the spirits of suicided students. Attempting to divine examination outcome, many ordinary people cast "moon blocks" and "draw lots" at temples—mantic practices that, as mentioned, resemble games of chance. Some distressed families account for students' rebellious behavior by attributing it to possession by spirits or ghosts. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the spreading epidemic of "lostness and confusion": Like soldiers returning from combat, veterans of the examination come back to a world that seems devoid of existential meaning. In recent years, this anomic existential malaise has been prolonged and exacerbated by social inequality and stagnating economic growth:

“Lostness and confusion” is said to be afflicting a whole generation of marginalized Chinese youth who feel impotent to achieve normative social ideals of success.

A brief conclusion argues that this spreading existential malaise heralds a still-contained yet potentially serious crisis of legitimacy in Chinese society as the “lostness and confusion” of Chinese youth metamorphosizes into more active forms of resistance and rebellion: As I suggest above, a recent rise in rebellious millenarian activity, mostly located in rural areas, seems to be linked with stress fractures in the examination system. At the other socioeconomic extreme of society, the urban middle-class elite are fleeing political corruptions, environmental degradation, and anticipated social “chaos” (*luan*). Thus, I conclude by relating these global trajectories of the middle class to the revolutionary desires of the disadvantaged, both of which I analyze as “alternative forms of fatefulness.”

CHAPTER 1

FATEFULNESS IN CHINESE EXAMINATIONS AND THE IDEOLOGY OF MERITOCRACY: *"STUDY CHANGES FATE"*

The persisting influence of the examination despite growing social inequality presents a paradox: The state's legitimacy depends on the perception that the conditions exist for the meritorious to succeed, but inequality increasingly calls these conditions into question. In particular, people insist that "study changes fate" (*gaibian ming*) despite wide gaps in examination performance between different regions and socioeconomic groups. Given these contradictions, why does the examination remain so effective in recruiting people into an ideology of meritocracy?

This chapter addresses this question by expanding on my analysis of the Gaokao as a fateful rite of passage. I combine a historical analysis of Chinese examinations (part I) with the main theoretical argument of my dissertation (part II). Rather than serving as ethnographic "background," history plays an integral role in generating and answering my theoretical questions.

Part I examines the Gaokao within historical and cross-cultural contexts. I begin by comparing the Gaokao with the imperial civil exams: Now as before the examination life commands feverish devotion despite limited levels of mobility—the paradox of legitimacy. I trace the genealogy of this paradox through the examination's imperial antecedents, including fateful trials of earlier origin, such as *Yijing* divination, and examine the mutual influence between cultures of meritocracy in China and Europe. In the process, I review various attempts to explain the paradox of legitimacy in imperial China and I explore the relevance of these

attempts to understanding contemporary Chinese society. These attempts include accounts that foreground mobility, recognition, and prestige; the Neo-Confucian culture of self-cultivation; status group; and filiality. Assessing these approaches, I comment on an enduring Eurocentric bias in scholarly appraisals of legitimacy in Chinese society: Anthropologists tend to focus narrowly on guanxi at the expense of understanding the relationship between guanxi and its complement—universalistic, meritocratic modes of bureaucratic social organization like the Gaokao (Kipnis 1997; Osburg 2013; Y. Yan 1996; M. M. Yang 1994; Wank 1999).[42] To provide a complement to conventional guanxi-focused works, I join scholars who see universalistic or rules-based forms of bureaucratic social organization like the Gaokao not merely as opportunities for people to use guanxi but as expressions of their meritocratic desires (Kipnis 2011).

Part II builds on the above-described approaches by examining the Gaokao as a fateful event. In this process, I address a broader issue of anthropological theory: As a result of an overly dogmatic conception of ritual, scholars sometimes underappreciate the significance of indeterminacy in rites of passage—another Eurocentric bias (Bell 1997; Seligman et al. 2008; van Gennep [1909] 1960).[43] By contrast, I argue that indeterminacy plays a fundamental role in undergirding political legitimacy in China and elsewhere. By foregrounding indeterminacy, my approach (1) accounts for the similarity between examinations and other fateful events, such as elections and trials; and (2) explains why some groups continue to be engrossed in the Gaokao

[42] Many good anthropological studies of guanxi exist (Kipnis 1997; Y. Yan 1996; M. M. Yang 1994). Some such studies even focus specifically on the role that guanxi plays in greasing the wheels of bureaucracy (Osburg 2013; Wank 1999; M. M. Yang 1994). But few works specifically address people's meritocratic yearnings—their desire to resist privilege and guanxi by virtue of personal merit.

[43] Van Gennep's ([1909] 1960) seminal treatise on rites of passage and much of the literature that grows out of such early anthropological concerns with ritual focuses on the formalistic aspect of ritual (Bell 1997). Even in recent works, "ritualistic" is a close synonym for formalistic (Seligman et al. 2008). As I argue in the following, however, many rites of passage—in particular, initiation rituals—incorporate strong aspects of uncertainty and indeterminacy, at least from the perspective of initiates or other low-level participants. Conversely, many modern social institutions—such as elections and trials—can be analyzed as rituals even though they incorporate (ideally at least) unpredictability. In sum, I join scholars who take a more expansive view of ritual, seeing all human interaction as involving a dimension of ritual or ritualization (Goffman 1959).

and others do not. More broadly, my analysis contributes to our understanding of legitimacy by highlighting how participants in fateful events interpret these events to imbue social arrangements with existential meaning. In the final analysis, the fascination with fateful events can be traced back to a humanly common fascination with death.

Part I: Chinese Examinations in Historical and Cross-Cultural Context

Dreams of Legitimacy

Chinese sometimes refer to their country jocularly as an "examination power" (*kaoshi daguo*). Now as in imperial times, the state largely selects its governing elite—"people of talent" (*rencai*)—by meritocratic examination. In imperial China, examinees participated in a staged hierarchy of examinations that qualified them for different levels of social privilege and government service. Young scholars participated in a variety of low-level training examinations, but the first test of real consequence was the "licentiate" (*shengyuan*) examination: Those who passed this exam became credentialed members of the scholar-gentry elite. The licentiate exam also qualified candidates to take the government-service exam—the "elevated man" or *juren* examination. Upon passing the elevated-man examination, candidates could advance to the highest level of examination competition—the "advanced scholar" (*jinshi*) exam. But qualification as a licentiate already represented a fundamental transformation of status: Licentiates were exempted from corporal punishment and released from mandatory labor under the state-imposed corvée system. They wore special hats to mark this elevated social status.

In contemporary society, the Gaokao possesses many similarities to the licentiate examination of old. Ordinary people see the exam as a way of transforming their status from common laborers to white-collar employees. Like the licentiate exam, the Gaokao serves as a

"threshold examination" (*menkan kaoshi*): Passing the Gaokao qualifies examinees to take a variety of other exams, including the national civil-service examination (*Guokao*); the State Judicial Examination (*Guojia sifa kaoshi*, or "bar exam"); and the certified public accountants exam. In some ways, moreover, the Communist Party is similar to the scholar-gentry of old.[44] Membership to the Party is increasingly correlated with educational level (Pieke 2009). Moreover, the Party is progressively increasing its reliance on examinations to promote cadres within its own ranks. Finally, the Party's leaders are generally selected from graduates of China's top two universities—Qinghua or Peking University—and thus from the country's highest Gaokao scorers. As I suggest in the introduction, therefore, selection by examination in Chinese society serves a role not altogether dissimilar to that of elections in a parliamentarian democracy.

This linkage between examinations and political legitimacy is embedded deeply in Chinese psyches. Consider how one Xiamen University master's student, Pengwei, associated legitimacy with examinations in a dream that he described. In his dream, a TV talent show hosted an examination competition for three important Chinese political figures—Wen Jiabao, the former Chinese premier; Hu Jintao, the Chinese president at the time; and Xi Jinping, the newly anointed successor to Hu. The assembled public voted on the examination performance of these political figures while Pengwei, as a representative of the people, stood behind the politicians to judge them on their calligraphy.[45] Pengwei observed that Hu Jintao was attempting

[44] Around 85 million or about 1 in 16 Chinese belong to the Communist Party. In mid-Qing times, 1 in 50 belonged to the gentry, but this number increased toward the end of the dynasty. See the discussion in chapter 1, particularly notes 17 and 18.

[45] Such TV competitions, pioneered by Hunan Satellite TV's singing competition "Super Voice Girl" between 2004 and 2006, have received enormous popular attention in recent years. Since contestants in these shows advance based on viewers' votes, which they submit via mobile phone, such shows are lauded as examples of democratic expression. Super Voice Girl was relaunched in 2009. Despite (or because of) the show's enormous popularity, it was inexplicably cancelled by the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) in 2011.

to hide his examination paper. Hu had particularly messy or "chaotic" [*luan*] writing, Pengwei recalled.[46]

Many Chinese today describe Chinese society in the same terms that Pengwei used to describe President Hu's test paper in his dream: They say the country is becoming increasingly "chaotic"—a term with connotations of moral decrepitude and social unrest.[47] In recent years, glaring and growing social inequality in China has combined with political corruption, slowing economic growth, and environmental degradation. These problems have increasingly caused people to doubt their belief in the merit of the governing elite and thus in the state's merit as legitimate guarantor of opportunity.[48] In other words, people widely continue to believe in meritocracy as a normative ideal, but question if current social arrangements can provide even an approximation of that ideal.

Under the new Chinese president, Xi Jinping, the state's muscular promotion of its new master slogan—"the Chinese dream" (*Zhongguo zhi meng*)—can be read as a response to this crisis of legitimacy. Chinese understand this slogan as an allusion to the American dream. For many Chinese, the U.S.—"the world's only superpower"—forms an object of ambivalent

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[46] The contents of Xi's paper was hidden from Pengwei's view, perhaps censored from his remembered dream contents. As in other places, a person's calligraphy is often understood to reflect his or her character. This belief is perhaps particularly strong in China, where calligraphy is such a widely practiced and well-developed form of art Consider the idiom, "As the characters, so the person" (*zi ru qi ren*).

[47] Popular protest, or "mass incidents," appear to have increased dramatically in recent years; moreover, participation in such protest is directly correlated to resentment of social inequality (J. Sun, Buys, and Wang 2013). Such mass incidents are not limited to the rural dispossessed. They also include Not In My Backyard (NIMBY) protests by middle-class Chinese (Perry 2002). Moral decrepitude is said to be evidenced in a perceived crisis of public morals: For instance, popular and official media widely report on accident victims not receiving assistance from passers-by, who fear being falsely blamed for the accident or extorted by the victim if they assist. These phenomena are also likely to be linked to inequality.

[48] Much literature exists on inequality in China. In the context of the present discussion, particularly relevant contributions to the literature include the following: Sun and Guo's (2013) edited volume provides useful and wide-ranging discussions of inequality in contemporary Chinese society, including gender inequality and the roles of environmental degradation and corruption in inequality. Wei-Jun Yeung (2013) and Xiaobing Wang et. al (2013) provide evidence of growing educational inequality following rapid higher-education expansion in the first decade of the twenty-first century. As I mention in the introduction, MIT Economist Yasheng Huang (2008) demonstrates that actual poverty reduction was greatest in the 1980s, followed by a two-decade period in which resources have flowed into large cities and large corporations. In other words, the pie is growing larger, but the rich are getting progressively larger slices of the pie. Of course, increasing inequality is a global phenomenon (Dorling 2014).

fascination and envy.[49] The "Chinese dream" slogan is meant to convey that China (and Chinese) can eventually surpass the greatness of the United States (and Americans), but that China must forge its own path on this journey—a path that is determined by its unique "Chinese characteristics."[50] By amalgamating individual and national desires for greatness, the "Chinese dream" encapsulates the core content of today's meritocratic ideology—developmentalism.

Widely publicized efforts to "battle corruption" and mitigate environmental degradation play similar propaganda roles. The continuing relative political and social stability in China, however, probably owes little to such efforts, which people widely assess to be relatively "empty" (*xu*) and "false" (*xujia*). Rather, China owes its stability more to an abiding belief in the value of personal merit—the notion that success repays good character and hard work. The Gaokao may be the state's most effective tool in undergirding this ideology of meritocracy. Despite the system's stark contradictions, people see the examination not as propaganda but as "genuine" and "real."

In sum, the Gaokao does far more than publicize the culture of meritocracy. It plays an important role in socializing people into this culture—a role that the Gaokao inherits from the imperial civil examinations. In other words, such trials of merit both capitalize on and reinforce people's belief in the relationship between merit and success as a normative goal and partial reality. This social significance of examinations explains why preparing for them forms a sacred occupation for so many—the examination life.

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[49] This statement should be taken only as a description of Chinese perceptions of geopolitics rather than a description of those geopolitics themselves. In later chapters, I elaborate on Chinese perceptions of the West as a transcendental object of desire.

[50] As I further discuss in chapter 2, Party-state ideologues characterize the state's combination of central-state control and free-market reform as "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" (*Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi*, literally, "Chinese-style socialism").

The Examination Life

As one teacher put it, most Chinese "spend their whole lives either preparing for the examination, taking the examination, or preparing others to take the examination." The examination life begins young. As students widely comment, "twelve years of arduous study are all for the final test." As in imperial times, when aspiring examinees had to learn by heart (*bei*) the "Four Books and Five Classics" (*Sishu wujing*), the modern examination requires prodigious efforts of memory.[51] From a young age, parents and teachers drill into children the importance of diligence and persistence. Children typically spend large amounts of time immersed in the "ocean of examination questions" (*tihai*) as they prepare for weekly, monthly, and yearly tests. Recent efforts to reduce students' burdens have merely resulted in the proliferation of after-school classes in urban places and in the use of clever ruses to circumvent study-reduction policies in rural areas (Kipnis 2001; Kipnis 2011; Woronov 2008). Now as in former times, success in the examination requires heroic self-abnegation. In explaining why examination pressure causes some children to commit suicide, teachers and parents point out that most children have known no other life. Parents lament that children have "no childhood" and become "victims of the examination" (*kaoshi de xisheng pin*, lit., "sacrifices to the examination").

In fact, the examination life begins even before people are born. For most parents, preparing the next generation for the Gaokao starts when they themselves begin to prepare for the test. Even when their own attempts at Gaokao glory end in failure, many young people organize their lives around the project of positioning their unborn offspring for educational success. For many prospective parents, this endeavor involves migrating to the city, finding a good job, attempting to purchase a house in a good school district, and selecting a suitable marriage partner. In a sense, therefore, children's personhood begins long before birth. After

[51] Chapter 3 addresses this topic in more detail.

children are born, parents exert great efforts to prepare them for the exam, often expending great sums of money on this task. In short, the examination plays a central role in the reproduction of persons, families, and cultural norms—social reproduction.

This process of social reproduction is intimately related with social and geographical mobility. In recent decades, the movement of hundreds of millions of people from relatively rural places up China's hierarchy of central places to relatively urban places has been called the largest migration in human history (Merkel-Hess and Wasserstrom 2009). Observers widely note that migrants move to create "a better life," but the role of education in this journey is less remarked. Most migrants, however, say that they move "for the children" (*wei le haizi*). Of course, migrants' own parents also form an important consideration. In China's culture of filiality, caring for the senior generation constitutes a sacred social responsibility. As middle-aged Chinese commonly lament, "Above us we have the elderly, below us the young" (*shang you lao, xia you xiao*). But this double duty only raises the stakes on producing successful children: In the absence of a comprehensive social welfare net, most parents see children (in part, at least) as health insurance. As the saying goes, "one raises children to provide against old age" (*yang er fang lao*, lit., "raise sons, guard against old age"). As I subsequently elaborate, moreover, these economic rationales—important in their own right—involve deeper issues of prestige and identity.

In short, the education of children provides an important motive for migration. Higher wages in cities allow migrants to afford expenditures for children's education and marriage. In addition, cities have better schools: The quality of educational opportunity, as reflected in college admission rates, increases dramatically with movement up the hierarchy, forming what I term a *score-value hierarchy*. However, China's rigid household registration (*hukou*) system

deprives most migrants of urban citizenship, and thus of equal access to social welfare and education (K. W. Chan and Zhang 1999; Zhang and Tao 2012).

As a result of the household-registration system, the examination relates in yet another way to migration: Because one's household residency (*huji*) transfers to the city where one goes to college, success in the examination remains the only way for most ordinary Chinese to obtain full urban residency, with its associated benefits of greater social security for oneself and one's parents and greater opportunity for one's offspring.[52] Thus people say that the examination provides rural children with their "only way out" (*weiyi chulu*) of the countryside, or, as people sometimes put it, their only way of "escaping the farm" (*tiao chu nongmen*, lit., "to jump through the farm gate"). For these reasons, many rural Chinese continue to understand the Gaokao as the only viable opportunity to transform their low-status and precarious rural existence into a high-status and stable urban one—a transformation that they gloss as "changing fate" (*gaibian ming*) or "transforming fortune" (*gaibian mingyun*).

Stratification Past and Present

Establishing the examination's significance to social reproduction, however, is not explaining how the examination reproduces a belief in merit. Indeed, this significance only begs that question. Moreover, the enduring appeal of the examination seems all the more perplexing given the vanishingly small and decreasing number of examinees who achieve the orthodox ideal of success—admission to a top college and employment in a secure, prestigious urban occupation.

[52] Urban household residency may be acquired through other means, such as purchasing a house, but such barriers are too high for ordinary Chinese; moreover, the more "developed" a city is, the higher the barriers (Zhang and Tao 2012). Since a citie's relative development relates to its position on the central-place hierarchy, a Skinnerian central-place analysis would be very useful in elucidating Zhang and Tao's data.

Surprisingly, the number of candidates who achieve this orthodox measure of success has not substantially increased in the last twenty years despite liberalization of the employment market and expansion of higher education. Before the gradual phasing out of the state-controlled work-assignment system (*fenpei zhidu*) in the 1990s, probably only around 5 percent or less gained admission to four-year colleges.[53] Under work assignment, the state paid for college, which guaranteed a stable, prestigious job in government or a state-owned work unit (*danwei*). The abolishment of the work-assignment system was followed rapidly by the expansion of higher education after 1999, which increased the number of university students four-fold from five to twenty million in just a few years (Wan 2006).

As a result of this meteoric expansion, approximately 75 percent of senior high-school students nationwide now go to some form of college. But higher-education expansion has flooded the labor markets with college grads, leading to widespread underemployment and joblessness. These developments have greatly deflated the value of an ordinary college degree. In times past, any college credential was extremely prestigious. Now, people say that only a degree from a Project 985 college—China's top forty—provides any guarantee of a good job. Indeed, most top companies only interview candidates with such degrees. Thus a degree from a Project 985 college is likened to having a "permit of passage" (*tongxingzheng*) to the good life." Nationwide, however, only around 2 percent of senior–high-school students achieve admission to such colleges. In short, higher-education expansion has produced fewer social changes than it first appears: If admission to a Project 985 college is used as the standard for success, then the

[53] Official government-reported admission rates for the 1980s are higher. The official rate is 4.8 percent in 1977, rising to 23 percent by the end of the decade. See, for example, http://edu.people.com.cn/n/2013/0503/c116076-21359059.html (accessed May 9, 2016). However, because of the practice of "pre-selection" (*yuxuan*) only some fraction of senior high-school students—sometimes as low as 1 in 5—acquired the opportunity to take the Gaokao. Now all senior-three students take the Gaokao. Thus these 1980s figures are not strictly comparable with recent statistics.

actual number of successful examination candidates has hardly risen since the phasing out of the work-assignment system in the late 1990s.[54]

Moreover, admission rates are highly stratified by region and socioeconomic group. Elite colleges, which are overwhelmingly located in China's two leading cities—Beijing and Shanghai—disproportionately recruit students from those cities. In stark contrast to other places, the rate of admission to Project 985 universities in Shanghai or Beijing is about 5 percent—double the rate elsewhere. But the disparities appear even more severe when broken down by high school. In my field sites, "good" high schools in urban areas sent between 10 and 15 percent of their students to Project 985 universities. In rural areas and low-ranking schools, by contrast, the admission rates to any top-100 colleges, much less Project 985 institutions, is negligible (chapters 2 and 3).

Such disparities are not a new phenomenon. Focusing on the universalization of education in the modern era, most observers assume that the contemporary system produces much more mobility than the imperial one did, but such is not the case. In the vanishingly small number of people who achieve the orthodox model of success, the Gaokao actually resembles the imperial civil examinations more than has been customarily recognized: During Qing times, only around 2 percent qualified for membership to the scholar-gentry elite by passing the licentiate exam (Elman 2013, 106).[55] Before as now, moreover, the highest rates of examination success concentrated in central places. Passage rates were determined by regional quotas, which

[54] Yet even these measures of success may be overestimated. Despite planned reforms, compulsory education still ends upon graduation from junior high school in grade nine, after which only a limited number of students (probably around 50 percent) achieve promotion to senior high school. When one takes into consideration this under-studied yet significant extra layer of selection, therefore, these rates of success are even smaller. Bourdieu (1977b) describes how progressive layers of selection within education systems tend to camouflage the actual degree of inequality that such systems perpetuate. For example, citing the promotion rate of people from disadvantaged backgrounds from high school to college obscures the fact that many dropped out before they reached high school.

[55] For a more thorough-going discussion of imperial-era licentiate numbers, see the introduction, in particular note 18.

distinctly advantaged centrally located place; moreover, such places possessed better cultural and social infrastructures for training examinees (Elman 2013).

By comparing the two systems, I do not mean to overstate the correspondence between them. The differences between the imperial exam and the contemporary systems are epochal.

In China today, the universalization of compulsory education means that examination culture infiltrates almost every level of society.[56] In short, families everywhere have broad access to the "examination life." In imperial times, the state established public schools—indeed, it was the first state in world history to do so; however, these state-sponsored institutions mainly served as waystations for examination candidates. Training for the exam was largely performed by families and lineage groups. Although schooling in basic literacy was widespread, effective preparation for the examination required great economic, social, and cultural capital (Elman 1991). In the late Qing period, for example, only a few percent the population actively prepared for examinations (Rawski 1979). By contrast, somewhere around half of Chinese children acquire an opportunity to take the Gaokao today.

In the imperial exam, success correlated with movement to central places: Examinees were sojourners, constantly traveling to and from examinations. As they progressed through increasingly greater levels of distinction, they worked their way up the central-place hierarchy. The Licentiate examinations were held in local counties and prefectures. The Elevated Man exams were held triennially in provincial capitals. The highest scholastic achievement—the "Advanced Scholar" degree—was conferred by the emperor himself in the capital.

At first glance, this system appears much different to today. But geographical hierarchy continues to play an important role in the Gaokao. In preparation for the test, students take a

[56] In 1986 China instituted compulsory education through the ninth grade. Estimates of compliance vary (Chung and Mason 2012; H. Yi et al. 2012); however, most children nationwide now become socialized into examination culture even if they drop out of school.

staged hierarchy of practice examinations, each of which corresponds to progressively more encompassing regions in the central-place hierarchy. These practice exams culminate with the national exam—the Gaokao. Unlike imperial scholars, however, todays' examinees need not travel to the examinations; instead, the examinations come to them. But now as before, the most successful examinees move to the capital—now home to the country's most prestigious institutions of higher learning. Now as before, therefore, the examination objectifies or hypostasizes the transcendental authority of the national collective as arbiter of individual merit. In contrast to local examinations, which are seen as biased by local politics and guanxi, the national exam is seen as relatively objective, even if this ideal far exceeds the reality: As I elaborate in chapter 3, few examinees are aware of the vast disparities in opportunity that exist between regions and socioeconomic groups.

In China today, nearly every social group has the right to take the examination, with the notable exception of adherents to "heterodox sects" (*xiejiao*). In imperial times, examination enfranchisement eventually extended to almost every section of the male population except for a very few stigmatized groups. But women never gained the right to take the civil examination despite achieving relatively high levels of literacy (Ko 1994; Mann 1997; Rawski 1979).

Other stark contrasts exist between the contemporary and imperial systems. Modern technology has facilitated a level of national standardization and synchronization in the Gaokao that the architects of the imperial exam could only dream of. In addition, the examination curriculum has changed radically. Critics of the Gaokao question how much the focus on memorization (*bei*) has fundamentally shifted since the imperial era; however, few would question the epochal significance of the modernization of the curriculum, which substitutes math, English, and science for the Four Books and Five Classics (chapter 4).

Despite these epochal shifts, however, the Gaokao and the imperial exam possess an important commonality: Now as before, vast numbers pursue the examination life despite little objective prospect of achieving the orthodox measure of success. Despite widespread critique of the system, people generally remain committed to their contention that the Gaokao remains China's "only relatively fair competition."

Examination Hegemony

Of course, Chinese themselves have explanations for the enduring appeal of the Gaokao under conditions of inequality. When asked to account for this contradiction, people often reply with the universal Chinese expression of resignation in the face of circumstances beyond one's control—"There's nothing to be done" (*mei banfa*). "We have no choice," people say: The only hope of mobility lies in examination participation, even if that participation entails "fighting a losing battle" or "depriving children of their childhood." In a country that is "overpopulated and underdeveloped" (*renkou duo, dizi bao*), "competition is fierce" (*jingzheng jilie*). This is just the "reality" (*xianshi*).

But people actually do have choices, even if these choices are not easy ones. As previously mentioned, relatively disadvantaged families are increasingly pulling their children out of school to work. Many students rebel by skipping classes, running away, or becoming violent—problems that are particularly pronounced in rural areas and "bad" schools. In both rural and urban areas, some students commit suicide.[57] In more privileged households, families

[57] Although it may seem extreme to label suicide as a "choice," it makes sense to do so in the context of the exam: As mentioned, students know no other life but examinations. Students who are desperate for an escape may see suicide as the only option. In Chinese culture, suicide has long been perceived as form of protest. Finally, suicide constitutes a form of fateful action, but one over which the individual has complete control. For all these reasons, people who contemplate suicide may see it as an empowering act. This interpretation of suicide is probably encouraged by the student and popular discourse around suicide. Every time a student commits suicide, social-messaging and other media flood with critiques against the examination system.

draw upon their own resources or those of their extended family, friends, and connections to educate their children overseas.

In sum, increasing numbers of families on the socioeconomic fringes of society are voting with their feet against the Gaokao. The children of the poor lament that "in this society, one would far rather have connections [*guanxi*] than a college degree." Concomitantly, many relatively privileged students have little desire to strive as their parents did. As teachers say of wealthy students, "Why should they be diligent? All they have to do when they grow up is collect rent."

The state takes seriously this crisis of examination legitimacy. Recent educational reforms represent an attempt to respond to these problems (chapter 3).[58] But participation in the examination remains high and even shows signs of inching upwards. After falling slightly from a high of 10.5 million students per year in 2008, the number of participants seems to have stabilized around 9.5 million.

In sum, participation in the examination life forms something of a social consensus. This consensus might be termed *hegemonic* because it unites disparate groups in a common social practice, despite how this practice disadvantages many of those groups. As I state in the introduction, therefore, the examination serves, in historian Benjamin Elman's words, as a

[58] These reforms, which I further discuss in chapter 3, include the recentralization of state authority to construct examination questions, which in the early 2000s had been partially devolved to the provinces; the abolishment of various schemas to provide "extra points" for extraordinary accomplishments to certain examinees, who critics say rely on nepotistic connections or *guanxi* to secure these privileges; and various attempts to address the serious regional disparities that I mention above. In addition to these policies that reformers intend to address problems of regional and socioeconomic disparity, they are instituting other policies to help recruit those who increasingly look abroad for education. Such policies include the partial reform of college admissions to allow for some universities to recruit students through special examinations—the so-called "autonomous examinations" (*zizhu kaoshi*)—and experimentation with allowing a limited number of universities and liberal arts colleges, sometimes in partnership with foreign institutions, to recruit students completely outside of the conventional Gaokao system.

cultural gyroscope for society, even in the minds of the millions who fail: The failures vastly outnumber the successful; nevertheless, the examination life commands widespread devotion.

For these reasons, Elman likens the examination life to a "cultural prison" (Elman 2014). This description condenses many aspects of the examination experience: Not only do the examination halls of imperial times, similar to schools now, resemble prisons (the prototypical total institution); in addition, vast segments of the population, who otherwise might direct their energies toward other goals, confine themselves within the examination life—a life of diligence and persistence devoted to "preparing for the exam, taking the exam, or preparing others for the exam."

To rephrase the question with which I opened this chapter, then, Why do people continue to lock themselves in this cultural prison? The continued devotion of the disadvantaged to the examination seems perplexing in light of their almost impossibly slim chances of achieving society's orthodox definition of success. But the dedication of the elite seems almost equally puzzling given how far the scales are tipped in their favor. In other words, why should people defend as "objective" a system that displays such evident bias? Both groups, however, put forward many muscular defenders of the examination—people who bridle at any suggestion that exam score may not faithfully reflect personal merit. In sum, the examination seems to reconcile, or at least ease, the tension between social hierarchy and mobility; moreover, the examination accomplishes this feat for widely disparate social groups under conditions of glaring inequality.

The Paradox of Legitimacy in Chinese Political Thought

Although this contradiction between hierarchy and mobility takes different forms in different times and places, this problem is neither new nor uniquely Chinese.

From early times, Chinese political thought has revolved around this tension. In particular, this preoccupation figures prominently in the long tradition of philosophical interpretation surrounding the Mandate of Heaven. Containing what is probably the earliest mention of this concept, the Early Chinese classic, the *Book of Documents* (dated to the 4th or 3rd centuries BCE), purports to record a debate between two brothers of the founder of the Zhou Dynasty (1046–771 BCE). In this debate, the two brothers argue over whether the Mandate was given to the sovereign alone or to the Zhou people as a whole. Cited by Confucian scholars to this day, the debate appears to provide a stronger case for the people, establishing the right of meritorious officials to remonstrate against the sovereign.[59] As I mention in the introduction, people throughout Chinese history have argued that the same principle asserts the right of the people to rebel against corrupt officialdom.

Writing of the philosophical implications of this text, Edward Shaughnessy suggests that this debate reflects a universal existential dilemma: This is the dilemma "in government, between the ruler and his ministers; in religion, between faith and works; in social status, between birth and merit; [and] in human potential, between nature and nurture" (Shaughnessy 1999, 315). Moreover, such debates extend far beyond the rarified province of philosophers. In Chinese popular religion, the existential dilemma that Shaughnessy identifies is customarily framed as

[59] Zhou Gong and Shao Gong were both brothers of King Wu, conqueror of the Shang. Their reported dialog centers on the relative merits of royal prerogative and official remonstrance. Following the death of King Wu, Zhou Gong—King Wu's youngest brother— arrogated to himself the regency of the late King Wu's son, the young King Cheng. Zhou Gong's action sparked off a civil war with King Cheng's other uncles—Zhou Gong's own elder brothers—who felt undermined and slighted by Zhou Gong's usurpation of the regency. Later, when the grown King Cheng demanded his right to make autonomous decisions, Shao Gong, a surviving elder son of King Wu, took King Cheng's side in arguing against regent Zhou Gong. Shao Gong argues that Heaven (*Tian*) bequeathed the Mandate (*Ming*) to the king, granting him unique perspicacity. Zhou Gong rebuts that Heaven gave the Mandate to the Zhou people (*wo you Zhou*), not to the king alone. Arguing on historical precedent, Zhou Gong contends that it was the responsibility of the king's advisors—people of virtue—to enlighten the king. Shaughnessy (1999) notes that this text was destined to be refrained in similar debates throughout Chinese history.

that between fate and merit: Are people's lives determined by preordained circumstances outside of their control (*ming*), or by personal effort and volition?

Note that these questions turn on the proper relationship between social authority and action, between given hierarchies and personal effort. In the last analysis, these debates refer to the paradox of legitimacy or (what is the same) the question of structure and agency. These antithetical terms—structure and agency—might be termed the *objective* and *subjective* poles of experience: In short, these debates ask to what degree people create their worlds (the subjective pole) and to what degree their worlds create them (the objective pole).

By the Warring States (475–221 BCE) period, the ability to divine the relationships between these opposing poles of experience became a test of personal merit. The arena for this test was mantic technique. Elites of the era centered their divinatory practices on interpreting the "Book of Changes," or Yijing—the oldest Chinese classic. Yijing divination, which remains widely practiced today, consists of interpreting randomly selected passages of the text, each of which is associated with one of sixty-four Yijing hexagrams. Consider historian Mark Edward Lewis'(1999) analysis of such divinatory practice: Starting in the Warring States, Lewis tells us, the Yijing "was increasingly cited as a source of lore or wisdom, and the ability to recognize its true meanings became a hallmark of percipience and testimony to moral character… The [Yijing] became more a test of moral acuteness than a means of receiving messages from the spirits," (Lewis 1999, 244). According to Lewis, successful divination seems to have consisted more in skillfully leaving open or suspending the contradiction between fate and volition rather than in reconciling this contradiction too sharply in one direction or the other. Records of divination juxtaposed "parallel explanation by means of both divine intervention and human action" (Ibid., 138). In other words, such records kept open both possibilities: According to such

interpretations, fate might be determined by human success or by failure in adhering to ritual, or this success or failure itself might be determined by Heaven. In short, these interpretations seem to have been characterized by virtuosic ambiguity.

Expressing a perennial fascination with the relationship between Heavenly preordination and human will, mantic practices have remained important in later ages up to the present as a way to resolve—or at least temporally suspend—this existential contradiction between fate and action (chapter 6). As I elaborate in the following, moreover, various modern practices that first appear to be unrelated to traditional divinatory techniques might be considered as modern equivalents of such techniques. Such modern analogs include the lottery, the stock market, and examinations. All of these fateful events function as trials of merit since people consider success in them to constitute a measure of character and a test of divine favor. In short, the standardized examination, a prototypical modern trial of merit, possesses a genealogical relationship with divination. Unsurprisingly, therefore, examinations have many similarities of structure and form with divinatory technique, as I subsequently elaborate.

Historical Development of Examination Culture

The roots of examination culture lie in various attempts by philosophers to reconcile the aforesaid contradiction between hierarchy and volition, which they considered a problem of social justice. During the period of empire formation following the Warring States, disparate philosophical traditions found common ground in the belief that personal merit provided the solution to this contradiction. The classical Chinese schools of philosophy—Legalism, Mohism, and Confucianism—disagreed on the precise definition of merit, but agreed that the meritorious should rule (Ho 1962). Emphasizing equal opportunity for education, Confucian thought represented a rationalizing tendency in Chinese government. Over the centuries, Chinese

methods of "selecting people of talent" shifted from ones that merely valorized the charisma of aristocratic lineages to ones that—in theory, at least—cast open opportunity to progressively broader groups of the population through rule-based measures of merit.

As early as the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 ACE), recommendation systems existed to identify people of extraordinary merit for government service, although the recommended came exclusively from established lineages. By the Tang Dynasty (618–907), the imperial court started selecting certain officials by examination in an attempt to weaken the power of aristocratic lineages, although examiner and examinee were usually known to each other. Not until the Song Dynasty (960–1279) did large-scale anonymized examinations appear. In Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1905) times, simplification of the examination curriculum (to be discussed in the following) opened up examination competition to broader social groups. As I note above, moreover, restrictions on eligibility for competition gradually disappeared until nearly all males possessed legal status as potential examinees, although women never acquired the right to compete in the exam.[60]

In sum, the period between the Tang and the early Ming dynasties marked the transformation of Chinese ideologies of meritocracy from favoring relatively particularistic, or guanxi-based methods of selection to favoring relatively universalistic, or rules-based, methods of selection. [61]

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[60] Lee (2000) gives a comprehensive summary of these developments. A more concise account can be found in Ho (1962), although Ho is now widely recognized to have overestimated exam-related mobility. Lewis (1999) focuses on the early imperial period. Moore's (2004) treatment of Tang rituals of recruitment helps accentuate the novelty of Song arrangements. Chaffee (1995) provides an insightful, up-to-date discussion of the Song examination, and Elman (2013) does the same for the Ming and the Qing tests. Elman (2000) consists of a more encyclopedic treatment of similar material. Rawski (1979) discusses wider social ramifications of the examination for literacy, and Ko (1994) focuses specifically on women's literacy.

[61] Guanxi is a contemporary term that has become particularly popular in the post-Mao reform era (M. M. Yang 1994). I do not mean to apply the word as it is currently understood to earlier periods, which would constitute an anachronistic usage. Rather, I employ guanxi as an analytical term to denote particularistic, kin-based forms of exchange more broadly. As such, guanxi may differ between different cultures and periods. In my usage, therefore, the word can be used to describe gift-based exchange in non-Chinese cultures.

This emergence of universalistic, anonymized examinations accompanied a massive demographic and social transformation in China that historians refer to as the Tang–Song transition (approximately the eight to twelfth centuries). Some scholars argue that the Tang–Song transition represents the emergence of early modernity in China.[62] Historians generally concur that this transition can be characterized as one from a society organized around powerful aristocratic lineages, who inhabited a social world set apart and distinct from that of commoners, to one organized around a scholar-gentry elite (the *shi*), who occupied a social position that was—theoretically, at least—increasingly within the reach of commoners.

As described in Robert Hartwell's (1982) path-breaking account, this demographic and economic transformation was characterized by accelerated commercialization and urbanization. As part of this process, the Chinese market system spread farther and farther into the periphery.[63] Indeed, the Tang–Song transition marks the emergence of well-integrated macro-region urban systems, which appear in Northwest China only during the Tang and spread across northern China during the Northern Song (960–1127) (Skinner 1980). During this period, the capital of the Northern Song, Kaifeng, grew to a population of three million. Focusing on steel production in Kaifeng, Hartwell (1982) describes how the commercialization of this urban center drove trade, technological innovation, and regional integration.

Under two foreign invasions by the Jin and the Mongols, the fortunes of northern China waned and those of the Lower Yangzte and Southeast Coast macroregions waxed. Formerly a periphery, the Southeast Coast became highly commercialized. By the twelfth century, the

[62] Many historians now argue that late imperial Chinese society anticipates or possesses many modern characteristics. Some go further. In particular, Torajirō Naitō famously and provocative claims that the Tang–Song transition represents the advent of full-fledged modernity in China (Miyakawa 1955). Note that Naitō thus dates the beginning of modernity to nine hundred years before the arrival of Western gunboats in China, which marks the onset of modernity in official Chinese state history and much conventional historiography (P. A. Cohen 1984). But one need not accept whole cloth what has come to be known as the Naitō hypothesis, however, to recognize the epoch-making nature of the social transition between the Tang and the Song. These historiographical arguments, and their social consequences, will receive further treatment in chapter 2.

[63] Hartwell's student, Robert Hymes (1986), also discusses elite transformation during the Song period.

population of this region grew to 10 million (Skinner 1980). The area where I conducted my fieldwork, which Skinner terms the Zhangquan subregion, became an economic center that focused on shipbuilding and international trade, with merchants traveling as far as the Middle East. The developing hinterlands produced tea that became a highly treasured commodity all over the empire.

The fortunes of old aristocratic lineages and Song-founder families deteriorated under this structural-demographic shift. To halt their decline, these pedigreed lineages entered marriage contracts with the emerging gentry-elite; meanwhile, newly wealthy but unlettered merchant and farmer families intermarried with cultured gentry lineages to buttress their social ascendance (Chaffee 1995; Hartwell 1982).

The ascendance of such parvenu families called into question the necessity of the connection between blood and prestige, family and merit, lineage and charisma. The examination solved this problem by providing seemingly objective valorization of the worthiness of the governing elite. As with modern examination meritocracies, these arrangements produced a powerful mythology surrounding the deservingness of the elite, who despite their different class backgrounds identified themselves as belonging to a common status group of adherents to the examination life—the literati or the *shi*.

As China's market hierarchies spread farther into the southeastern and southwestern peripheries, examinations proved useful not only as a cultural gyroscope for areas deemed central to the Chinese ecumene but also as an important tool for incorporating these newly settled areas into the "Central Kingdom"—a process that historians and anthropologists sometimes refer to China's "civilizing project" (Harrell 1995; Rowe 1994).

As a whole, the social hierarchy flattened during this time: If during mediaeval times the social hierarchy looked like a church spire in which the aristocratic elite occupied a rarefied

world that existed beyond an unimaginable existential and social gap, starting in Song times the social hierarchy increasingly resembled a teardrop in which broadening constituencies of merchant-farmers could increasingly imagine attaining elite status—if not during their lifetimes than during that of those of their children (figure 5).

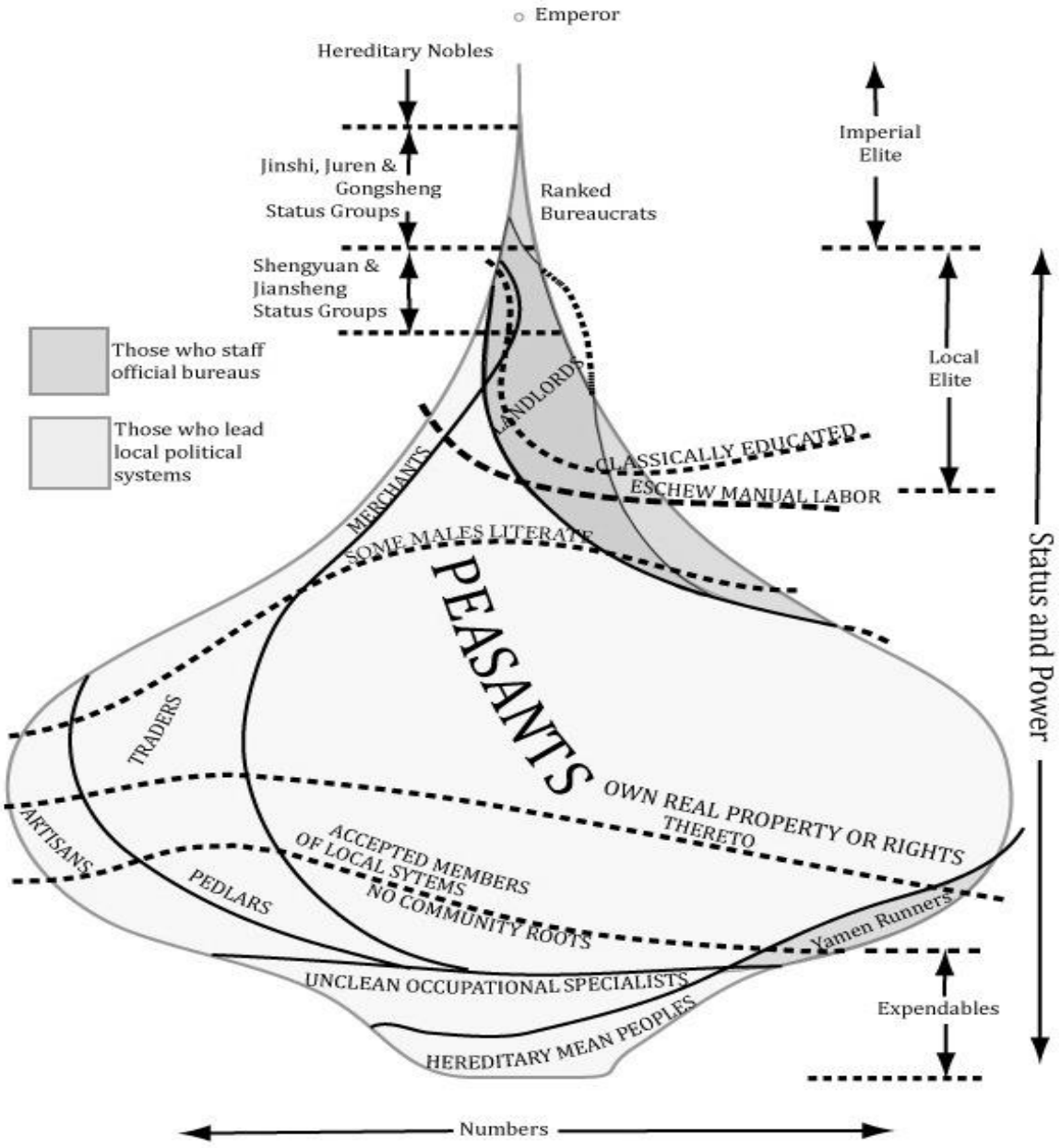

Figure 5: Stratification in late imperial society
Source: Adapted by Paul D. Barclay, Lafayette College Department of History, based on an unpublished illustration by G. William Skinner.

From this historical perspective, social mobility figures first and foremost as the mobility of whole groups or classes of people rather than of individuals. Most evidence suggests that examination success followed intermarriage with elite groups rather than preceding it. Then as now, therefore, it is largely a myth that a diligent farmer's son could rise from nowhere to test into the upper echelons of the social elite.

Other cultural and social shifts from Song to Qing times in China anticipated many of those associated with early modernity in Europe. Literacy became widespread (Rawski 1979). A thriving commercial book market appeared during the Ming and Qing dynasties (Brokaw 2007; Chow 2004). In scientific and social thought, a notion of progressive development emerged around the idea of resurrecting the perspicacity of the sages to achieve the eventual future telos of Great Unity (*Datong*)—an imagined future utopia of perfect Confucian rule (Bol 2008; Nylan 2001). In the legal sphere, laws shifted gradually away from a more particularistic focus on status hierarchy to a relatively universalistic focus on equal rights for all. In marriage law, for example, the eighteenth century represented a watershed shift in a thousand year transition away from focusing on status hierarchy to focusing on gender (Sommer 2000).

Weber, Europe, and the "Spirit of Capitalism"

Despite important differences, therefore, early-modern China and Europe exhibit striking cultural similarities. In particular, note how a culture of meritocracy in both places encouraged people to account for their fate by seeking signs of divine favor in the fruits of diligent labor—an outlook that Weber terms the "spirit of capitalism" (Weber [1905] 1992).

Weber identifies this spirit with the "Protestant ethic." In Weber's analysis, this ethic revolves around a deep-seated anxiety that accompanied the decline of traditional religious and

aristocratic authority during the Reformation and Enlightenment (sixteenth through eighteenth centuries)—a process that Weber terms "disenchantment." Weber notes that Christians presumed themselves to be born evil but could no longer count on traditional religious authorities to guarantee their salvation in the next life. Thus they increasingly sought signs of salvation in the diligent and ascetic pursuit of a "calling" (*Beruf*). Since the wanton waste of Earthly lucre was considered sinful under Reformation (particularly Calvinist) ideals, people tended to accumulate capital as a sign of merit. In Weber's account, this accumulation led to the emergence of capitalism.

Weber and others link these developments to rationalization during the Enlightenment (Horkheimer and Adorno 1991; Russell 1961). As people became progressively more disenchanted, they began to judge themselves with reference to a universal authority—an increasingly abstracted conception of God or Reason. Perceiving themselves as discrete individuals endowed with equal rights before God, the enlightened (largely Protestant) Bourgeoisie pursued rational bureaucratic organization that ran like a machine. Far from being completely rational, however, the spirit of capitalism contained deeply irrational elements—notably, a salvational orientation toward a transcendental future, smuggled into political thought by Hegel and Marx. We now know this transcendental future as the ever-receding telos of modernity.

Similar meritocratic ideals have existed in other places and times, notably ancient Greece; however, their florescence in early-modern Europe was accompanied by economic transformations that integrated broad segments of the population into a common marketplace as competing individuals.

The predominantly Eurocentric view of such historical accounts, however, has long overlooked similar structural transformations in China.

Weber actually writes much about China. In his 1915 *Religion of China*, he waxes admiringly about the thriftiness of Chinese and the precocity of the Chinese bureaucracy and financial system. But Weber concludes that the predominance of guanxi or "sib" relationships in China nevertheless impeded the development of capitalism: Under the influence of Confucianism, Chinese believed all human beings to be born good; thus, Chinese were presumably less anxious than Christians, who were driven by anxiety toward capitalistic accumulation. By the same token, Weber argues, Chinese internalized the Confucian "Five Relationships," namely, the relationships between parent and child, husband and wife, older and younger brother, ruler and subject. Thus Chinese tended to orient themselves outward toward society rather than inward toward the universalistic rational authority of God. Focusing on such particularistic earthly relationships, Chinese were concerned more with the good name of the lineage, perpetuated through success in the civil examinations, than with the accumulation of capital. Bureaucracy in China, therefore, contained (despite appearances to the contrary) a deeply irrational element—bureaucracy for bureaucracy's sake. This irrationalism also manifested itself in the Chinese attitude toward history, which consisted in a regressive orientation toward a past Golden Age—the mythical empire of the Confucian sages—rather than a progressive orientation toward the future.

As the above discussion suggests, however, recent historical research on China now casts into doubt many of Weber's premises. Historians now widely consider Weber's question of why capitalism did not develop outside of Europe to possess a deeply Eurocentric bias. Moreover, recent geopolitical developments have turned Weber's assumptions on their head: Consider how

contemporary observers attribute the recent economic rise of China and the "Asian Tigers" (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan) to a "Confucian ethic."[64] By the same token, a growing body of scholarship keeps pushing back the historical beginnings of capitalism in Europe and elsewhere. These discussions place into serious question the notion that any sudden or radical "break" can be identified between "traditional" and "modern" forms of governance. Some scholars now debate the very utility of such terms as "modernity" and "capitalism," which they argue should be jettisoned in favor of an analytical nomenclature that possesses less Eurocentric bias.[65]

Despite such critiques, "modernity" remains largely synonymous with Westernization. But such Eurocentric assumptions make it difficult to account for the influence of non-European cultures on European modernity. Consider, for example, the influence of Chinese examination culture on Europe, of which Weber appears to have been entirely unaware.

Uncanny Analogs: Mutual Influence and Parallel Transformations

During the Enlightenment, European enthusiasts of Chinese culture and philosophy—including Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, and Quesnay—introduced the emerging European public sphere to Chinese civil examinations, which these enthusiasts presented as the technology of governance

[64] As one recent example of this popular view, see the February 2015 Wall Street Journal "Asia's Rise is Rooted in Confucian Values" (http://www.wsj.com/articles/asias-rise-is-rooted-in-confucian-values-1423254759, accessed December 15, 2015).

[65] Such debates have produced vast literatures, largely identified with the Annales School of longue-durée historiography. Works of this type that critique such Eurocentric conceptions of modernity and capitalism with specific reference to China include Arrighi (2007), Pomeranz (2000), and R. Bin Wong (1997). For an anthropologically inflected approach to such questions, see Hill Gates (1997). Postcolonial studies provides another prominent source of critique of Eurocentric historiography. See in particular Chakrabarty (2000), Chatterjee (1993), and Said (1983). Many such works, however, merely modify the existing paradigm without proposing any fundamental reform. Indeed, this paradigm will prove hard to reform since it is institutionalized into the very departmental divisions that define academic life (for example, the separation of "pre-modern" and "modern" history). Andre Gunder Frank (1998) is perhaps most consistent in his critique, suggesting that such terms as "capitalism" and "modernity" be jettisoned altogether. In China historiography, Cohen's (1984) critique of Eurocentrism is highly influential, as I discuss in chapter 2.

preferred by the relatively enlightened sovereign of Cathay (Spence 1998; Teng 1943). As I suggest above, the rise of the bourgeoisie during the Enlightenment accompanied widespread questioning of the God-given charismatic authority of the clergy and the aristocratic elite. Under such conditions, the examination seemed to offer a legitimate source of enlightened rational authority for selecting men of talent. In other words, the examination provided an answer to the Hobbesian question of how to ensure social justice and stability in a disenchanted world: Under trial by examination, one's lot or status is (ideally, at least) determined not by the irrational charisma of bloodline but rather by equal treatment before the law, which is guaranteed by the impartial judgements of an all-powerful sovereign state.

During China's semi-colonization by Western powers in the nineteenth century, Western colonial administrators praised the Chinese state's use of public examinations to manage the population. Before the eighteenth century, written university examinations were unknown in Europe; moreover, European countries and their colonies did not introduce civil-service examinations until the nineteenth century: "France adopted such a system in the first revolution, 1791; Germany around 1800; India in 1855; and England applied the Indian system to all home service in 1870" (Teng 1943). The "modern" innovation of anonymized meritocratic examinations thus moved from the colony to the metropole, and not in the other direction as many might assume.[66] As noted, therefore, China's 1905 abolishment of the civil exam in the name of "modernization" represents a great historical irony.

Despite these suggestive clues, the modern history of examinations remains to be written. But the appeal of Chinese examinations to European political thinkers probably owes more than is commonly understood to similarities in the early-modern economic transformation of both

[66] Examinations may thus be reckoned amongst other administrative and ideological innovations long deemed to be innovations of the metropole but now widely understood to have originated in the colonies, such as nationalism (Anderson 2006).

places. In both places, the decline in traditional authority is associated with the emergence of a new status group of cultural elites during a period of rapid urbanization and commercialization: Just as the florescence of the Bourgeoisie in Europe is commonly associated with the decline of traditional authority in the Reformation and Enlightenment, the rise of the scholar-gentry elite in China is commonly associated with the decline of the traditional authority in Tang–Song transition.[67]

In many respects, moreover, the changes in self-conception and subjectivity that accompanied the flowering of the examination system after the Song resembled those that accompanied the emergence of democratic institutions in Europe during the Enlightenment. Weber's Eurocentric assumptions to the contrary, Chinese literati possessed a strong orientation toward a universalistic authority, toward which they felt a deep responsibility for self-cultivation.

Neo-Confucianism, Self-Cultivation, and Universalism

Starting in the Song, Neo-Confucianism or Way Learning (*Daoxue*) developed into the dominant intellectual current of this meritocratic culture.[68] In Chinese social life today, Confucian ideologies that have descended from Neo-Confucianism continue to exert great social influence. Beginning its life during the Song Dynasty as an anti-examination ideology, Neo-Confucianism became examination orthodoxy during the Mongol-led Yuan Dynasty. This body of thought was

[67] Although evidence of mutual influence clearly exists, much work remains to be done to establish the precise relationship between Chinese and European cultures of meritocracy. In particular, questions remain over the degree to which similarities in the emergence of modern examinations in China and the West should be attributed to cultural diffusion or to parallel evolution. In the final analysis, an account of such correspondences will derive not from using one culture as a foil or benchmark for the other, but rather from considering their social-structural similarities and differences, ideological cross-pollinations, and long historical enmeshment in a common global market, albeit one that in years past was less well integrated than ours is today.

[68] Neo-Confucianism is the more familiar term but is often used with great imprecision to designate all philosophical and social currents from the Tang to the late Qing. Way Learning more precisely refers to the philosophical innovations that emerged in the Song Dynasty and became examination orthodoxy during much of the following dynasties (Bol 2008; Elman 2013, ix). I mainly use the familiar term, but employ it here in this narrower sense.

to occupy this dominant position for another 700 years until the exam's abolishment in the twentieth century.

The emergence of Neo-Confucianism signaled a major shift in Chinese society comparable to that in Enlightenment-era Europe from religious faith in a ruler to religious faith in the self (Bol 2008). Neo-Confucians justified their doctrines through history and philosophy. Ultimately, however, their worldview defined itself through an unquestioned faith in unity and coherence: In contrast to mediaeval conceptions, moreover, "the Neo-Confucians shifted the focus of … belief in unity away from the imperial system and into the mind as something individuals embodied and could act on. They had internalized the classical idea of empire" (Bol 2008, 217). This internalized faith in coherent unity received expression in a concomitant faith in the power of "learning" (*xue*) to produce for each individual a sage-like consciousness of right and wrong. Through the cumulative efforts of many, this consciousness could transform the world.[69]

Neo-Confucians had thus "bifurcated" the political and the moral: The succession of political power (*zhengtong*) from dynasty to dynasty did not necessarily follow the succession of moral power (*daotong*). Neo-Confucians held this moral continuity to have been lost after Confucius but rediscovered in the Song (Bol 2008, 132). Indeed, by the eleventh century most intellectuals (including the opponents of Neo-Confucianism) believed not in resurrecting the political system of the ancients but rather in resuscitating their alleged perspicacity and moral vision. This vision would lead to creative new solutions to what historian Bol provocatively terms the "modern" problems of Song society—increasing commercialism, private wealth, and foreign relations with more or less equal states (Bol 2008, 66; chapter 2, passim).

[69] Some scholars, notably Nylan (2001) and Connery (1998), produce accounts that cast doubt on Bol's claim for the philosophical novelty of these ideas; however, it appears clear that Song-era ideology represents a watershed vis-à-vis earlier currents, if only in the social prevalence given to such ideas in Song times.

The great synthesizer of Neo-Confucian thought, Zhu Xi (1130–1200), believed that Song examinations, which emphasized the belles-lettres, perpetuated great injustice by awarding style over substance, unctuousness over rectitude, wealthy urbanites over stalwart farmers (Bol 1989). The Neo-Confucian doctrine therefore contains a measure of *ressentiment* toward the aristocratic elite: Just as virtuosity did not necessarily correlate with virtuousness, literary form (*wen*) did not necessarily correlate with moral substance (*dao*). Therefore, individual literati could achieve recognition for sage-like qualities in the absence of official appointment.

Note the irony of Neo-Confucianism's eventual canonization as examination orthodoxy given its origins as an anti-examination ideology. The Neo-Confucian canon consisted of the Four Books and Five Classics as expounded by Zhu Xi in his famous commentaries. This canon was much more limited in scope than the expansive Song-era curriculum. Simplification was not limited to examination contents but also applied to form. The "eight-legged essay"—a highly formulaic structure—came to dominate the examination. At first glance, the triumph of the eight-legged essay seems to flout Zhu Xi's critique of literary formalism. But the simplified approach were consonant with the popularistic spirit of Neo-Confucianism: The relative ease of preparing for the reformed examinations facilitated the recruitment of broader swaths of the population into the examination life. The tasks of memorizing the Four Books and Five Classics admittedly constituted a formidable challenge. However, this challenge lay much more within the reach of relatively ordinary people than did mastering the open-ended curriculum of the Song examination system, which produced polymathic literary supermen like Wang Anshi (1021–1086) and Su Shi (1037–1101).[70]

[70] Neo-Confucianism possessed broad appeal under conditions of flattening social hierarchy. In Bol's view, "Neo-Confucianism was initially successful because it offered education, connections, self-justifications, opportunities for local leadership, and ways of acting morally to the literati as local elites with great ambitions but poor prospects." In other words, Neo-Confucianism reflected the political interests of newly wealthy families, mainly in the South, who

Consider the Neo-Confucian search for internal sources of moral legitimacy in light of the aforedescribed social transformations. The Neo-Confucian ideal of learning—the "internalization of the empire"—represented an alternative to traditional forms of political legitimacy as the social hierarchy flattened and mobility increased. The simplified examination canon represented the re-translation of this moral ideal into a political one—credential-based meritocracy. In this process, the "Central Kingdom" began to acquire a new cultural identity as a quasi-national polity that united diverse groups around common meritocratic aspirations.[71]

The canonization of Neo-Confucianism as a simplified test orthodoxy resulted from a social negotiation similar to that which determines examination contents in contemporary times (chapter 4). Then as now, the examination's form and contents advantaged dominant social groups but recruited the participation of less dominant ones; thus, this negotiation might be termed hegemonic.[72]

The emergence of this new hegemonic orthodoxy probably also owes much to new geopolitical realities. As Elman points out, the transition from the belles-lettres tradition of Tang–Song to the Neo-Confucian orthodoxy of the Ming–Qing was "mediated through two conquest dynasties," namely, the Jin (1115–1234) and the Yuan (1271–1368). Neo-Confucianism's new dominance, therefore, should be considered as a response to the combined effect of increasing commercialization and geopolitical disruption: It is no accident that literati's

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could afford to educate their sons for the examination, but for whom attainment of official position, because of increasing examination competition, remained mostly out of reach. Bol does not analyze the emergence of Confucianism in terms of class conflict, although it might be possible to pursue such an analysis. Neo-Confucianism arose partly within the context of a political response to Wang Anshi's New Policies, which sought, among other things, to curb the power of private wealth and increase the power of the state; by the same token, the type of overweening literary refinement demonstrated by Wang Anshi's nemesis, the more aristocratic Su Shi, was anathema to the great synthesizer of Neo-Confucianism, Zhu Xi.

[71] As distinctions between the elite and commoners blurred, and interactions between the so-called Great and Lesser traditions increased, literati began publishing works of vernacular fiction that leaned heavily upon traditions of oral storytelling. As these vernacular works fed back into popular opera and storytelling, they helped broader swaths of the population begin to imagine themselves as a national community.

[72] Building on Pierre Bourdieu's theories of education and social reproduction, Hilde De Weerdt (2007) uses developments in the Southern Song (1127–1279) to provide a window into this negotiation process.

faith in internal unity and coherence emerged at a time when the newly emergent polity came under threat from outside forces. In this period of invasion and geopolitical uncertainty, the act of memorization required for passage of the examinations became "a heroic, cultural act of great meaning" (Elman 2000, 64). This sentiment would be intelligible to takers of the Gaokao today, many of whom perceive the examination life as something quintessentially and ineffably Chinese.[73]

In sum, the emergence of Neo-Confucianism marks a transition from worshipping external authority to worshipping an internal moral authority that trumps both textual tradition and worldly power. This new moral authority is simultaneously internalized and transcendent, forming what Nylan (2001) calls an "interiorized metaphysics." Note how this internalization of authority resembles the transition that Foucault describes during the European Reformation and Enlightenment from a society based on "punishment" to one based on "discipline." In the latter form of society, people become the agents of their own subjection.[74] In China, the exemption of

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[73] Elman (2000) ties these developments to the emergence of a nativist ethnic consciousness that I would term national or quasi-national. Particularly the abrogation of the civil examinations from 1237/38 to 1314 "unintentionally ceded" literati autonomy to develop their traditions in independence from the need for state legitimation (Elman 2000, 30–31). In this context, Elman sees Neo-Confucianism, with its theory of cultural legitimacy (*daotong*), as a cultural sublimation of Han military defeat at the hands of the "barbarians." Neo-Confucianism formed a "cultural apotheosis of millennial proportions" among Song loyalists, that is, those who remained loyal to the conquered dynasty. In other words, "Sung literati, in search of higher moral ground, retreated conceptually from politics to culture in tandem with their army's retreats on the battlefields and the vast Han migrations from north to south China." In this way, "moral victory was plucked from the jaws of military defeat by turning that cultural front into a fortress of local literati after the Sung dynasty had been defeated" (Elman 2000, 61-62). Elman argues against the traditional assumption, moreover, that the origins of the Neo-Confucian orthodoxy in the Ming–Qing examination system could be unproblematically traced to the Southern Song. Instead, Elman theorizes that the proximate cause of this "invention of the Southern Song" consisted in the humiliation suffered by the Ming during "barbarian" incursions in the Oirat wars and the Tu-Mu debacle (1448-49), when a Ming emperor was kidnapped by invading forces. In this way, Ming historiography and popular culture reconfigured "'Sung loyalism…into Ming 'Han nativism'" (Elman 2000, 55). This emergent ethnic identity alloyed pretentions of civilizational universalism with a nativist stance toward outsiders. In my view, similar patterns continue to characterize, if in much altered form, Han ethnic identity today. Trauzettel (1975) pursues a complementary analysis of Song patriotism and "proto-nationalism."

[74] Scholars who focus on earlier eras, however, express some skepticism that this transition began only in the Song. These critiques provide us with an important reminder that history probably contains few neat breaks but rather, as Foucault (1990, 122) puts it (whose own historical explanation tended toward dichotomization), "inflexions" of the "curve." Nevertheless, few would dispute Bol's assertion of the importance of the shift in elite imagination during

successful examination candidates from corporal punishment and corvée labor literally represented their graduation from punishment to discipline. However, the caveat must be added that self-discipline in Chinese education, especially in the early stages of socialization, has always been inculcated through a strong dose of corporeal punishment.[75]

Whether self-discipline ultimately owes more to rod or reason, examination success, now as then, provides evidence of moral cultivation. Although the Gaokao has replaced the Neo-Confucian canon with science and humanities, people's moral attitudes toward examinations demonstrate remarkable continuities. In both eras, people have continuously debated whether or not examinations select people of moral virtue and negotiate over their contents. But they nevertheless understand success in examinations to reflect superior self-cultivation (chapter 4).

Status and the Examination Life

Since the beginnings of examination culture, the highest levels of success have always been associated with the greatest degrees of self-cultivation. Before as now, however, even limited examination success could confer great status, even peripheral association with literati great prestige (Rawski 1979). Desire to identify with this status thus forms one of the most convincing arguments for why people spent their lives preparing for examinations despite slim chances of glory.

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this period. In general, Foucault's historical analysis too neatly bifurcates historical periods. As I argue in chapter 3, various forms of inducement, which fall all along the spectrum from punishment to discipline, continue to play an important role in contemporary society. Thus, cultural and historical differences are probably more accurately described in how these various human potentialities are amalgamated in social practice rather than typifying those practices as characterizing a whole historical period or culture.

[75] The nineteenth century missionary James Doolitle ([1865] 1966) vividly describes the punishments endured by young Chinese scholars. Indeed, the role of the teacher seems to have largely consisted in meting out such punishment. In contemporary China, corporeal punishment is also used by teachers, but seems to be rare in senior high schools. I did not see any senior high-school students punished physically during my fieldwork, although teachers say that parents of rural origin sometimes encourage teachers to hit children if they misbehave. In younger age groups, corporeal punishment seems to be less and less common in schools, although reportedly more common in rural areas. Corporeal punishment is more widely practiced by parents than by teachers, but there is some cultural stigmatization of such punishment emerging, particularly in urban areas.

By the same token, modest levels of literacy bestowed great economic benefit (Rawski 1979). Most urban dwellers possessed some level of literacy and numeracy, which was essential to many occupations. As literacy spread in late imperial times, a vibrant print culture emerged (Brokaw 2007; Chow 2004). Men who failed as exam candidates could support themselves on the fringes of the examination life by working as teachers or hawking books. Some produced exam-prep materials or strove for literary fame by publishing essays and novels.[76] Much of this literary production was highly critical of the culture that made it possible.[77]

Similar motivations are readily apparent in contemporary times, in which people associate Gaokao success with status and white-collar employment. As in times past, even relatively low levels of examination success may transform a family's reputation, particularly in rural areas. Consider, for example, how a Mountain County girl explained her desire to get into college: "In my village, my father always gets beat up. Last month he lost two teeth in a fight. My aunt [*gugu*] told me that if I get into college, people will stop hurting him. That's an important reason we study so hard—the prestige [*weiwang*] of getting into college." In another village, a farmer was selected as village head because three of his four children (two of them girls) had attended college. Such examples could be multiplied. But even lower levels of educational success—junior-high-school and high-school diplomas—translate into economic and social benefits. Without such credentials, wage-earners can only hope for menial jobs. But a

[76] Some scholars argue that a public sphere in which scholars could engage in social critique emerged in the marginalia of such publications, analogous to but different in important respects from the public sphere that emerged in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Chow 2004), although this view is contested (Reed 2004). On the outskirts of the examination life, broad groups of the population achieved some level of literacy (Rawski 1979). Elite women were trained in classics and poetry so that they could become suitable marriage prospects, able to provide companionship to men and a good early cultural environment for sons (Ko 1994). Different levels of literacy at different levels of society both worked to unite the imperium and functioned as a de facto form of censorship. Only men with high levels of training had access to kinds of knowledge—for example, the science of reckoning solar eclipses—that touched upon the political legitimacy of the state (Elman 2005).

[77] The most famous work to satirize the examination system was the Qing-era novel *The Scholars* (~1750) written by Wu Jingzi. Ropp (1981) and Shang (2003) both provide useful social commentaries on this text.

high-school diploma increases the chances of relatively prestigious employment in the service industry as a sales associate or low-level clerk.

Observing that status increases with the obtainment of educational credentials, however, does not explain *why* people give credence to the charisma of those credentials.

Filiality and Patriarchy

Before as now, self-cultivation implies cultivation of one's relationships to others—relationships which, now as before, are governed by patriarchal social arrangements. In this patriarchal context, the most important relationships are those with male ancestors and male offspring—fathers and sons. Despite the increasing status of women in the twentieth century, this basic structure of what might be termed *patriarchal motive* remains substantially unchanged from imperial times to this day. In the Chinese culture of meritocracy, examination performance provides a universal yardstick of filiality—one that measures the success of fathers and lineages as much as it does their examinee offspring.

Ostensibly a self-effacing act, filial obeisance to fathers and worship of male ancestors constitutes an idiom by which sons and others fashion themselves into potent social actors worthy of social recognition (Sangren 2000). Continuing the patriline by producing male offspring constitutes a sacred moral duty. Not giving birth to a son is considered the most egregious offense to filial obligation.[78]

In this context, the education of sons takes on paramount importance as a filial act. In Confucian doctrine, moreover, people are naturally good but easily corruptible—a belief that gives special significance to education. Consider the first two stanzas of *The Three Character*

[78] As the widely quoted Confucian adage goes, "There are three forms of unfilial conduct, of which the worst is to have no descendants" (*bu xiao you san, wu hou wei da*).

Classic (*San zi jing*)—a popular children's primer composed in the twelfth century and still widely read today:

> People at birth, 人之初
> are naturally good. 性本善
> Their natures are similar; 性相近
> their habits become different. 习相远
>
> If, negligently, not taught, 苟不教
> their natures deteriorate. 性乃迁
> The right way to teach, 教之道
> is with absolute concentration. 贵以专[79]

Note how this classic statement of Confucian (specifically, Mencian) educational philosophy emphasizes the fundamental similarity of all (male) human beings. Since differences between human beings primarily derive from differences in habits, not nature, education takes on fateful significance.

The precariousness of this process—the ease with which children's natures can deteriorate—makes the task of educating children a source of great anxiety. In this cultural context, failing in education is failing as a parent. It would be overly schematic to claim that deep-seated anxiety over the corruptibility of human nature plays the same role in Confucian culture that original sin does in Weber's Protestant ethic. But it would be wrong to claim, as Weber does, that Chinese are essentially unanxious subjects.

For Chinese parents, the production of filial, well-educated sons provides a supreme testament to the moral superiority of fathers. Thus just as sons accrue recognition by worshipping fathers, fathers do so by producing filial sons. This dialectics of mutual recognition has deeply existential significance, since this recognition concerns basic questions of potency or personhood. But these existential concerns for status and recognition are intricately bound up

[79] I take this translation from www.yellowbridge.com, an online guide to Chinese language and culture (http://www.yellowbridge.com/onlinelit/sanzijing.php, accessed July 6, 2015).

with practical ones for stability and security. As noted, Chinese parents see the education of filial children to be an insurance policy against the vicissitudes of old age.

In imperial times, women's prohibition from taking exams denied them full personhood, although women could achieve some measure of power and recognition by cultivating filial sons (Sangren 2000). Thus the expansion of examination enfranchisement to women in the twentieth century constitutes one of the largest social transformations of the contemporary era. The rate of change in women's status accelerated following the institution of the one-child policy in the early 1980s. Particularly in urban areas, where implementation of the policy was more successful, parents now have more incentive to invest in daughters, who are often only children (Fong 2002).

But it would be easy to overstate these changes. In China, as elsewhere, many women complain about unequal treatment. Now as before, "boys are valued and girls scorned" (*zhongnan qingnü*)—particularly in rural areas. The "inferiority" of women constitutes a basic element of Chinese gender ideology—one that is reproduced through examination culture despite this culture's claims to modernity (chapter 3). As elsewhere, therefore, women in China find themselves in a double-bind: To achieve full recognition as persons, they have to compete with men—for example, by achieving examination glory. But this act of competing with men may strip them of their status as "proper women." Nevertheless, singleton daughters who perform filiality by taking care of their parents have unprecedented freedom to defy disadvantageous gender norms (Fong 2002).

Universalism versus Guanxi

Note that a striking element of Chinese examination cultures, past and present, consists in how these cultures encourage people to relate the cultivation of particular relationships (especially filial relationships) to the universal yardstick of examination success—the ultimate measure of *self*-cultivation. In other words, universalism and guanxi are joined at the hip.

Although scholars are now relatively disburdened of Weber's Eurocentric assumptions, much work on China nevertheless tends to emphasize guanxi over bureaucracy, particularistic ties over universalistic selection.[80] By the same token, "modern" forms of economic and social organization in China—such as audit culture or "individualism"—are often attributed to Western or global influences, such as "neoliberalism" (Hansen 2015; Rofel 2007; Hansen and Svarverud 2010; Y. Yan 2009; Zhang and Ong 2008). Skeptics of such attributions point out their Eurocentric premises by highlighting historical and cultural continuities like the ones that I have identified in the above discussion (Kipnis 2007). Such continuities suggest that "modern" social organization results, at minimum, from multiple and overdetermined causes. We should thus be cautious of over-eager attributions of "modernity" to the impact of Western culture.[81]

From a longer-term perspective, therefore, what seems most conspicuous in Chinese society is the coexistence of highly developed forms of both guanxi and bureaucracy. As many have noted, China is a land of guanxi. For millennia, however, it has also possessed a highly developed bureaucracy. Although a fine-grained analysis would identify great variation between

[80] Consider the spate of useful ethnographic works on guanxi (Kipnis 1997; Y. Yan 1996; M. M. Yang 1994) but the relative dearth of similar work on Chinese bureaucracy. Of course, much work focuses on the interface of guanxi and bureaucracy (Wank 1999; Osburg 2013), but such works tend to privilege the former over the latter. In a popular register, cultural guidebooks of the "how-to-do-business-in-China" variety customarily emphasize the prevalence of particularistic connections or guanxi in Chinese society, but rarely point out the longstanding coexistence of guanxi with universalistic, rules-based forms of sociality, such as state bureaucracy or examinations, past or present.
[81] Inspired by Cohen (1984), I term such accounts "Western-impact narratives." As I argue in chapter 2, such narratives jibe with conservative forms of nationalist ideology that veil China's own imperialist projects, past and present.

periods and places, this co-occurrence of bureaucracy and guanxi characterizes Chinese culture to this day. As I adumbrate in the above discussion, this coexistence of guanxi and bureaucracy manifests itself both in Chinese subjectivity and institutions: On one hand, Chinese have long possessed a universalistic conception of personal merit, which they understand to be judged according to the standards of universal institutions like the examination. On the other, Chinese give great emphasis to the self's particularistic involvement with other human beings as governed by the "Five Relationships."

Note that these two forms of sociality correspond with two characteristic forms of social reciprocity, which are commonly glossed as 'market exchange' and 'gift exchange'. The former is broadly associated with rules-based organization, the latter with particularistic ties. I refer to the former as *universalistic reciprocity* or *organization reciprocity* and the latter as *particularistic reciprocity* or *guanxi exchange*.[82]

In the context of Chinese meritocracy, universalistic reciprocity mainly consists in the orthodox meritocratic ideal that "success reciprocates hard work" (*fuchu de nuli you huibao*). Thus I refer to universalistic reciprocity as *orthodox social reciprocity*. By contrast, guanxi exchange—such as nepotism, patrimony, and bribery—is unorthodox vis-à-vis meritocratic ideals, although such particularistic reciprocity may be quite legitimate vis-à-vis the five relationships.

[82] Distinctions similar to the one that I am drawing between universalistic or organizational reciprocity and particularistic or guanxi reciprocity are common in social thought. Consider, for example, Tönnies' distinction between Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft, Durkheim's (1964) distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity, Polanyi's (1957) between reciprocity and market exchange, or Foucault's (1990) between premodern/non-Western "sovereign power" and modern/Western "biopower." Anthropological theory also marks out a similar conceptual terrain with such distinctions as that between gift exchange and market exchange or between pre-capitalist and capitalist society. In the anthropology of China, Xiaotong Fei (1992) famously distinguishes between organizational and differential modes of association—a distinction that directly contributes to my own terminology. Conventional deployments of these analytical categories, however, tend to dichotomize their objects of analysis, portraying such objects as emblematizing either the one or the other social type. The employment of neat dichotomies, moreover, usually rests on implicit or explicit teleological thinking: Primitive social forms based on gift exchange develop toward complex ones based on market exchange.

I likewise distinguish orthodox social reciprocity from its supernatural analog—*cosmic retribution*—which merges the rationalistic Confucian ethic of self-cultivation with popular religious beliefs in gods, ghosts, karma, and cosmic retribution (Brokaw 1991). In meritocratic culture, cosmic retribution generally follows a similar calculating logic to that of orthodox social reciprocity; however, unlike orthodox social reciprocity, cosmic reciprocity transcends the rationalistic bounds of front-stage institutional life, involving magic, dreams, and past and future lives

At best, however, such distinctions form ideal types. Note, for example, that an important filial duty (particularistic reciprocity) consists in achieving examination success (universalistic reciprocity). By the same token, people understand merit to reflect moral superiority in both forms of reciprocity.

In addition, people may strategically deploy either form of reciprocity to frame events.[83] For example, I found that teachers sometimes used examinations (universalistic reciprocity) to exercise favoritism (guanxi exchange), thereby helping or hindering students according to some particularistic bias. Consider, for example, the prejudice encountered by a girl from a rural school system—the little sister of an informant—when she moved to an urban school. She was denied admission to a mathematics class in her new school when the teacher instituted a special examination during a personal interview to demonstrate the girl's "low quality." This one-off exam was held under the guise of universalistic fairness, but the girl's family felt that the teacher's behavior reflected bias against the girl's rural origin. By the same token, people might

[83] For example, money—conventionally associated with organizational association and market exchange—may become imbued with affect when money is presented as a gift. To take another example, two family businesses may frame each other as kin when they cooperate and competitors when they compete. It is more likely, therefore, that both forms of association—organizational and differential—form universals of human experience. Consider, for example, how the value of linguistic signs universally rests on an amalgamation of two types of structural opposition—one based on relations of difference (such as that between father and son, or person and thing) and one based on relations of affinity (such as that between different kinds of wood). By the same token, even in societies without money, barter exchange in my view predicates some abstract notion of value.

account for a student's examination failure in one context through lack of diligence (chapter 4) but in another context through cosmic retribution (chapter 6).

Consider another way in which guanxi and bureaucracy are intermixed. In imperial times, moreover, fellow examinees formed life-long particularistic ties of guanxi to one another and to their examiners—ties that had great social significance in Chinese social life (Man-Cheong 2004). In other words, the bureaucratic ritual of examination produced strong guanxi ties. The present-day analogs of such relationships are those formed among high-school classmates, on one hand, and between cohorts of such classmates and their teacher (especially their head teacher or *banzhuren*), on the other.

Mindful of such examples, I join calls to identify cultural difference not in general adherence to one or another ideal type but rather in a fine-grained analysis of how these tendencies combine in culturally specific contexts. But I nevertheless propose that the distinction between universalistic reciprocity and guanxi exchange forms a useful analytical heuristic. Consider, for example, how these terms suggest a more precise restatement of my thesis regarding the emergence of Chinese examination culture during the Tang–Song transition: As I have suggested, the social hierarchy flattened during this economic transformation, bringing about a corresponding increase in mobility—both social and geographical. With the ensuing social ascendency of parvenu farmer-merchants and their intermarriage with aristocrats, the particularistic ties of aristocratic bloodline lost their Heaven-sanctioned veneer of charismatic legitimacy. The examination filled this gap, replacing it with the universalistic, state-sanctioned legitimacy of the gentry—a relatively disenchanted form of authority.[84]

[84] In imperial times, however, the reach of the state did not penetrate below the level of individual counties. At the local level, particularistic ties with local gentry played the paramount role in governance. Then as now, moreover, particularistic networks dominated commercial life and—somewhat counterintuitively—played an important role in bureaucracy. Social historians identify the penetration of the state apparatus into the locality to be a watershed

In sum, these particularistic and universalistic forms of sociality do not seem to counteract or contradict each other. Indeed, their coexistence suggests that they exercise counterbalancing tendencies: Law serves as a foil and supplement for guanxi. Even if this tendency manifests itself differently in different places and times, it is far from uniquely Chinese. As the Roman historian Tacitus said, "the more corrupt the state, the more the laws."

Part II: Indeterminacy, Character, and Legitimacy

The Structure of Fateful Events

To sum up the discussion so far, the mature imperial examination emerged in the Song Dynasty as a relatively universalistic selection mechanism that provided legitimacy to the scholar-gentry elite and social cohesion to the state in a period of leveling social hierarchy and declining traditional authority.[85] Above all, the examination manifested and encouraged people to adopt a meritocratic principle, namely, the principle of perceiving one's success or failure in life to be manifested in one's individual self-cultivation as judged by an abstract, impersonal authority—a role that the Gaokao continues to play today.

As I emphasize above, however, examination success—now as then—closely correlates with membership to the elite. Thus I say that the form and content of examinations result from a hegemonic negotiation that recruits the assent of broad social groups but actually serves the interests of dominant ones. In other words, examinations cause people to misrecognize particular interests (the interest of the dominant elite) as universal (the interest of all). According to

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distinction between twentieth century and imperial China (Duara 2003). As mentioned, for example, the overwhelming majority of Chinese children, even in most rural areas, now receive some level of instruction in public school. Paradoxically, however, guanxi relationships remain important at every level of the social and geographical hierarchies, but particularly so in rural communities.

[85] To say that the examination functioned relatively rationalistically, however, is not to say that it was not surrounded by magic, mantic practices, and religious belief (chapter 6).

Marxian thought, this form of misrecognition or "symbolic violence" constitutes the paradigmatic operation of ideology in general (Marx [1932] 1970; Bourdieu 1977b). In short, the examination objectifies or alienates the social labor that contributes to educating individuals by representing this labor as a universalistic measure of individual charismatic merit—the test score. That is to say, the test score appears to reflect the merit of the individual alone but actually includes the efforts of teachers, parents, money, guanxi, and place. In sum, universalistic selection cannot be purified of particularistic influence.

But these descriptions of ideology—however suggestive—do not explain the paradox of legitimacy posed by such symbolic violence: To reframe the question, Why should people recognize as universal the particular interest of the elite?

As suggested, this paradox of legitimacy is a question of motive: Why do many people whom the examination institutionally disadvantages nevertheless remain captivated by the unrealizable ideal of examination fairness? And why do those people whose interests the examination serves give credence to its valorization of their purportedly intrinsic merit? Various candidates for explaining the paradox of legitimacy emerge from the foregoing discussion, including desires for mobility, social recognition, and prestige; the influence of the Neo-Confucian culture of self-cultivation; identification with status group; and filiality.

All these explanations provide important pieces of the puzzle but offer little account of the peculiarities of the examination ritual itself. To state the question bluntly, Why force children to ascetic extremes of study for twelve years, then, instead of judging them on that twelve years of performance, lock them in a room for two days, telling them that their accomplishment in that forty-eight-hour period will largely determine the outcome of their own, their parents', and their unborn offspring's lives? Why go through the whole ritual at all, moreover, when most evidence

suggests that the ritual takes only secondary importance to children's social background in determining life outcomes? In other words, Why does the examination ritual take the form that it does, and how does this form help perpetuate people's fascination with the exam?

One possible response to this question is to point out the fundamental incoherence of such social arrangements: Like all forms of universalistic law, the calculating rationality of the examination must inevitably fail to render social justice in the face of the singularity and particularity of human existence (Derrida 1989). Put another way, any social principle that masquerades itself as a universal rule will always be shot through with incoherence. Particularistic interests, which the ideal of universalistic selection purports to surmount, haunt that ideal. This uncanny incoherence threatens the sovereignty of the allegedly "modern" and "meritocratic" subject, producing deep anxiety.[86] Reactions to such anxiety vary. Some people react by forming new ideals—for instance, that of social revolution from below or social change from above. Others are driven by their anxiety to ever more excessive and ascetic performances of engrossment in the impossible ideal.

Without doubt, such internal contradiction represents one of the examination's defining attributes. In this abstract form, however, this account of incoherence offers little concrete explanation of why people remain committed to the ideal of universalistic selection despite its incoherence, and why certain groups abandon the examination and others do not. What is it about the examination and similar rituals that transforms them into such objects of fascination?

I therefore propose to inspect more closely the structure of the examination ritual itself. In the discussion above, I point out a genealogical connection between Chinese examinations and Yijing divination. In addition, I compare examinations to trials (calling exams "trials of merit")

[86] Freud's ([1919] 2003) "uncanny" refers to feelings of anxiety produced by "the return of the repressed." More specifically, uncanniness results when beliefs that people thought themselves to have surmounted return to haunt them. Such beliefs are often associated with earlier stages of development.

and to elections (pointing out the role that examinations play in undergirding political legitimacy). As I mention in the introduction, I draw inspiration from Goffman's analysis of *fateful action* to describe and account for such resemblances.

In the normal course of life, Goffman suggests, events are either *undetermined* or *consequential* but usually not both. "Undetermined" means subject to precariousness or chance. Think here of a coin toss: Before the toss, we do not know whether the coin will come up heads or tails. Similarly, in a boxing match we do not know beforehand who will win. "Consequential" refers to the capacity to create or destroy significant value. Think again of the coin toss or boxing match: In the coin toss, the loser loses the bet, the consequentiality of which depends on the wager. In the boxing match, the loser loses (at minimum) face whereas the winner's reputation and purse increase.

Many situations are undetermined but not consequential. Consider, for example, normal conversations between colleagues and friends. Other situations are consequential, but not all that undetermined. Under ordinary circumstances, driving a car is fairly safe, but one small mistake or unforeseen hazard can have mortal consequences.

As Goffman notes, however, certain events combine indeterminacy *and* consequentiality. This intersection forms a subset of relatively rare but symbolically important, ritually heightened events. Goffman terms this combination of chanciness and consequentiality *fatefulness*. Fateful events he terms *action*.[87]

Types of fateful action are many. In addition to trials and elections, fateful events include high-stakes examinations, athletic contests, and various forms of combat. Many types of economic activity likewise possess an element of fatefulness, including business deals, high-stakes market transactions, stock-market investment, and gambling. Various methods of making

[87] Note that this definition of action differs from a Weberian/Parsonian terminology.

a living from the land—including mining, fishing, and hunting—are characterized by fateful moments. Natural disasters and other such unpredictable events may also be understood as fateful occurrences. Many fateful events involve competition and conflict, but certain forms of artistic performance (especially improvisatory ones) highlight a more cooperative dimension of fatefulness, as do high-stakes professional interventions such as firefighting or life-saving medical care. As I note above, Kula and potlatch might be analyzed as cross-cultural exemplars of fateful trials of merit in relatively small-scale, unmarketized societies.

In short, fateful events seem to form a shared human experience. Cross-culturally, these events possess many shared characteristics, which can be explained by certain human commonalities. For example, all human beings possess a body, which they only imperfectly control. But cultures everywhere present people with situations in which mastery of the body is required. Thus, as Goffman suggests, the ability to maintain composure is everywhere prized.[88]

Fateful events demonstrate great variation, but everywhere involve bodily techniques and mental discipline. Depending on the event's precise structure, many other virtues besides composure may be important to participants. Most fateful events require some skill—or, as Goffman terms it, *primary capacity*—which must be diligently cultivated beforehand. In trials of endurance, the ability to persevere—variously termed gameness, resilience, grit, or persistence—becomes important. Goffman terms the cultivation of primary capacities and gameness "coping strategies." By contrast, "defensive strategies" include the employment of magical practices and categories—such as luck—to account for success or failure.

In general, therefore, fateful events provide participants with opportunities to display and valorize aspects of character that are held to be culturally sacred. But "character" is a complex

[88] In certain "post-human" scenarios, we can imagine cultures or beings that eventually entirely transcend the constraints of the human body, but such scenarios (for now) remain the domain of science fiction.

phenomenon: In particular, Goffman suggests that a peculiar "folk belief" persists about character—namely, that it both constitutes an enduring attribute of individuals *and* requires periodic proof. He accounts for this contradictory nature of character by suggesting that this paradox corresponds to society's need both to provide people with motive and to make them dependable—needs that he refers to respectively as the problems of "continuity" and "morale."

This paradox of character should remind the reader of the abovementioned contradiction between the objective and subjective poles of experience: "Continuity" corresponds to hierarchy and "morale" to volition. Goffman's approach to this contradiction is suggestive. Without further elaboration, however, his analysis remains highly functionalistic. That is, Goffman's account puts the cart before the horse: It accounts for the structure of action through its social effects of "morale" and "continuity" rather than through emergent properties of society itself. This limitation seems to arise from the fact that Goffman—mostly to his credit—rarely attempts to scrutinize phenomena that cannot be directly observed. But a less functionalistic analysis of the structure of character requires analysis of motive and thus subjectivity.[89]

Fatefulness and Fantasy

In particular, consider that fateful action forms the object of much fantasy and desire. In fact, most fantasies cross-culturally seem to focus on action. Consider how various forms of fateful event form the foundation both of many of the world's great epics and of many popular forms of entertainment. Certainly, China's own tradition of vernacular literature largely focuses on the stuff of action—conquest, rebellion, strategy, and deceit.[90] Goffman does not cite Freud, but if

[89] Indeed, I would suggest that any account that overlooks motive and subjectivity is likely to be functionalistic, even if this functionalism is not immediately evident.

[90] I am thinking here of China's great epic narratives, such as *The Three Kingdoms* (*San guo*) or *The Water Margin* (*Shui hu zhuan*), which tell tales of martial prowess, self-sacrifice, and heroism. These narratives, transformed into

we include romantic seduction (and resistance to seduction) within the category of fateful action, as Goffman does, then the overlap between fantasy and fatefulness seems to be fairly comprehensive. In other words, action forms the stuff of daydream and fantasy.

In his piece "The Creative Writer and Daydreaming," Freud ([1908] 2003) suggests that most fantasy revolves around two kinds of desires—status increase and sexual gratification. In Freud's view, moreover, these two motives are closely linked: Fantasies of romantic fulfillment usually accompany those of increase in status.[91] As I elaborate in chapter 4, it is true, for example, that Chinese high-school students routinely inject their daydreams of Gaokao success with interwoven fantasies of social and sexual fulfillment. But we do not need to consider these two motives—power and sex—to be everywhere and always linked in order to contemplate an even more fundamental desire that Freud attributes to such fantasies, namely, the desire to avoid non-being or death.

In the same piece, Freud draws some general conclusions about fantasy by analyzing common plot elements from popular literature. He observes that such literature invariably describes a series of events in which the protagonist experiences repeated brushes with death only to be saved in the last instant by his or her heroic demonstration of character. Note that such brushes with death could be literal, as in tales of adventure. But they could also be figurative, as in more prosaic dramas, which describe how the protagonist flirts with the social death of embarrassment, decrease of status, or loss of prestige. The reward for successfully conquering these moments consists in increased status and a reassertion of the self's potency. In romantic or

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novel form from oral storytelling in the imperial area, are told and retold until today, and form inspiration for many contemporary genres of storytelling, such as martial arts novels and films, which have become a global hit. More broadly, even apparently more prosaic tales, such as the great novel *Dreams of the Red Chamber*, involve constant themes of fatefulness, ranging from fateful occurrences, to exam participation, to seduction, and others.

[91] The overwhelming macho or masculine focus of most action probably speaks more to the patriarchal structure of the social arrangements that I here examine than to the basic structure of action itself.

dramatic tales, protagonists routinely redress undeserved inferiority through acquitting themselves heroically in fateful moments, thereby achieving their desired (and deserved) place in the social order. In Goffman's terms, these brushes with death—literal or metaphorical—are moments of fateful action.

Freud was writing about the popular novels of his day and culture milieu, but his analysis could easily apply to popular literature or action movies today. Indeed, this trope of flirting with death seems to constitute a perennial cross-cultural fascination. I cite again its ubiquity within China's own vernacular tradition.

The recurring trope of flirtation with death suggests an underlying, more fundamental motive, beyond any immediate regard for status increase and sexual gratification, that accounts for the cross-cultural fascination with fatefulness: As Freud suggests, this obsession seems to be caused by an underlying narcissistic fantasy of avoiding death and achieving immortality. I come back to this fantasy in my subsequent discussion of action. To set the stage for this discussion, however, I first elaborate on my suggestion that fateful events are rites of passage.

Fateful Events as Rites of Passage

In my introduction, I suggest that all fateful events are rites of passage. Thus I call fateful events "fateful rites of passage." At this juncture, it is be useful to expand on these thoughts.

As defined in van Gennep's ([1909] 1960) influential observations, rites of passage comprise any type of ritual transition from one status to another, including initiation ceremonies, mortuary rites, marriage, and others. In short, the term is broadly synonymous with ritual. As van Gennep explains, such rituals generally possess a triadic organization—separation, transition, and reincorporation. Remarking on these observations, Terence Turner (1977) notes that rites of

passage everywhere are well known to possess this organization; however, the reason why is little understood. To solve this riddle, Turner proposes a structural analysis. His insight is that the structural transformation from one social status to another necessarily involves three steps.

To appreciate Turner's point, consider the type of ritual most relevant to the present account—rites of initiation: During the separation phase, initiates undergo a transition from their normal status (say, that of children) to a liminal one (something in-between children and adults); during transition, they occupy this liminal status; then, during reincorporation, they undergo a transition from that liminal status into a new status (that of adults). In structural terms, this transformation consists of the movement from one pole of a binary opposition (child) through a liminal status to the contrasting pole of that opposition (adult). As Turner suggests, people use such transformations to manage the conflict that arises when social roles become ambiguous. Consider, for example, the tensions that are produced when young people find themselves in transition between child and adult status.

In Turner's analysis, such structural transformations invariably form part of a larger hierarchical order. This order is complex. It contains both relatively immanent, concrete entities in hierarchically inferior positions and relatively transcendental, abstract entities in hierarchically superior positions. Through rites of passage, initiates are transformed from less potent, hierarchically inferior social actors into relatively potent, hierarchically superior ones. This transformation is conducted by agents of even greater social potency. Such agents include initiators or elders but also, in many cases, these agents are conceived as impersonal transcendental forces—social institutions, supernatural powers, or deities. In the case of examinations, the examination itself—as conceived as an abstract, universal, calculating rationality—assumes the role of such a transcendental authority.

Now consider this analysis of rites of passage within the context of the foregoing discussion of fatefulness.

Even simple forms of fateful action conform to the triadic structure. Take for example a person who challenges another by bumping into him or her in the street. The implicit meaning of this challenge is that the person so challenged does not deserve the status of someone who should go unmolested. The challenger treats the object as if the latter were an inferior entity or non-person. In short, the challenge contests the status of the person challenged, placing him or her in a liminal state between adult and non-entity. The ensuing conflict—physical or verbal—settles the question. Many outcomes are possible: Both individuals can gain, lose, or maintain status. Or the victim can choose to ignore the slight. Acknowledgement of victory, defeat, or stalemate (or non-acknowledgement that any event took place) reincorporates both individuals into the normal stream of events.

Note, moreover, that games of chance—even simple ones—also possess this triadic structure: The bet is placed (separation); the coin flips through the air or the ball turns around the roulette table (transition); and the bet is settled (reincorporation). Indeed, I would argue that all forms of human social interchange possess such a three-part structure; however, only some events are fateful.[92]

Although we are not accustomed to thinking of most fateful moments as rites of passage, their fundamental structural similarity to rites of passage suggests that analyzing these events under a common rubric will increase analytical clarity.

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[92] Bateson (2000) suggests that all animal communication (not only human communication) necessarily involves chains of stimulus-response-reinforcement. Under normal circumstances, such stimulus-response chains form habitual behaviors. In Bateson's analysis, rites of passage and other exemplars of what I term fateful events are examples of what he terms Level-III learning—structural transformations of habitual relations. In this context, consider also Charles S. Peirce's analysis of semiosis as necessarily triadic. See, for example, Peirce ([1903] 1998). In addition, consider how narratives are usually divided into beginning, middle, and end. By the same token, the human career is usually divided into birth, life, and death.

In Chinese examination culture, children separate from early family life when they enter primary school; next, they enter a liminal phase of examination preparation that lasts twelve years, punctuated by subsidiary promotions between age grades and culminating in the Gaokao itself; finally, these children are reincorporated into society as adults—college students—after they receive the results of the final fateful examination. Note, however, that other modern, secular fateful events—such as elections, trials, or high-stakes market transactions—also follow this basic tripartite structure. For instance, consider an ideal market transaction, in which the price of a good is predetermined: Buyer and seller enter a phase of transition or liminality while they bargain over the price of the commodity. Reincorporation consists in transference of ownership, which transforms the status of both individuals.

Perceptions of Indeterminacy: Of Sambia Nose-Bleeding and Chinese Examinations

The reason that we do not customarily consider examinations and other such fateful events under the rubric of rites of passage may have roots in certain Eurocentric assumptions. Rites of passage of all kinds are clearly consequential to participants, but we are not accustomed to thinking of them as undetermined. Instead, we tend to think of such events as highly "ritualistic." However, many "modern" fateful events such as examinations, elections, and trials may be far less precarious than is customarily understood. Conversely, many rites of passage in "primitive" societies may involve a larger element of indeterminacy (and thus fatefulness) than is usually recognized.

Cross-culturally, indeterminacy is likely to assume an important role in rites of passage that legitimize social elites. Such legitimizing rites include not only initiation ceremonies but also many other tests of character. In different cultures, combat, hunting, or poetic performance

might be included in this category. Note, however, that from the perspective of initiators or experienced ritual specialists, the result of such events may not seem undetermined at all. In many initiations, for example, ritualists may decide who will succeed and who will fail, if indeed the ritual generates any failures. But from the perspective of low-level participants, such events may seem profoundly precarious.

Consider, for instance, Gilbert Herdt's (1981) classic account of initiation among the Sambia, a mountain-dwelling group who inhabit the Eastern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea. As part of their initiation, Sambia boys are subjected to ritual nose-bleeding.

> Nose-bleeding … is … the single most painful ritual act. It is secret; so when first performed on by boys by surprise, it turns into a forcible, violent assault that is probably close to authentic physical and psychological trauma. The technique is simple: stiff, sharp grasses are thrust up the nose until blood flows (Herdt 1981, 224).

The "esoteric" quality of the ritual is increased by the sound of wailing spirits (Herdt 1981, 225). As the initiators and anthropologist know, however, nose-bleeding is not fatal; moreover, the menacing spirit voices are actually produced by elders playing flutes behind screens of foliage. As they grow older, Sambia boys eventually become initiated into these secrets and learn to conduct nose-bleeding on themselves. Sambia particularly prize the ability to do so without flinching. Such self-control is emblematic of the ability to face violence calmly—the hallmark of Sambia masculinity and warriorhood (Herdt 1981, 204; 224; 246). By encountering a "genuinely traumatic event" within a controlled setting, Sambia learn composure. In their later lives, this trait becomes invaluable during unscripted tests of merit—spontaneous violent encounters with other warriors.

Just as Sambia initiates learn composure through repeated nose-bleeding, so do Chinese examinees learn "psychological quality" through repeated examination. In both cases,

indeterminacy—not knowing what is going to happen next—produces trauma, but this traumatic reaction results in the formation of composure (chapter 5).

I suggest that such examples of indeterminacy within rituals in small-scale, non-Western societies could be multiplied, particularly within initiation ceremonies. I propose that a reexamination of such ceremonies reveals that indeterminacy often plays an important role—at least from the perspective of initiates and outsiders. From the more transcendental perspective of initiators and insiders, who possess secret knowledge, the results of initiation may be a foregone conclusion, but for initiates the experience is likely to be perceived as fateful, and thus profoundly meaningful.

Although Sambia nose-bleeding and Chinese examinations display many cultural differences, these fundamental arrangements are remarkably similar. Ordinary participants in the Gaokao (students, teachers, and parents) little suspect the degree to which their chances for success are manipulated by hierarchically superior ritual specialists (officials and administrators), neither do they fathom the true degree to which the cards are stacked against their favor (chapter 3).

Indeterminacy, Limits, and Death

Indeed, I argue that indeterminacy—perceived or real—enables individuals to imbue rites of passage with transformative power: The forces that effect transformation in rites of passage derive efficacy and symbolic potency from the perception that they transcend individual human control.

By making people feel that there is something to be won, indeterminacy also helps solve what Goffman calls the problem of morale, or what I have called motive. In other words, without

unpredictability there is no commitment and engrossment. Few people are able to feel involved in a story after peaking at the last page.

In forms of action that are more closely associated with secular modern life, the element of indeterminacy is quite familiar. Consider the obsessions in sports with preventing doping, in finance with preventing insider trading, or in legal procedure with preventing inappropriate influence on judge and jury. In general, these obsessions revolve around thwarting illicit or backstage contamination of universalistic, rules-based procedures—the "rule of law"—with particularistic relationships. Such contamination is damaging because it disabuses people of the perception that the outcome of such events is undetermined.

Note, however, that even well-policed events are subject to critiques of the kind that Bourdieu raises: In "meritocratic" ritual, all participants are construed to be "equal before the law." In fact, however, they possess widely varying economic, social, and cultural capital. As I mention above, any form of rules-based selection can never be fully purified of particularistic influence. Thus all such efforts to police boundaries between licit and illicit participation, appropriate and inappropriate influence, are ultimately doomed—if not to ritual failure, then to incoherence. Yet without such energetic efforts to maintain at least the perception of indeterminacy, people are likely to lose morale, to feel no motive to participate. In sum, indeterminacy becomes in such events an indication of "fairness," although it remains important to differentiate between indeterminacy and fairness: The two terms belong to two different levels of abstraction or logical types: "Fairness" refers to a subjective judgment whereas indeterminacy refers to a structural characteristic of the event.[93] But without indeterminacy, an event cannot be deemed "fair" and thus legitimate.

[93] Thus an event can be undetermined without being "fair": As I note above, for example, a conversation with friends may be quite unpredictable, but "fairness" may not enter the picture. Or consider gambling in a casino, or

Sociologists of law have long pointed out that indeterminacy plays a central role in producing legitimacy within juridical procedure (Luhmann 1969). More broadly, scholars of play, games, and gambling have identified indeterminacy as a central component of ludic behavior (Caillois 1961; Huizinga 1950; Lindner 1950). In finance, indeterminacy assumes the guise of "risk." Note, moreover, how indeterminacy legitimizes market transactions: In the aforedescribed ideal market transactions, buyer and seller are free to negotiate their price. Because of this indeterminacy, we say that the market price is ultimately legitimized by a transcendental force—the "invisible hand" of the market.

Thus indeterminacy plays significant social roles. However, attempts to account for the importance of indeterminacy mostly take the category for granted, considering it as an *a priori* of human experience without tracing its more fundamental connections to sociality and subjectivity (Luhmann 1969; Caillois 1961; Huizinga 1950).

Goffman primarily discusses indeterminacy as a relatively monolithic category, which he labels "chanciness." Recall that I propose further disaggregating the category to improve analytical clarity: I use the term *precariousness* to index uncertainty that results from the agonistic interaction of two or more individuals, as in a boxing match or competitive examination. By contrast, I reserve the term *chanciness* to describe aleatory factors that people perceive to lie outside of their control. Note that most moments of action actually combine both types of indeterminacy. In examinations as in other forms of action, fatefulness is formed by this admixture of the aleatory and the agonistic.

Indeterminacy serves dual purposes, both giving people hope of a favorable outcome and certifying the outcome with the transcendental authority of a force beyond personal control. As I

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even the Gaokao: Both these events may be (to some degree) undetermined, but people may contest the degree to which each is "fair."

subsequently argue, precariousness is more associated with the former purpose, chanciness with the latter.[94] In moments of action, people must reconcile these two aspects of indeterminacy, which correspond respectively with the subjective and objective poles of experience. Recall, for example, that skillful Yijing divination consists in holding these subjective and objective poles in productive tension. All forms of action cross-culturally possess this tendency to create productive ambiguity between subjective and objective explanations of outcome.

I suggest that this conception of productive tension bears a close resemblance to various philosophical and social-theoretical notions of how people make meaning and imbue existence with significance. Consider, for example, Kant's ([1781] 1996) notion of freedom or "being the cause," Hegel's ([1807] 1979) influential dialectics of mutual recognition, and Piaget's (1962) interplay of accommodation and assimilation. In such theories, subjectivity results from a dialog or dialectics of self and world, including other selves. In existentially inflected versions of these dialectics, the individual must heroically struggle against society to achieve meaning, even as he or she inhabits social traditions. This trope appears in Heidegger's ([1927] 2010) conception of "authenticity," which helps inspire Sartre's (1956) discussion of "choice." A similar concern with meaning-making already pervades Marx's ([1932] 1970) descriptions of how the division of labor impinges on human freedom. In Freud's ([1919] 2005) theory, this division takes up residence in the psyche: The superego internalizes the mores of the ruling class, imposing social norms (the reality principle) on the id (the pleasure principle). This compromise formation produces the ego.

In my description of this productive tension between the objective and subjective poles of experience, I draw particular inspiration from one of Freud's interpreters, Donald Winnicott. In

[94] However, these two concepts of indeterminacy should mainly be considered as heuristic categories between which much slippage occurs.

Winnicott's (1991) formulation, this tension indexes a fundamental human dilemma: This is the dilemma of whether "I" create the world or the world creates "me." Once again, "I" and "me" refer here to the subjective and objective poles of being or existence. In Winnicott's analysis, meaningful, "creative" existence consists *not* in answering this question definitively but rather in leaving the answer ambiguous. Winnicott's conception of creativity thus bears striking resemblance to the practice of Yijing divination as described by Mark Edward Lewis, as well as to the above-mentioned existential and phenomenological concepts. In all of the above, the goal of practice (and existence) is to strive after a productive ambiguity between the objective and subjective poles of experience rather than to resolve that ambiguity decisively.

In short, this productive tension between objective and subjective explanation appears to be necessary to creativity, that is, existential significance and meaning making. When the tension goes out of balance, life is evacuated of meaning. At one extreme, overvaluing one's role in determining the world results in psychosis—a condition in which one overwrites the world with one's personal fantasies. At the other, overvaluation of the world's importance in determining subjectivity produces neurosis—a feeling of impotence and lack of control that is characterized by a compulsive obsession to follow the demands of social laws and norms. [95]

That such theories mainly derive from a Western point of reference need not concern us overly much. As evidenced in the above discussion of the Sinological literature, indigenous Chinese conceptions of merit from early times revolve around a similar tension between the

[95] To anticipate another form of critique, some will say that this concern for the objective and subjective poles of existence rests on unsound Cartesian assumptions. Indeed, in normal involvement in the world—what Heidegger calls everyday circumspection—these subjective and objective poles lose their quality of opposition. Yet when the world—social or otherwise—confronts us as an impediment, limit, or object of theorization, the subjective and objective dimensions emerge in starker contrast. Thus even Heidegger does not seem to reject the Cartesian "I think therefore I am." Rather, he merely asserts that traditional Western metaphysics place too much emphasis on the "I" and not enough emphasis on the "am." By the same token, moreover, both the Western theories of action that I adumbrate above, on the one hand, and indigenous Chinese practices of action, on the other, center not on reinforcing a simplistic Cartesian divide of the subject and object but rather on how to suspend, reconcile, or transcend the division between subject and object—a division that I assert forms a universal human dilemma.

objective and subjective poles of experience. Indeed, I would argue that the cross-cultural commonalities in rites of passage and action suggest that this tension between objective and subjective poles of experience—structure and agency—forms a common human concern.

In the final analysis, I suggest that this concern derives from the universal reality of death. Death or non-being forms the prototype and epitome of all limits, contingency, and precariousness in human life. As mentioned, moreover, a desire to cheat death, if only momentarily, fuels the human interest in action. In fact, human desire—whether described as motive, morale, care, freedom, reason, or whatever—probably originates in this fundamental human concern to transcend the limits of existence, of which death is the ultimate symbol and arbiter. Action thus forms an attempt to achieve symbolic mastery over absence and death.[96]

Ordinary life, however, revolves around concerns that are—superficially, at least—more prosaic. The limits that rites of passage enable people to maintain and transcend consist (for the most part) not in the ultimate limits of life and death but rather, as Turner points out, the boundaries between different statuses—the social "death" and "rebirth" of transition from one social role to another.

Such social limits are often imposed by other people, which helps account for the agonistic dimension of action—precariousness. At an abstract level, these limits consist in the social division of labor, which relegates individuals to constraining roles in that division; more concretely, however, people experience these limits in the form of other people, who impose social constraints on one another.

Philosophers have produced elaborate descriptions of such conflicts. Consider, in particular, Hegel's ([1807] 1979) description of the dialectics of mutual recognition in the

[96] According to Freud, all ludic and, indeed, symbolic behavior has this quality. Consider his famous discussion of the game of "fort" and "da" in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle.*

master–slave dialectic. Yet Winnicott's approach reveals a more playful and potentially cooperative dimension of action that likewise deserves emphasis. In much action—for example, certain forms of improvisatory artistic performances—the agonistic dimension is muted or subdued. As these theories suggest, moreover, the experience of meaning and potency requires limits. Cooperation and aggression, therefore, should not be seen as opposites but rather as complementary categories. By the same token, even openly agonistic forms of action, such as athletic competition, contain a strong cooperative dimension.

But the limits of indeterminacy are imposed not only by the agonistic precariousness of interaction with other humans but also by chanciness—the aleatory dimension of indeterminacy. We customarily consider chanciness to consist of random or happenstance events—the role of the dice or the fall of the cards. In many cases, however, people use "chance" or "luck" to account for the limits imposed by other people, including aspects of personhood that they usually consider to be relatively immutable, such as place of origin, gender, and class. In China, as in many other places, people say that such aspects of personhood comprise one's "fate" (*ming*). Social theorists sometimes refer to this category of the fated as the "contingent," by which they mean cultural-cum-natural facts. In scientistic views of the world, by contrast, such "facts"—for example, gender—are sometimes deemed "natural." As Marx ([1932] 1970, 53) implies, however, the "natural" seems to constitute a catch-all category for things that transcend voluntary human control.[97]

Be they considered "cultural" or "natural," such facts of life constrain people's scope for action. But such facts are usually, if not always, in some sense socially produced, thus subject to

[97] This category of the "natural" seems to be shrinking year by year as technological advances make the culture/nature distinction appear increasingly arbitrary. Such developments may represent the conditions of possibility for true incorporation of "nature" into the historical dialectic, as envisioned by Western Marxists such as Lukács (Jay 1984; Lukács 1972).

historical change in interpretation and perception. Such collective facts, however, do not change easily.[98] But people still act to change their lot and change society. Therefore the distinction between precariousness and chanciness is often one of framing: When people take an active role toward social arrangements, they tend to see the division of labor as the precarious result of struggle. When they take a passive role toward social arrangements, they tend to see that division as the aleatory product of chance. Indeterminacy thus represents both an opportunity for and limit to self-determination.

As I suggest above, however, the ultimate limit of desire—in symbol and in fact—is death. In its structure as an event, moreover, action always contains a fundamental reminder of death. The triadic structure of rites of passage, which Turner attributes to structural transformation, also mimics the basic structure of existence—birth, life, death. But the role of death in human meaning-making, and thus in the creation of legitimacy, is not always appreciated.

In sum, indeterminacy in its various forms stands in for death or non-being, imposing limits on human narcissism, without which we would descend into nihilism. Without limits, life becomes devoid of meaning. An excess of limits, however, produces a similar yet complementary result—a zombie-like existence of neurotic ineffectuality. Indeterminacy represents incoherence in social arrangements, but ironically this incoherence is what allows people to imbue those arrangements with meaning and, therefore, legitimacy.

[98] As Marxist theorist Frederic Jameson, therefore, "History is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis" (1982, 102).

The Existential Dilemma in Theory and Practice

My purpose here is not to produce a more refined dialectics of subject and object. In other words, I do not aspire to invent a better mousetrap for catching the proper relation between these antithetical terms. Instead, I suggest it may be productive to refocus attention on how both social theory and social practice perennially revolve around identical existential concerns. In other words, the social theorists who debate the degree to which examinations actually provide social mobility, on one hand, and the examinees who take those examinations, on the other, are both trying to work out the same fundamental dilemma—one on the level of social theory, the other on practice.

That is, fateful events and related practices, such as divinatory technique, seem to accomplish in practice what such theoretical conceptions describe on an intellectual plane. What from the first-person perspective of individual meaning-making consists in an existential dilemma (Did I create the world or did the world create me?) is, from the third-person perspective of macro-social analysis, a question of structure and agency (Did the world create people or do the people create the world?). As in divination so in theorization: The best prized answers to this question are those that leave proper room for ambiguity, complexity, and nuance.

Through taking the Gaokao, therefore, individuals in a sense answer for themselves the question of social arrangements and personal motive, structure and agency, posed in the philosophical debates discussed above and in the theoretical concepts (habitus, hegemony, interpellation, and so on) that I mention in the introduction: Each person comes to his or her own understanding of the degree to which he or she is author or product of his or her own fate. In other words, this social-theoretical question is also an existential one with which everyone must

grasp, to the ultimate effect of reproducing (and sometimes transforming) the very social arrangements that give rise to that basic existential dilemma in its many forms.[99]

Character, Luck, Fortune, and Fate

The foregoing comments characterize action and rites of passage in general as they exist in any human culture. As a particular manifestation of this larger cross-cultural potentiality, the ideology of meritocracy in China possesses many culturally idiosyncratic characteristics. These culturally specific characteristics nevertheless are derivable from the humanly common structure of action. They also bear a remarkable, though not total, resemblance to other cultures of meritocracy across time and space. Although I focus in the following on the modern Chinese examination, I suggest that many of the structural characteristics that I discuss are common to the historical civil examinations, as well as to other meritocratic regimes.

Recall that students, teachers, parents, and administrators widely agree that success in the Gaokao demands at least four virtues, namely, (1) "diligent study" (*nuli xuexi*); (2) "persistence" (*jianchi*); (3) a "good attitude" or "psychological quality" and (4) "luck" (*yunqi*). In view of the foregoing discussion, it is useful to recapitulate and elaborate on my contention that these four virtues represent culturally specific transformations of the general structure of action.

In Goffman's vocabulary, diligent study represents a "coping mechanism" specific to the examination, persistence a form of "gameness." Great efforts of self-abnegation in diligent study

[99] No matter how institutions are transformed, however, the basic existential dilemma persists. Moreover, this dilemma is likely to endure so long as human existence is subject to limits, if only in finitude and death. In my view, therefore, no one is likely to come to a final, authoritative response to this question, in theory or in practice. Indeed, attempts to do so often foreclose the possibility of human meaning-making and creativity. But our perennial struggle with this dilemma is important. As the above-mentioned Chinese philosophical debates tell us, the questions raised by this dilemma, whether approached in theory or practice, concern fundamental issues of social justice. Just because the ultimate achievement of justice may be unattainable does not mean that we should not keep trying .

of course play an important role in the Gaokao because the primary capacities needed for success in the examination must be developed over the course of many years (chapter 4).[100]

Persistence and diligence are similar, but persistence emphasizes the importance of maintaining one's efforts in the face of frustration and defeat. Recall that students preparing for the Gaokao take regular rehearsal examinations. Successful examinees learn not to take as definitive a sub-optimal performance on any one of these countless practice examinations; rather, they learn to persist in the face of defeat.

The virtues of diligence and persistence conform closely to the expectation that the examination requires and cultivates hard work; thus their importance should not surprise us. By contrast, the emphasis on the virtues of "good attitude" may seem at first counterintuitive, especially given the widespread critique of the examination for its great emphasis on rote memorization. Experienced teachers, however, constantly underscore the importance of "good attitude" (*hao xintai*). Similar terms include psychological quality" (*xinli suzhi*) "the ability to deal with changes" (*yingbian nengli*), or "a cool temperament" (*lengjing*). These terms refer to the examinee's equivalent of a soldier's ability to stay calm under fire, or the Sambia warrior's ability to maintain poise during self-mutilation. On examination day, Chinese say, "attitude, not knowledge, determines success" (chapter 5). Such differences in "attitude" can result in large score variations, as demonstrated by the experience of the garbage collector's son that I describe in the introduction.

Diligence, persistence, and attitude represent orthodox virtues that closely correspond to orthodox notions of meritocratic reciprocity. The virtue of luck, by contrast, departs from this

[100] Reforms of recent years have modified the examination format somewhat to deemphasize memorization, but diligence remains the most heavily emphasized aspect of the examination experience (chapter 4). This emphasis on diligence accords with the fundamental promise of Chinese meritocratic reciprocity, namely, that success reciprocates hard work.

orthodox schema. In public, teachers and students emphasize orthodox virtues. In private, however, they will readily admit that "luck" (*yunqi*) plays and important role in examination success: Recall that luck is important because a myriad of chancy factors outside individual control can influence success on test day, including the test venue, the weather (venues are not air conditioned), one's health, one's seating arrangement, and of course the test questions that one receives.

In Goffman's analysis, luck and associated terms such as "fortune" (*mingyun*) or "fate" (*ming*) form "defenses," which console subjects by pointing toward supernatural explanations for the vicissitudes of examination success. My foregoing analysis suggests a critique and refinement of this formulation. Note the similarity of such terms to magical concepts widely discussed by anthropologists from other cultural contexts, such as "mana" and "hau." Drawing inspiration from anthropological studies of mantic practice and witchcraft (Siegel 2006), I suggest that such "null signifiers," as Levi Strauss (1987) calls them, point toward the fundamental incoherence of social arrangements. As mentioned, people never experience the promised meritocratic reciprocity of the examination ("success repays hard work") to be fully coherent. Of course, many variations in examination performance can be explained through variations in diligence, persistence, and composure; however, when these orthodox explanation no longer suffice, people turn to unorthodox ones. As students say, "hard work and success will never reach an equal ratio" (*nuli yu chenggong bu hui cheng zhengbi*). Concepts such as luck and fate therefore help people account for the gap between ideal and reality. Demonstrating the peculiar Chinese cultural predilection to quantify phenomena according to ratios, a popular Hokkien song proposes that success is "70 percent hard work and 30 percent fate"—a statement with which people widely agree.

“Fate” and “luck” of course differ in important respects. As I suggest above, “fate” encompasses factors beyond individual control, including place of origin, gender, family background, and certain life events. By contrast, “luck” is relatively changeable and can be affected by behavior. Attitudes toward fate and luck vary. No matter what their precise religious predilections, however, most Chinese express a fundamental belief that both luck and fate are subject to the laws of cosmic retribution. Unlike orthodox social reciprocity, the cosmic reciprocity that governs luck and fate exceed the narrow bounds of the examination experience or even those of the individual’s lifetime. As the popular saying goes, “good reciprocates good, evil reciprocates evil; it is not that deeds remain unreciprocated, but only that the time has not arrived.” Thus, people understand their ancestors’ deeds and their own actions in this and past lives to influence the outcome of meritocratic competition. Cosmic retribution forms a sustained topic of discussion in chapter 6. As I elaborate there, students, parents, teachers, and administrators engage in many types of magical and religious practices to affect luck and exert control over fate.

In combination, “fate” (*ming*) and “luck” (*yun*) form the compound “fortune” (*mingyun*)—a concept that highlights the amalgamation of objective and subjective factors in life outcomes. In other words, fortune points toward the very existential dilemma around which action revolves. People’s contention that the examination “decides fortune” (*jueding mingyun*) or that one can use the examination to “change fate” (*gaibian ming*) give expression to the widespread perception that the examination provides people with a real opportunity to exert some control over a world that is largely given to them.

The Gaokao as Sentimental Education

I propose that the discussion thus far brings into relief two hitherto underappreciated aspects of the Gaokao and of many similar examinations in general.

First, as a form of action and trial of merit, the examination is deeply moral. Critics of the Gaokao, and of norm-based standardized examinations more widely, suggest that that such examinations merely require people to regurgitate knowledge; moreover, they say, the rankings that such examinations produce are largely meaningless since such rankings render small differences in ability highly consequential (Soares 2012; D. Yang 2006). Similar debates raged around the imperial civil exams (Woodside 2006). Thus, this anxiety over whether or not examinations select people of real quality probably constitutes an intrinsic aspect of all similar trials by examination. Of course, these critiques deserve careful consideration, but they largely miss the point of examinations—what Robert K. Merton might call their latent function. Similar to Geertz's (1973) suggestion that the Balinese cockfight forms a kind of "sentimental education" in which Balinese learn how to act and feel like Balinese, I suggest that the Gaokao forms a moral education in which Chinese learn to embody and express their highest cultural values—a role that fateful moments of action play in many if not most societies.

Second, consider the concern with luck, fate, and fortune that the examination generates. This concern with supernatural power represents not a secondary or subsidiary aspect of the examination experience but rather a central one—perhaps, indeed, its crux. In a sense, the examination is like a machine for generating fate. Consider the testimony of the student who said, "your hand moves a little, five points are gone, and your whole fate is different." In the Gaokao, small score differences, which students can only attribute to random causes, have fateful consequences.

The crucial factor in the structure of the examination that enables it to produce this concern with fate is indeterminacy in both its forms as chanciness and precariousness. As I suggest in the foregoing analysis, unpredictability—perceived and real—enables the examination to occupy the position of a transcendent social power, thus authorizing the examination to conduct status transformations on individual examinees.

Now consider the two aspects of indeterminacy separately. Recall that precariousness refers to the agonistic dimension of the examination. Crucially, for examination competition to be precarious, this competition must be perceived to take place front-stage within the time horizon of the event itself. In other words, the results are not legitimate if they have been "fixed" beforehand. This dimension of indeterminacy, therefore, corresponds with the widespread perception that the results of the examination are determined during the event front stage by rules-based measures of merit rather than ahead of time backstage through particularistic relationships or privilege. Precariousness is therefore required for the examination to acquire the imprimatur of legitimate state authority.

Indeterminacy, however, also presents itself in another aspect—chanciness. In its aspect of chanciness, indeterminacy encourages people to invoke even greater transcendental authorities—those of luck and fate. As Evans-Prichard (1937) notes in his classic treatment of Azande witchcraft, just because events can be explained rationally does not preclude the invocation of fate. Consider students who lose composure on the examination upon encountering a particularly difficult mathematics problem (a frequent occurrence). Such students may reason that they deserve a bad score because of uncareful preparation or lack of "psychological quality"; however, they may easily also wonder why they encountered that particular math problem on that particular day. Only luck and, ultimately, fate seem to provide answers to such questions.

Attitudes toward the examination resemble in this respect those toward popular divination. Jordan (1982) reports that diviners simultaneously take account of and suspend disbelief in the statistical characteristics that underlie mantic practices such as the casting of "moon blocks"—kidney-bean-shaped wooden dice (*poe*) that Chinese use to communicate with gods: Even as worshippers manipulate their tosses of the blocks to increase their chances of receiving the results that they desire, they paradoxically understand these results to express divine will. In spite of such manipulation, the aleatory element of mantic techniques undergirds the perception that these techniques reveal the workings of transcendent powers, such as divine will or fate. That is to say, people (consciously or unconsciously) manipulate divination to increase their odds of receiving a favorable result. During such manipulations, however, they do not altogether eliminate the element of chance, which enables them to suppose the existence of an unseen agency. Stamping mantic practices with the authority of something beyond human control, this aleatory element encourages believers to perceive divination to give voice to divine powers.

Since indeterminacy in both its aspects as precariousness and chanciness plays such an important role in undergirding the legitimacy of the examination, authorities are understandably very concerned with maintaining the impression that the examination is not determined by guanxi or money or social difference but by merit (chapter 3)

As I note above, however, people are aware (although not necessarily well informed) about such inequalities. Thus, just as belief in divination requires suspension of disbelief, acceptance of examination requires some degree of self-deception or, as Sartre (Sartre 1956) might say, bad faith. This self-deception proceeds in different ways for successful and unsuccessful candidates. As mentioned, those who do well naturally tend to recognize the

authority of the test because it has recognized their merit (Bourdieu 1979). Upon receiving recognition for one's merit through performance on a test, one's merit becomes predicated on the validity of the test. For example, focus groups of recent examinees at top-tier Xiamen University muscularly contended that Gaokao scores derive "20 percent from social factors, 80 percent from individual ones." But students in my rural field sites were more likely to contest this view: From positions lower on the central-place, it is generally easier to see that human and social resources concentrate themselves in hierarchically advantaged positions. From the peripheral vantage, the notion that reward reciprocates effort thus appears emptier (chapter 2).

But even for socially advantaged examinees, success requires great diligence and composure: Well-qualified examinees can "choke" (*kaoza*) on test day while so-called "dark horses" (*heima*) may become "examination heroes" (*kaoshi yingxiong*). Therefore, those who fail to fulfill their hopes for examination success tend to blame their own lack of diligence or "psychological quality."[101] In other words, the examination experience generates theodicies of the gap between expectation and experience (Sangren 2012). As one teacher said, the exam provides occasion both for families and for schools to dispel fantasy and come to terms with reality. Thus Chinese say that they must "recognize fate" (*renming*).

Conclusion: The Chinese Spirit of Meritocracy

As an important rite of passage in which Chinese learn, express, and preserve their most sacred social values, the Gaokao plays a central role in the Chinese culture of meritocracy. But the virtues of diligence, persistence, composure, and luck undergird success in any realm of activity that Chinese identify with one's calling or *shiye*.

[101] Anagnost (2004), Murphy (2004), and H. Yan (2003) among others similarly argue that quality discourse helps legitimate social inequality.

Chinese may identify any grand life project as a calling. All such projects demand great self-sacrifice for the achievement of individual recognition and collective glory. In the Maoist era, people spoke of the "revolutionary calling" (*geming shiye*). In contemporary parlance, people embrace "charitable callings" (*cishan shiye*), for example, through philanthropic and humanitarian response to natural disasters. In ordinary life, the notion of calling includes any entrepreneurial activity, small and large, ranging from hawking wares on the street, to farming, to founding a multinational company. People discuss such entrepreneurial callings mainly in counterdistinction to the distasteful practice of working for others as a wage earner (*dagong*): Young migrant workers dream of the day when they can save enough money to embark on their own entrepreneurial calling—a hair salon, a clothing shop, or a café.[102] Even social failures—"mere" wage-earners—may embrace compensatory life projects: Consider how most cab drivers, construction workers, and garbage collectors say that everything that they do is "for the children," which, as mentioned, usually means for their children's education. More broadly, official developmentalist ideology considers education and modernization central callings of the Party-state: According to this ideology, the mission of education (*jiaoyu shiye*) is essential to the mission of modernization (chapter 2). And for better or worse, education in China is synonymous with education for examinations (*yingshi jiaoyu*), these fateful rites of passage.

Note, therefore, how these diverse conceptions of calling illuminate the central significance of the Gaokao to reproducing belief in the Chinese culture of meritocracy: For many people, like the garbage collector's family that I discuss in the introduction, success in the calling of educating children serves as a touchstone for success in life more generally—success that

[102] Consider, for example, the personal narrative of a young woman from rural Jiangxi Province. She had gone to school in the countryside but spent her summer holidays in Xiamen, where her mother worked in a hotel as a maid. After failing the Gaokao, she followed her mother to Xiamen to work in the same hotel as a fitness trainer. Upon returning home to get married in her mid-20s, she traveled to Hangzhou, where she had close kin, to open a small clothing shop—an endeavor she described as "creating her own calling" (*chuangzao ziji de shiye*).

ultimately constitutes proof of divine favor or karmic merit. Therefore, the examination life forms the central endeavor around which people organize a broad array of economic and social activity ranging from migration to marriage, from home-buying to entrepreneurship. In sum, the exam is central not only to the reproduction of persons but also to that of social institutions and to the economy more broadly.

The Gaokao is certainly not the only form of fateful action available to Chinese. For the "people of talent" who pursue orthodox forms of success in the Chinese meritocracy, the Gaokao constitutes only the "threshold examination" for many future tests. Nearly all professionals must face a dizzying array of examination-based professional qualifications.

Every calling, moreover, no matter how quotidian, has its moments of action. As mentioned, many market transactions possess the basic structure of action. Other popular forms of action include orthodox ones, such as stock market investment, and unorthodox ones, such as the lottery or other forms of legal or illegal gambling.

Within the broader culture of meritocracy, Chinese generally consider all such forms of action to test the same four sacred virtues that the Gaokao does. Note, for example, how one lottery fanatic in Xiamen—a migrant worker from Jiangxi, Old Li—described the virtues necessary for success in this chanceful calling:

> To be successful, you must possess four characteristics. First you must have persistence (*jianchi*). Second, you must maintain a calm attitude (*xintai ping*). A bad attitude produces misjudgments (*chansheng cuojue*). Third, you have got to have some luck (*yunqi*). And finally you have to have knowledge and wisdom, which you accumulate through research (*yanjiu*).

Such views of gambling contradict suggestions that gamblers want "something for nothing." Gamblers, like the parents of examinees, search for proof of virtue and cosmic merit in their earthly successes. In short, even enthusiasts of less orthodox forms of action insist that success demonstrates their possession of orthodox virtues.

But the paradigmatic expression of orthodox virtue remains success in the Gaokao. Despite glaring inequality, Chinese persist in their view that the Gaokao constitutes the country's "only relatively fair social competition." Whereas they see ordinary competitions as ruled by guanxi backstage ahead of time, they say the Gaokao is determined by individual merit front stage on test day. Without indeterminacy, ordinary competition cannot produce a belief in legitimacy. People therefore say that ordinary competitions are "empty," "fake," and "counterfeited," whereas the Gaokao is relatively "real," "true," and "genuine."

This structural reversal explains both people's enduring fascination with the Gaokao and its sacredness as a social ritual: What normally consists in mere "counterfeit" performance—the universalistic reciprocity of organizational fairness—becomes relatively solid and real in the Gaokao. Perceiving the examination thus to be both consequential and undetermined, the majority of Chinese consider it to be a fateful event.

As I note above, however, people on the socioeconomic fringes of society are failing to experience the Gaokao as fateful. The dispossessed no longer perceive the examination to be undetermined, and thus no longer to be different from any other empty performance. The middle class no longer perceive the examination to be consequential, and thus no longer worth sacrificing their children to. But whether they see the Gaokao as their only way of "changing fate" or seek other ways of so doing, people of widely divergent backgrounds possess a common desire to achieve social mobility. For most Chinese, social mobility is synonymous with geographical mobility up China's hierarchy of central places. For those who remain committed to the examination, such mobility represents the exam's greatest consequence—its greatest source of value.

CHAPTER 2

HIERARCHY, MIGRATION, AND POPULAR CONCEPTIONS OF "DEVELOPMENT" AND "OVERPOPULATION": *"WATER FLOWS DOWNWARD AND PEOPLE MOVE UPWARD"*

A peripheral, mountainous, and underdeveloped county of Ningzhou Prefecture, Mountain County formed the rural apogee of my regular fieldwork sojourn to and from the metropolis of Xiamen through the intermediary agricultural city of Ningzhou, capital of Ningzhou Prefecture. In return for my service as a volunteer English teacher at Mountain County Number One High School, school administrators gave me free rein to observe the lessons of my Chinese colleagues.

In late March, 2012, I attended a geography lesson on urbanization. This particular class, which was among those that I had instructed in spoken English, was publically termed a "slow" or "bad" class (*manban; chaban*)—and, in secret, a "garbage class" (*laji ban*)—because it consisted overwhelmingly of farm children with poor test scores. The teacher started the lesson by directing students to open their geography textbooks to page 29, which described "The service functions of cities of different hierarchical levels." Opening my book, I was surprised to find the hexagonal lattice-work diagrams familiar to me from G. William Skinner's (1964) employment of central-place theory—an important conceptual tool in my own research (figure 6). According to this theory, central places—villages, towns, and cities—form nodes in a hierarchical network: Each central place—which constitutes the "command post" of local market activity—possesses a multitude of connections to other places both lower and higher than it on the central-place hierarchy (Skinner 1964; Skinner 1980). In aggregate, these connections

produce a fractal-like model of economic geography. This model facilitates the identification of spatial patterns and temporal rhythms in economic activity, broadly conceived.

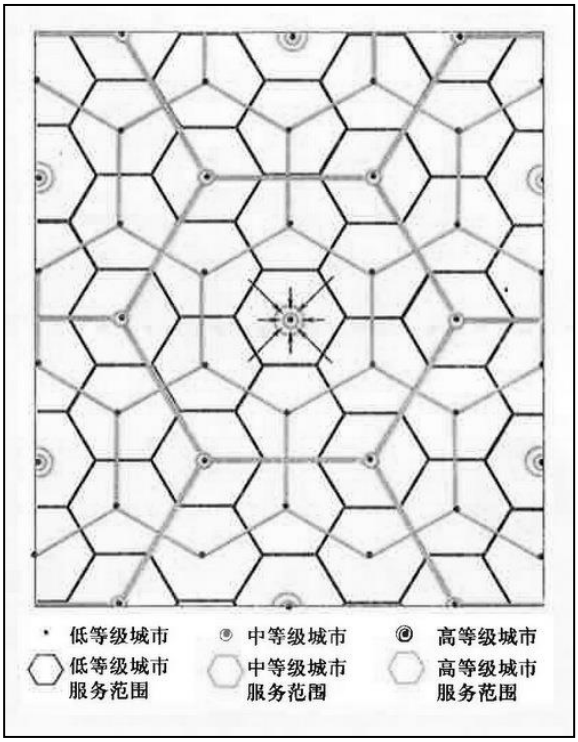

Figure 6: Illustration of central-place theory from a high-school geography textbook
Source: Kecheng Jiaocai Yanjiusuo 2009, 29.

Visual aids helped students enliven this abstraction: An accompanying cartoon illustration on page 32 of the textbook (figure 7) depicted a father and daughter in the countryside under the caption, "low income; social services lacking." Nearby, farmers labored in the field next to another caption—"quick population growth puts great stress on the land." One of the farmers appeared to be gazing thoughtfully at a city in the distance. Hovering over the city, captions read, "many opportunities for employment"; "level of social-welfare guarantees high"; "cultural facilities complete"; and "traffic convenient."

"Urbanization can be divided into two types," the teacher explained, "urbanization of places [*quyu de chengshi hua*] and urbanization of the population [*renkou de chengshihua*]. … As the population urbanizes, many things improve, becoming more elevated [*tigao*]—living conditions, everyday habits, thoughts, even level of edification and all-around…"

"Quality [*suzhi*]!" suggested a student.

"Yes, quality, including physical quality [*shenti suzhi*]," the teacher replied. "The main reason for migration to the cities is that city people have higher quality and a higher education level."

Figure 7: "Schematic diagram of driving forces behind the rural population's migration to the cities"
Source: Kecheng Jiaocai Yanjiusuo 2009, 32.

A notoriously protean term, "quality," or *suzhi*, refers to an individual's all-around deportment and sensibility but may also be disaggregated into individual components, such as "moral quality" (*daode suzhi*), "physical quality" (*shenti suzhi*), and "psychological quality" (*xinli suzhi*) (Kipnis 2006).[103] "Merit" or "character" might serve aptly as an alternative translation for the term, which can roughly conceptualized as an emic term for unconscious bodily and mental disposition or "habitus" (Bourdieu 1990; Mauss [1934] 2007).

Apparently, this geography textbook had appropriated Skinner's theory (without attribution) toward the un-Skinnerian purpose of reinforcing Chinese-state modernization ideologies.[104] According to these ideologies, "quality" is concentrated in urban areas and

[103] Chapter 3 provides a broader bibliographic review of the *suzhi* literature.
[104] Central-place theory was originally conceived by William Christaller, a German Nazi geographer. In an apparent reference to Christaller, the geography textbook states that the theory was developed by a "certain German scholar" for understanding Germany, but can be used to analyze China. For over a half century, however, Skinner and the many anthropologists and historians whom he influenced have been doing exactly that, developing the theory into an influential body of scholarship that Skinner calls regional analysis. In my experience, Chinese anthropologists, historians, and geographers are widely aware of Skinner's work, which they generally admire. Therefore, it would be surprising if the textbook designers were not cognizant of Skinner's work. Thus it seems unsual that they do not

increases with development, which follows a Western model. Continuing her lesson, the geography teacher presented the historical view that underlies these assumptions: Urbanization was an inevitable global trend that commenced in the West during the Industrial Revolution (mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries). Developing countries, like China, were perpetually "playing catch-up with the West" (*yao ganshang Xifang*).

Note the irony. This geography lesson on urbanization itself constituted part of the urbanization process. This recursive relationship could be observed on multiple levels. On one level, the lesson was inculcating students with the ideology of pursuing "socialist modernization" under the Party-state's stewardship. On another level, students' purpose in memorizing this ideology was to succeed in the Gaokao—a purpose that they pursued with the goal of moving up the central-place hierarchy (or, in the language of the lesson, of "urbanizing" themselves). Whether or not students "believed" in state ideology, therefore, was almost immaterial; they enacted it in their own life projects, albeit for their own interests. For them, education was synonymous with self-transformation through migration. On multiple levels, then, the lesson contributed to the "urbanization of the population."

In a memorable turn of phrase, the founder of Mountain County's only private school, Mr. Jian, summarized some cultural implications of these arrangements as follows: "Destiny is a type of movement" (*yuanfen shi yi zhong yundong*) he said. The term "destiny" (*yuanfen*) is similar to similar terms such as "fate" (*ming*) or "fortune" (*mingyun*) but places a greater emphasis on serendipitous connections with persons and places. By pursuing self-transformation

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credit him. Consider, however, the remarks of a Chinese sociologist, who confided in me the following: "Skinner really causes Chinese social scientists to lose face. His theories are so useful for understanding China, but were developed by a foreigner." Thus I suggest that the omission of Skinner's name from this geography textbook possibly reflects the textbook designers' bow to Chinese political correctness, which is heavily inflected with nationalism: In the context of Chinese nationalism, it is not politic to include a foreigner's fundamental contributions to understanding China in the orthodox examination canon.

through educational mobility, parents and children aspire to achieve what Mr. Jian called a "better platform for destiny" (*gei yuanfen yi ge geng hao de pingtai*). This goal likewise applies to the strategy of sending children overseas to study, which has become the first step toward emigration for many families. By the same token, most families that pursue less orthodox forms of mobility—such as undocumented sojourning to cities to find temporary work—do so in the hopes of accruing the social, cultural, and economic capital that is necessary for their children to pursue orthodox forms of mobility. In the terms of the geography lesson, all such phenomena contribute to the "urbanization of the population."

But another irony presents itself: Urbanization has diminished rural students' chances of urbanization. As elsewhere in China, many local primary schools in Mountain County have shuttered their doors (*chedian bingxiao*) in recent years as local officials encouraged people to move into more centrally located settlements, leaving an education gap in rural areas.[105] Mountain County's best high-school teachers, moreover, have fled the countryside. Many now work at newly opened private schools in Ningzhou, where the education bureau has encouraged the partial privatization of education. Still others have moved to Xiamen, taking advantage of municipal programs to accelerate the city's urbanization by "introducing talent" (*yinjin rencai*) from rural places. Like their teachers, students of means and ability likewise move up the central-place hierarchy, pursuing their education at centrally located high schools. In short, the countryside faces brain drain. In the face of such widening educational and economic disparities, many students of rural origin drop out of school to seek work in urban areas without completing their compulsory junior-high education.[106]

[105] Local official described these efforts to me. For a description of such efforts in other areas of China, see Chan and Harrell (2010).
[106] See useful articles by Chung and Mason (2012) and Yi et. al. (2012) on school dropouts.

In sum, these urbanization policies—the "urbanization of places"—represent vast efforts to transform the central-place hierarchy itself by spreading civilization and "quality" into the periphery, even as these efforts harness the desire for self-cultivation and self-transformation of people located in peripheral places to urbanize themselves—the "urbanization of the population."

In my field sites, the hubris of this urbanization project is emblemized by an ambitious long-term government plan to merge Xiamen and Ningzhou into one massive megacity by urbanizing the intermediary countryside—one of many such projects across China (Gransow 2012). Locals skeptically observe, however, that the stark differences in income and infrastructure between the two cities, encompassing a massive area of hundreds of square kilometers, will only gradually disappear, if ever.[107]

If education is the urbanization of people, then urbanization might be conceived as the education of places: Both projects of transformation—two aspects of the same process—aim to accelerate China's progress toward the ever-receding telos of modernity. But the utopian desire that has justified such projects—variously figured as the "improvement of life" (*shenghuo shuiping de tigao*), the "development of the country" (*guojia de fazhan*), or the "pursuit of socialist modernization" (*shehuizhuyi xiandaihua jianshe*)—has produced catastrophic consequences, including social disparity, a widening rural–urban opportunity gap, and environmental degradation (Gransow 2012; Huang 2008; Weller 2006; H. Yan 2008).

Why, then, do people continue to subscribe to the variant of meritocratic ideology that I term *developmentalism*? This chapter suggests that developmentalist ideology is *objectified* in the central-place hierarchy: I mean that people find seemingly objective proof of that ideology in their experiences of centrally located places as relatively "modern" and peripherally located ones as relatively "backward" (*luohou*). These experiences of the central-place hierarchy reinforce the

[107] The creation of such megacities constitutes a fundamental policy directive of the Chinese state.

nearly ubiquitous belief that China is "overpopulated and underdeveloped" (*renkou duo, dizi bao*)—a belief that provides people with a ready justification for every allegedly "necessary evil" (*biyao zhi e*) of development, including the Gaokao.

The uniting theme of the chapter is *consequentiality* or *value*: How do people experience mobility and development as an increase in value, and how is this value related to their experiences of the central-place hierarchy? Several subthemes come into play in this discussion, including the desire for mobility as a transformation or "extension of self" (Munn 1986); the "polycentric" experience of most Chinese, who are neither simply "urban" nor "rural"; population control under the "one-child policy"; the historical narrative of national humiliation under Western colonialism; and the experience of mobility as a method of producing social critique and insight.

The chapter consists of four sections. The first section (Overview) summarizes my main argument. Part I, "Looking Inward from the Periphery," considers how teachers and students in the countryside view the central-place hierarchy, including the role that "the West" (*Xifang*) plays in that view. Part II, "Looking Outward from the Center," reverses this perspective by following a group of teachers, based in the city, on a journey into the countryside.[108] Note that the chapter's organization borrows a heuristic conceit from the above-described Chinese high-school geography lesson: Part I may be said to focus on "the urbanization of the population," Part II on "the urbanization of places." But these two "urbanizations" form inseparable moments of a single process. In the final section, therefore, I unite the strands of my argument by

[108] In Mandarin, movement into the periphery is generally conceptualized as going "down" (*xia*), whereas movement into the center is conceived as going "up." Thus during Cultural Revolution times, urban youth were "sent down to the countryside" (*xiangxia*). However, I employ the prepositions "inward" and "outward" to avoid mixing metaphors in English and because, as I describe below, the periphery in my field sites, as in many places in China, consists of highland, mountainous areas, which becomes relevant in how I describe the phenomenological experience of existing in the periphery.

discussing various systematic variations in experience along the central-place hierarchy, which I term *hierarchical effects.* In this discussion, I suggest that mobility forms a method of developing social critique—both for anthropologists and our interlocutors.

Overview: Mobility, Polycentrism, and Developmentalist Ideology

In China, as elsewhere, people use spatial movement to symbolize and effect status transformation. My Chinese colleagues, students, and friends almost invariably associate personal transformation with movement up and down China's geographical hierarchy of central places. The transformation that most Chinese families desire, moreover, consists in the extension of their potential for social efficacy up the central-place hierarchy from relatively peripheral places, which they conceive to lack opportunity and value, to relatively central places, which they conceive to possess these qualities (Xin Liu 1997; Nyíri 2010; Skinner 1976). The ability to advance this extension I term *mobility*. Spatial and social mobility, in other words, refer to two parts of the same process. Although Chinese are experiencing increasing ambivalence toward orthodox methods of achieving mobility, particularly the Gaokao, they generally associate movement up the central-place hierarchy with an increase in status and efficacy. Mobility thus forms a Chinese version of what Nancy Munn (1986) terms the "spatiotemporal expansion of self." A time-honored Chinese idiom expresses the common-sense or doxic certitude of natural law that adheres to these arrangements: "Water flows downward and people move upwards" (*shui wang dichu liu, ren wang gaochu zou*).

Note that this "extension of self" up the hierarchy does not necessarily imply abandonment of connections to places lower on it. But official documents—such as state identity cards (*shenfenzheng*), household registration documents (*hukou*), and passports—generally

represent personhood as statically centered in one place. This bias seems to have wide currency. Even some anthropological accounts reduce mobility to the simple relocation of an individual's base of operations from a point lower on the hierarchy to one higher on the hierarchy—a process glossed as "migration."[109] But such accounts reinforce a false dichotomy between the "rural" and the "urban." Wittingly or unwittingly, reductive accounts of this type reflect an urban bias that aligns with the metropolitan interests to which the state now largely caters: Most well-established metropolitan elites in places like Shanghai and Beijing have little need of maintaining strong personal associations with the countryside (although they may dream of going overseas) but have vested interests in limiting and controlling the mobility of people from rural areas, whom they ambivalently perceive as a threat or a source of cheap labor (H. Yan 2008).

At places lower in the hierarchy, by contrast, people rely on various sojourning strategies to make a living (Skinner 1976). People therefore rarely fit into a neat urban/rural dichotomy: Families generally maintain multiple centers of activity. They achieve mobility or "extension of self" by establishing perches or "platforms" (*pingtai*) in new places while maintaining their associations with old places. Long-term migration does take place, but constitutes a more complex and ambiguous process than it is widely perceived to be.

In sum, the lives of most Chinese crisscross or traverse multiple levels of the central-place hierarchy. Therefore, the experience of ordinary Chinese combines phenomenologically disparate social worlds. These worlds range from relatively "rural" places, conceived as "backward" (*luohou*) and "traditional" (*chuantong*), to relatively "urban" ones, conceived as "advanced" (*xianjin*) and "modern" (*xiandaihua*). I term this inhabitation of many worlds

[109] Thus I join calls to focus on people's movements rather than on defining those movement in terms of static origins and destinations (Chu 2010; Fong 2011; Nyíri 2010; Skinner 1976). See also Bernard and Rita Gallin's work on rural–urban migration in Taiwan (Gallin and Gallin 1982; Gallin 1974).

polycentrism. Increasingly, moreover, Chinese with the means and ability often pursue education and employment in other countries (Chu 2010; Fong 2011). Therefore, many families' polycentric experiences extend to transnational destinations, like the United States.

To establish perches in urban areas, people may employ *orthodox* or *unorthodox* mobility strategies. The former result in the establishment of official household residency (*huji*) in urban places whereas the latter generally do not. Orthodox mobility strategies include taking the Gaokao or investing in urban real estate; unorthodox ones include various forms of itinerant labor and even criminal activity.[110] In theory, people's household registration ties them to one place but tens of millions of sojourning migrants survive without having household residency in their places of work (K. W. Chan and Zhang 1999; Zhang 2001). However, equal access to local citizenship rights and social benefits—including public education—requires official household residency.

As I discuss in chapter 1, college study ("the only way out of the countryside") provides most people with their only feasible method of obtaining residency in urban places.[111] In short, sending a child to college enables a family to establish an officially recognized new urban platform of activity for themselves and their family. Other methods of establishing urban household registration—such as investment in real estate or the accumulation of "points" within state-controlled migration schemes—are beyond the reach of ordinary rural Chinese (Zhang and Tao 2012). But even most urban Chinese perceive the Gaokao to be China's "only fair competition."

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[110] In his influential discussion of imperial-era mobility strategies, Skinner (1976) employs the terms "orthodox" and "unorthodox" with slightly different connotations, using the former as a synonym for lawful and the latter as a synonym for unlawful.

[111] The household registration of college students transfers temporarily to the city where they go to college. Upon graduation, they can move their registration to the city permanently if they find an employer who is able to sponsor them. Parents and spouse can then elect to subsume their household registration under that of the new urban resident.

For these reasons, education remains the preferred mobility strategy. Moreover, orthodox educational mobility provides many advantages. Such mobility accompanies access to more desirable marriage partners, jobs, and social connections or guanxi—in short, to status (*diwei*), prestige (*weiwang*), and security (*wending*).[112] As one rural teacher put it, "The goal after which rural high-school students are striving [*fendou de mubiao*] is very clear—get out of the countryside, change themselves, change their [social] environment, give their own future children a better opportunity."

In sum, then, students and their families perceive the examination as highly consequential. Now as in imperial times, however, success in examinations usually follows movement up the hierarchy rather than preceding it (Hartwell 1982; Skinner 1976; X. Wang et al. 2013; D. Yang 2006; Yeung 2013). Therefore, students' Gaokao scores correspond closely with social background and position in the central-place hierarchy, forming what I term a *score-value hierarchy* (chapter 1). Despite such social disparities, however, examinees perceive the Gaokao to provide genuine opportunity for mobility—a perception that is not altogether incorrect but greatly exaggerated (chapter 3). Since people see the Gaokao as both consequential *and* undetermined, they experience the exam as a life-altering moment of fateful action—a chance to "change fate" or "transform fortune."

People understand their "individual fortunes" (*geren de mingyun*) as linked to the "national fortune" (*guojia de mingyun*). This association forms a core component of China's ideology of developmentalism—the current variant of China's long-standing culture of "meritocracy." According to developmentalism, "individual development" (*geren de fazhan*) and

[112] In addition, the Gaokao is a "threshold" test that provides access to other social competitions, such as the national civil service exam, the accountant's examination, and the lawyer's examination.

"national development" (*guojia de fazhan*) are closely connected. As one high-school student told me,

> National development [*guojia de fazhan*] and individual development [*geren de fazhan*] reciprocally rely [*huxiang yilai*] on each other and reciprocally promote [*huxiang daidong*] each other. The development of the country promotes [*cujin*] individual development; diligent individual struggle [*geren nuli de fendou*] further drives [*jin yi bu daidong*] national development.

Since the Gaokao's reintroduction in 1977 at the dawn of the Reform and Opening era (1978–present), the development policies of the Chinese state have both responded to and helped produce a desire for this reciprocal project of self- and national transformation. Aspiring towards "socialist modernization" (*shehuizhuyi xiandaihua*) or "socialism with Chinese characteristics" (*Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi*), these policies have included market reforms, breakneck urbanization and industrialization, the one-child policy, and, in recent years, the expansion of higher education (Greenhalgh 2005; Huang 2008; C. K. Lee 2007; H. Yan 2008; Yeung 2013). These social-engineering efforts paradoxically both build on cultural continuities with China's imperial past *and* incorporate teleological thinking from Marxist ideology and international development models: On the one hand, people widely perceive the Gaokao to be the cultural heir of the imperial exam; on the other hand, they see China to be developing toward modernity.

In official Party-state Marxism, this vision of modernization includes the ultimate goal of reaching a Utopian communist society after passing through the historical stage of capitalism. Despite its Marxist framework, however, official ideology has a strong nationalist substrate. To justify the pursuit of development, Party-state ideologues invoke the humiliations suffered by China under Western gunboat diplomacy and semi-colonialism in the nineteenth century (Gries 2004; Y. Guo 2004). Embraced in both official historiography and by people at all levels of Chinese society, this narrative of traumatic national humiliation buttresses the desire for

development by framing development as a project of national redemption—the "great restoration of the Chinese people" (*Zhonghua minzu weida fuxing*). As I elaborate below, however, this narrative of national humiliation is largely based on an anachronistic and teleological official historiography that reduces the advent of "modernity" and "capitalism" in China to Western impact, that is, the influence of Western models and ideas.

In sum, Chinese widely perceive development to be a method of erasing perceived national humiliation by "catching up with the West" (*ganshang Xifang*); however, these efforts have produced mixed results. In contrast to official narratives, most of China's poverty reduction occurred during the 1980s (Huang 2008). In the 1990s and 2000s, economic investment has focused on urban areas and large enterprises; moreover, vast human and economic resources have flowed up the social and geographical hierarchies into the cities (Ibid.). In addition, development has devastated the environment. The most conspicuous consequence of environmental degradation consists in China's ubiquitous health-threatening smog, dubbed the "airpocalypse" (*kongqi mori*); however, water pollution and desertification, among other problems, likewise constitute existential threats to many Chinese (Lora-Wainwright 2013; Lora-Wainwright et al. 2012; Tilt 2010; Weller 2006). Educational expansion (*kuozhao*), moreover, has created a glut of college graduates, resulting in widespread under- or unemployment, which disproportionately affects people of rural origin (Kipnis 2011; Yeung 2013). In addition to creating better standards of living for many, therefore, development has increased rural–urban inequality and decimated whole villages and ways of life (Cho 2013; Nyíri 2010; Zhang 2001).

People in China widely acknowledge such problems, but their thinking about them contains a paradoxical element: On the one hand, Chinese invoke the problems of development to make qualified arguments *against* development. On the other hand, they likewise take these

problems to provide evidence for the *necessity* of development and thus for the inevitability of current social arrangements—a drive toward development shepherded by the autocratic Party-state.

This tautological reasoning relies heavily on people's common-sense or doxic belief in the reality of "overpopulation": People widely appeal in the last analysis to "overpopulation" in their account for most social ills.[113] Note, moreover, that people widely associate "overpopulation" with "underdevelopment." This association is codified in the nearly ubiquitous view that China suffers from "overpopulation and a weak foundation" (*renkou duo, dizi bao*), where "weak foundation" is mainly understood as lack of development and "lack of citizen quality" (*quefa de guomin suzhi*). But there is nothing historically necessary about this discourse. During the Maoist period, the Great Helmsman himself, Mao Zedong, ridiculed "overpopulation" until late in life.

People associate "low quality" and underdevelopment with the "traditional" predominance of particularistic connections or guanxi, considered by many to be a cultural relic of China's "feudal" (*fengjian*) past.[114] This combination of underdevelopment, "low quality," and guanxi form what people call China's "national conditions" (*guoqing*)—the incontrovertible, commonsense truth of its cultural reality, which can only be transcended, if ever, through continuous development.[115] This discourse of "national conditions"—a close synonym for culture—has a rhetorical effect at the level of the nation that "fate" (*ming*) does at the level of the

[113] Greenhalgh (2005; 2010) provides useful discussions of people's notions of "overpopulation." See also Anagnost's (1997b) discussion. Complementing these approaches, my argument emphasizes the ideological role that this notion of "overpopulation" plays in domains of social life that seem at first far removed from the politics of population control.

[114] The relationship between connections and quality, however, is complex since the ability to cultivate connections can be a mark of quality. For useful accounts of the relationship between quality and development more broadly see Murphy (2004) and Hairong Yan (2003). On "overpopulation," see Anagnost's (1997b) discussion in *National Past-Times.* Chapter 4 also expands on this relationship.

[115] Refer to Xiuwu Liu (1996) for a useful discussion of the genealogy and translation of *guoqing* in the context of higher education.

individual: “National conditions” or culture can be used to explain every ill. In particular, people reason that the examination system—however fraught— provides the only possible type of “fair competition” given China’s overpopulation.

The belief in overpopulation has long drawn vehemence from the traumatic sacrifices that families make to comply with population-control policies. Even amid current state efforts to reform China’s population control, ordinary Chinese widely consider the national population to be “overly numerous” (*guo duo*). Although policies restricting parents to one child have largely been abandoned, population controls remain in effect. Since the belief in overpopulation plays such an important ideological role, this belief is unlikely to be abandoned anytime soon. This vehement belief in overpopulation reinforces a correspondingly vehement belief in the necessity for development.

Indeed, Chinese population-control policies do not merely form a response to the Malthusian specter of overpopulation, be this specter real or imagined. Rather, Chinese policymakers conceive population-control policies as a eugenicist program to hasten China’s development away from its “weak foundation”—that is, to speed the country’s transition from “quantity to quality” (Dikötter 1998; Greenhalgh 2005). These policies aim to increase population “quality” by encouraging “excellent birth” (*yousheng*). The Chinese term for “eugenics” is the “science of excellent birth” (*youshengxue*). In short, population control constitutes part of the above-mentioned ambitious society-wide social-engineering program, which is designed to transcend China’s “national conditions.”[116]

[116] Demographers have long noted that GDP inversely correlates to population growth. Attempting to account for the paradox by which household size decreases when household income increases, economists and demographers argue that the concentration of parental investment in fewer children produces human capital of higher quality if reduced quantity (Becker 1993; Chesnais 1992). Reverse-engineering such arguments, Chinese policymakers reasoned that restricting parents to one child would hasten China’s demographic transition to development by raising the “quality” of the population (*zhiliang; guomin suzhi*) (Greenhalgh 2005; Murphy 2004). But population-control

In commonsense understandings, therefore, the specter of overpopulation coupled with the promise of development provides the main rationale for the Party-state's existence. This understanding of development creates a meritocratic narrative of national transcendence—one that casts the Chinese people in the heroic role of the conquerors of hardship: In spite of its "overpopulation," China is said to be developing toward the telos of modernity.[117] According to this narrative, the Chinese people assume this heroic role under the leadership of the Communist Party, which bases its legitimacy on guaranteeing the conditions for development.

For individuals, "development" is synonymous with mobility. According to the logic of such developmentalist ideology, the spatiotemporal expansion of the self (the "urbanization of people") is reciprocally related with spatiotemporal expansion of Chinese society as a whole (the "urbanization of places"). With development, people say "life is getting better all the time" (*shenghuo yue lai yue hao*). The utopian logic of national development—the notion that "things are getting better all the time"—relies on the meritocratic logic of orthodox social reciprocity—the notion that "success repays hard work." In this narrative, hard work and suffering lead to personal and national redemption and strength. Despite increasing numbers of Chinese dropping out of school or seeking education abroad, I argue that the Gaokao remains the premier social institution linking individual mobility with national development. Through diligent striving to succeed in the examination, people link the transformation of their individual fortunes to the transforming fortune of the nation.

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policies also aspired to effect the direct genetic improvement of the Chinese race (*Zhongghua minzu*) by encouraging people to "bear excellent children" (*yousheng*) (Dikötter 1998; Greenhalgh 2008). Population control thus aims to kill two birds with one stone, simultaneously solving the problems of "overpopulation" and "underdevelopment."

[117] Anagnost (1997a) similarly relates "quality" and "overpopulation" to a search for national transcendence, which she says children embody as depositories of "quality." See also chapter 4.

Note that the strongest support for developmentalist ideology comes from the hierarchy of central places itself: Processes of urbanization, industrialization, modernization—in short, development—have objectified these mutually reinforcing logics of social mobility and national development into the spatial hierarchy of places.[118] Consider, for example, how the spatial hierarchy contains a temporal dimension: People regard rural places to be relatively "backward," urban places to be relatively "advanced." By providing further support for these perceptions, the objectification of social labor in individuals' test scores supplements the objectification of developmentalist ideology in the hierarchy of places. As I argue below, such *hierarchical effects*, as I term them, provide seemingly self-evident confirmation for the reality of "overpopulation and a weak foundation," and thus for the necessity of development.

In reality, however, the polycentrism of Chinese families complicates any such neat binary distinctions. Moreover, the problems that accompany development cause many Chinese to feel deep ambivalence about Chinese modernization: As I elaborate below, many people perceive the rule of law, universalistic competition, and other aspects of urban modernity to be "empty," "false," or "simulated." By contrast, they see human relations in the countryside to be relatively "down-to-earth" and "real." In other words, many Chinese see modernity as performative in the dramaturgical sense: According to this view, urban places play front stage to a rural backstage. Inspired by the social critiques of my interlocutors, I term this phenomenon the *staging of modernity*. By contrast to the relative "emptiness" of Chinese development, "the

[118] I draw inspiration for this discussion of objectification from Bourdieu's (1990) use of the term to describe the instantiation of culture in space.

West" (*Xifang*) represents to most Chinese a transcendental source of genuine value, that is, a place where modernity is not performed but "authentic."[119]

Such perceptions index a critical awareness of society—one that mobility helps to create. In other words, mobility (or the lack of it) relates intimately to how people experience the geographical hierarchy and to their ability to critique that experience. I suggest that mobility renders the familiar strange, thus making people in a sense anthropologists of their own society. In other words, mobility defamiliarizes everyday assumptions, giving people outside or etic perspectives into the cultural worlds that they traverse. This is a familiar anthropological conceit—the uncanny insight of the itinerant stranger.[120]

Mobility has this uncanny effect, albeit with varying results, whether it be mobility of an orthodox variety (farmers striving to become scholars) or mobility of an unorthodox variety (the peripatetic lives of migrant workers and other itinerant strangers). As I point out below, unorthodox mobility is widely identified with the popular outlaw imaginary of the "land of lakes and rivers" (*Jianghu*), which is derived from the vernacular tradition of martial-arts literature (Boretz 2011; Ge 2001; Ruhlman 1960). This phrase traditionally describes the peripatetic life of bandits, fortune-tellers, wandering medicine men, and outlaws but has been borrowed by migrants of all types to describe their experience of itineracy. Thus the term refers not so much to a place but to the experience of being in-between places. In short, the "land of lakes and

[119] "*Guowai*" technically refers to all foreign countries, but this is the marked usage of the term. People generally employ the term to mean *Western* countries and the United States in particular, which is the unmarked referent of "*Guowai*." See also Fong's (2011) discussion.

[120] Freud's (Freud [1919] 2003) notion of the uncanny draws inspiration from the etymology of the German term, *unheimlich*, which literally means "un-homely"—in short, something that should seem normal or "at home" but is not. I suggest that mobility creates such uncanny experiences by defamiliarizing both one's "native" cultural world and the worlds that one crosses.

rivers" resembles what Deleuze (1983) calls the "war machine"—an anarchic, itinerant social potential that the state, to remain viable, must harness for the purpose of its own reproduction.[121]

The Gaokao constitutes the state's primary tool of recruiting such ordinary people's desires into the state-orthodox project of "meritocratic" developmentalism. Thus the examination actually works at cross purposes with its manifest goal of promoting mobility: In contradiction to this stated goal, the Gaokao guides, manages, and controls mobility. In this way, the Gaokao ekes out mobility in small drops while bolstering the ideology of meritocracy. In other words, the Gaokao obstructs revolutionary social change and critical insight even as it gives ordinary people hope of "transforming fate."

In sum, mobility forms not only an object of analysis but also a method of research: My own account of the hierarchy derives from a process of co-experience and co-theorization that I undertook in countless encounters with people while I sojourned up and down the hierarchy.

Part I: Looking Inward from the Periphery—"The Urbanization of the Population"

Mountain County Elites, Brain Drain, and the National Fortune

During my second year of fieldwork in late 2012, I was introduced to Mr. Jian, the above-mentioned owner of the only private school in Mountain County, a junior high school. Mr. Jian's college classmate, Ms. Zhang, made the introduction. Ms. Zhang occupied a mid-level administrative position—head of English pedagogy (*jiaoyanzu zuzhang*)—at Mountain County Number One High School. Mr. Jian and Ms. Zhang had studied together in the mid-1980s at the teacher's college in the provincial capital, Fuzhou. Like Mr. Jian, who had started life as a teacher, Ms. Zhang moonlighted as an entrepreneur: On the side of her official occupation at

[121] I draw inspiration for my use of "stranger" in this context from Simmel's ([1908] 1971) essay of the same name, which highlights the deep unease that strangers cause, but also the social insight that they possess.

Mountain County Number One, she ran a successful furniture company with her husband, the principal of a local physical education school.

Both Mr. Jian and Ms. Zhang owed their start in life to success in the Gaokao. In the thirty-five years since the beginning of China's Reform and Opening in 1978, they had risen from humble backgrounds to become Mountain County elites. Thus Mr. Jian and Ms. Zhang personified both the power of the Gaokao to transform individual fortunes, on the one hand, and China's changing fortunes in an era of rapid national development, on the other. The paths that Mr. Jian and Ms. Zhang took in the 1980s, however, differed greatly from the paths taken by students since the late 1990s—the era of higher-education reform and expansion. Before policies shifted in the 1990s, the state had assigned jobs to college graduates under the work-assignment system (*fenpei zhidu*), a holdover from the socialist planned economy. As was customary, therefore, state planners compelled Mr. Jian and Ms. Zhang to return to their rural places of origin. At the time, college graduates were vanishingly rare: Only 1 to 5 percent of test-takers gained admission to a four-year college (chapter 1). The rarity of a college degree, coupled with the traditional status accorded to teachers, granted people like Mr. Jian and Ms. Zhang great prestige. As with successful civil-exam candidates of imperial times, they "returned to their native places in silk robes" (*yijin huanxiang*)—an idiom that dramatizes the charisma that examination success confers on individuals.[122]

Inspired by the hopeful idealism of the 1980s, Mr. Jian let himself be swept up in the wave of protests that washed over the country in 1989, involvement in which nearly cost him his job. Converting to Christianity, he decided to give up challenging "worldly authority." He vowed instead to direct his energies inward toward his own "calling" (*shiye*), subsequently achieving

[122] In fact, people in rural areas explicitly use this idiom to refer to locals who acquire college degrees. On one occasion, I traveled with Mr. Jin, a senior Mountain County administrator, to his home village. A local tea seller who recognized him remarked on the transformation of his fate from farm boy to scholar by invoking this idiom.

renown as a high-school teacher and, later, entrepreneur. When in the mid-2000s the Department of Education (*jiaoyu ju*) of Ningzhou Prefecture began to display a friendly attitude toward the privatization of education, Mr. Jian founded the first and only private school in Mountain County—a junior high school. Despite its peripheral position in rural Mountain County, Mr. Jian's school boasted the second-best test scores on the high-school entrance examination in all of Ningzhou prefecture, outdone only by Ningzhou Experimental School in the prefectural capital.

Sometimes termed the "little Gaokao," the high-school entrance exam (*Zhongkao*) determines the high school that students will attend. Mr. Jian's school became a pipeline for top rural talent to enter high schools in more centrally located places. To the chagrin of local high-school administrators and Mountain County officials, top graduates from Mr. Jian's school bypassed Mountain County Number One—the best local government-run school—to test into some of the most esteemed secondary institutions in Ningzhou or even Xiamen. Many local elites and government officials publically bemoaned the resulting diversion of "student resources" (*shengyuan*) away from the county's own school system. Privately, however, they clamored to send their own children to Mr. Jian's school.[123]

Along with Mr. Jian, Ms. Zhang, who had likewise succeeded as an entrepreneur, could claim membership to the Mountain County "elite" (*jingying*). But juxtaposing "Mountain County" with "elite" struck locals as humorous—an oxymoron. Outmigration to urban places had drained the county not only of students but also of teachers. As a rule, those who had stayed behind regarded themselves as failures—either incapable of making a better life in the city or hopelessly quixotic in their loyalty to their native place. As a Mountain County math teacher

[123] The school became popular with officials not only because of its high test scores but also because it was considered safer than ordinary junior high schools, where brawls occurred with relative frequency.

abashedly admitted, “The orbit of my life is too narrow (*shenghuo quan tai zhai*).” Starting a successful business helped to immunize oneself against such perceptions. Many teachers tried their hands at entrepreneurship. Few, however, enjoyed the success of Mr. Jian and Ms. Zhang.

“Destiny is Movement”

During my second year of fieldwork, Mr. Jian and Ms. Zhang usually met with me once or twice a month to talk. On the occasion that I describe, the dishevel-headed, fifty-something Mr. Jian—always smiling—picked Ms. Zhang and me up at the Mountain County Number One school gate in his new Audi (“the school is doing well,” Ms. Zhang remarked) and drove us ten miles out of town into the mountains to a local coffee plantation—home to the only café in Mountain County. The café was empty except for Mr. Jian, Ms. Zhang, and me. Perched high on a mountain, it overlooked ridge after ridge of steep-terraced hills. In the lowlands beyond the mountains lay the prefectural capital Ningzhou and, beyond that, the metropolis of Xiamen. Hewn into the hills through centuries of agriculture, the terraces were mostly overgrown with dense green foliage, although they showed signs of scattered banana-tree cultivation.

Mr. Jian, Ms. Zhang, and I sipped coffee and appreciated the mountain-top view. The pungent coffee aroma mingled with the earthy humidity of a Mountain County spring evening. The silhouettes of fruit bats began to swoop overhead. Obscured by the growing twilight, ridge after ridge of terraced hills extended into the smoggy lowlands below.

The conversation drifted toward the sleepy seat of Mountain County in the valley below and its relation to more distant places. Beyond Mountain County lay the dusty prefectural capital of Ningzhou and, beyond that, the shining metropolis of Xiamen on the Pacific coast. Farther off in the distance were greater cities, more exotic places—Taiwan, just across the straits from

Xiamen; Shanghai to the north and Hong Kong to the south, with their glittering towers and endless shipyards; the hazy behemoth of Beijing, magnet of political and cultural power. In the minds of parents and students, each progressively more central destination possessed better opportunities and thus greater charisma and more value—better schools, better resources, better jobs. Given the vehemence of these views, the sapping of student and teacher "resources" from the county formed an unavoidable "reality" (*xianshi*).

"Water flows downwards and people move upwards," said Mr. Jian. The idiom acquired special poignancy from our mountain-top vantage: Just as gravity pulls water down into the lowlands, so do central places exert their inexorable attraction on people.

Mr. Jian and Ms. Zhang were not immune to this pull, but it led them to cast their sight even farther into the distance. Mr. Jian's daughter was now completing an undergraduate degree in the United States. Ms. Zhang and I teased him about her. Did she have a boyfriend? Would it be all right if she married an American?

"No, I wouldn't mind," he said. "My daughter must find her own destiny, *yuanfen*."

Mr. Jian's qualified openness to foreign suitors would strike his usual interlocutors as open minded. His next comment, however, hinted at a greater plan.

"Destiny, *yuanfen*, is a kind of movement, *yundong*," Mr. Jian said.

I reflected on Mr. Jian's comparison.

In Chinese, "destiny" (*yuanfen*) is used to refer to serendipitous coincidence that retrospectively acquires the aspect of necessity. For example, one can say of a couple that they "are destined to be together" (*you yuanfen*), thus sanctioning the match with the authority of fate. Similarly, young people of marriageable age who face pressure to find a partner can strategically reply, "My destiny has not yet arrived" (*yuanfen hai meiyou dao*). In addition to romantic

relationships, destiny describes the relationship among friends or business partners—*guanxi* connections. More generally, the term refers to any fateful connection between people, places, and things.

People commonly associate destiny with Buddhism- and Taoism-inspired notions of past lives, greater karmic plans, and predestination. As I later discovered, Mr. Jian's Christian version of destiny (and fate more broadly) similarly rested on what he called "the necessity within contingency" (*ouranxing limian de biranxing*)—an idea that he identified with God.

Like fate (*ming*) and fortune (*mingyun*), destiny has connotations of fated occurrence. Indeed, these terms possess some degree of interchangeability. They highlight different aspects of the same problem—the paradox of structure and agency (chapter 1). "Fate" foregrounds the objective determination of people's lives by social facts; "fortune" introduces an element of volition to fate, underscoring people's ability to influence fateful circumstances. In contrast to these terms, "destiny" emphasizes fortuitous connections among people and between people and places. In English, too, the notion of destiny is related to that of destination, which originally referred to one's Heaven-ordained fate but through synecdoche came to refer the goal of one's travel.[124]

I asked Mr. Jian to elaborate on his comparison.

"Take my daughter," he replied. "I sent her to the States. She will probably find a job there, meet her husband. That will be her destiny."

Apparently, parents had a greater influence on destiny than I had realized.

As we spoke, I reflected on the many conversations that I had had with teachers, parents, and girls in which they emphasized the importance of getting into a good college to finding a

[124] My choice to translate *yuanfen* as "destiny" derives partly from this etymological coincidence, partly from its similar usage by English speakers to describe the fateful convergence of separate lives.

suitable marriage partner. I said to Mr. Jian, "I used to think that parents and teachers were against 'early love' [*zaolian*] for moral reasons. But actually many parents just hope their children won't get stuck with a hometown boyfriend or girlfriend."

"Precisely," he replied. "Moving to a better place is providing destiny with a better platform."

I had heard "platform" (*pingtai*) used in similar contexts before. For example, another father had described college as a "platform" not only for finding a job but also for establishing connections—*guanxi*—with classmates. The enduring relationship between Ms. Zhang and Ms. Jian provides one such example of the ubiquitous importance of classmate connections in Chinese social life (chapter 1). An important aspect of transcending one's fate or transforming one's fortune through educational mobility thus consisted of creating opportunities for a better destiny in one's interpersonal connections or guanxi. As Mr. Jian intimated, moreover, this principle, applied to one of the most important connections of all—one's marriage partner.

"But many parents still want girls to stay close to home," added Ms. Zhang. "Even if their daughter can go to Beijing, they will be happy with her staying in Xiamen. Even in this era, there's a perception that she is marrying into another family. 'A girl married out is like scattered water' (*jia chuqu de nüer, po chuqu de shui*). But not you, Mr. Jian."

"Indeed not," said Mr. Jian. "I sent my daughter far away, like you. But I can visit her in the U.S.," he added with a twinkle in his eye.

This teasing was good natured. Ms. Zhang, too, had sent her daughter overseas—to Australia, both for high school and college. Ms. Zhang and Mr. Jian both hoped that their daughters would immigrate, or, as they said, "develop overseas" (*zai guowai fazhan*). Even for

those who return to China, however, a foreign degree confers great charisma. In this sense, the "West" represented the next step up the civilizational hierarchy from Beijing.

Mr. Jian and Ms. Zhang's experience were atypical for Mountain County. Both of their daughters were "singleton" children—children of the "one-child policy." This policy was put into effect at the beginning of the Opening and Reform period in the early 1980s. Until its abandonment in 2015, the policy limited—in theory at least—most parents to having only one child (Greenhalgh 2005). [125] Like other one-child parents, Mr. Jian and Ms. Zhang concentrated their resources on their only children (Fong 2006). Resisting what they said was a rural culture of "valuing boys and scorning girls," they held no expense to be too high to pay for their daughter's education (chapter 1). In this rural context, however, Mr. Jian's and Ms. Zhang's strict adherence to the "one-child policy" formed more the exception than the rule.

Compliance with birth-control policies is widely overestimated, particularly in rural areas (Merli 1998). During my fieldwork, the majority of households that I encountered in Mountain County and other rural areas had more than one child; families with three, four, or even five children were not uncommon. Many households in Ningzhou—which residents describe as a "backwater agricultural city" (*bise nongye chengshi*)—likewise contrived to circumvent the policy. The more rural the locality, the less strictly state actors enforced the policy—one reason that overpopulation is associated with rural areas and underdevelopment.[126]

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[125] The policy encountered stiff resistance, particularly in rural areas. Moreover, exceptions were made for minorities and rural families (Fong 2006; Goh 2011; Kipnis 2011). In rural areas, families whose first child is a daughter could apply to have a second child—a concession to the heavy rural bias toward male children.

[126] In Mountain County, the only type of person who did not regularly contrive to circumvent the policy was government employees—people "in the system" (*tizhi nei*). This category includes teachers like Ms. Zhang and Mr. Jian. (When his wife was still of child-bearing age, Mr. Jian was still working as a teacher at a public school.) Still, many teachers and government officials—particularly in senior positions where connections trump policy—found ways to subvert the policy. The situation in Xiamen was more complicated—urban families faced greater scrutiny. Yet even in Xiamen, many families—especially those of rural origin—had more than one child. Moreover, even parents on the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum—the extremely rich—contrived to circumvent the policy, sometimes by "hiding" a child abroad. Nevertheless, the policy has caused much suffering. Countless female infants

Despite population control, therefore, parents in the countryside widely possess multiple children. As they have done since imperial times, parents use children to pursue multiple but complementary mobility strategies, thereby coordinating the economic activity of the entire family (Skinner 1976)—a phenomenon that I describe in more detail below. Employing a metaphor derived from the stock market, parents today sometimes refer to this process as "diversifying one's portfolio" (*fensanhua touzi*).[127]

This strategy differs from that of one-child parents, who have all their eggs in one basket. As the singleton children of rural elites, Mr. Jian's and Ms. Zhang's daughters enjoyed opportunities similar to those of highly privileged urban children. As many observers have noted, the concentration of parental hopes and desires on fewer children has produced new pressures on such "singleton" children, who are conceived to be of higher "quality" than their rural counterparts (Fong 2006; Kipnis 2011). But using education as a mobility strategy to acquire greater "platforms for destiny" is something that nearly all parents aspire to do.

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have been abandoned or killed. Families without strong connections, or guanxi, have often faced crippling fines and draconian career consequences for non-compliance.

[127] As in imperial times (Skinner 1976), families that pursue orthodox mobility through education employ a variety of sojourner strategies to maximize their chances of success. For example, college students at second-tier universities may sojourn to cities even further up the central-place hierarchy to work, returning to their universities to take final examinations and to their native places for Chinese New Year. Even when some family members are pursuing less orthodox forms of mobility, they may be doing so to support other family members who are pursuing orthodox ones. In rural places, older siblings, particularly girls, often work to pay for the high-school and college tuition of younger siblings. In one rural household, for instance, the eldest sibling, a sister, sojourned to the city to help pay the tuition of her two younger sisters and brother. Upon earning her doctorate from Xiamen University, the second-eldest sister obtained a coveted Beijing household registration when she acquired a job in Beijing as a college professor. She planned to repay her elder sister by using her perch in Beijing to help her elder sister's children. The women's father was elected as the village chief in their hometown in Putian, an accomplishment that owed much to the status that he accrued through his second-eldest daughter's educational accomplishments. Not all girls, however, are fortunate to have such supportive parents. In another rural household, a young woman worked in a clothing store in Xiamen to help pay her twin brother's high-school and college tuition even though her test scores were higher than his.

For further examples of families' economic coordination and their "diversification" of mobility strategies, see Myron Cohen (1976) and Cochran and Xie (2013).

Developmentalist Ideology in Historical Perspective: Western-Impact Narratives

Such arrangements are not as novel as they might first appear. The identification of "quality" with central places, and central places with "modernity" is new. But regional systems, and corresponding notions of civilizational hierarchy, have long played an important role in Chinese lives. Whereas high-school geography teaches students that urbanization originated with modernity and capitalism in the West, the ancientness of the central-place hierarchy, etched over the centuries into the landscape, suggests a more complicated narrative.

The belief that modernity originated in the West dominates the high-school curriculum, and represents the official view of Chinese state historiography. As one history teacher put it, the whole Chinese world "was rolled into capitalism" (*bei juanru zibenzhuyi*) during China's encounter with the West in the nineteenth century.[128] Ironically, therefore, the Chinese state promotes a form of historical narrative that I identify as "Eurocentric" (chapter 1). By focusing on Western imperialism, the official narrative constitutes a form of "impact-response" historiography. As Paul Cohen (1984) notes, such narratives exaggerate the impact of the West on China, thereby obscuring long-term historical trends and cycles that may not be directly attributable to Western intervention.[129] Drawing inspiration from Cohen's critique, I term such narratives *Western-impact narratives*.

Western-impact narratives generally argue that a sudden break between tradition and modernity occurred in the nineteenth century around the advent of Western gunboat diplomacy in China (Barlow 2004; L. H. Liu 1995; Karl 2002; Meisner 1970; Reed 2004). I join skeptics of such narratives who argue that the Western-impact approach produces a historical anachronism

[128] More fundamentally, this historical view is instantiated in the very disciplinary division—ossified in the school curriculum—between "history," which focuses on world history and China's modernization, and "Chinese language," which broadly includes the cultural and linguistic heritage of China's mediaeval and imperial history.
[129] In Western historiography, Western imperialism narratives became popular in the 1960s around decolonization and the Vietnam War. Before this period, another form of impact-response narrative predominated.

by ignoring or underemphasizing recognizably modern forms of sociality that existed before the nineteenth century (Chow 2004; Duara 1995; Miyakawa 1955; Woodside 2006; Wong 1997). In other words, Western-impact narratives Eurocentrically distort or obfuscate continuities, patterns, or rhythms that are intrinsic to China's own history and to its long involvement in global markets. For this reason, Cohen (1984, 1) terms Western-impact narratives "ethnocentric" As I have already mentioned, however, Western-impact narratives dominate official Chinese state historiography, thus making uneasy bedfellows of Chinese state ideologues and liberal Western academics.

Contrary to the Western-impact view of history propagated by the Chinese high-school curriculum, the social arrangements that undergird the current drive toward urbanization and development are not entirely new. To underscore this point, I expand here on the longue-durée perspective on Chinese history that I adopt in chapter 1: As I discuss there, the central-place hierarchy long predates Western impact on China (Hartwell 1982; Skinner 1964). In imperial times, too, economic, cultural, and political power concentrated in central places. The wide-scale expansion and centralization of market systems in southern China during the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE)—considered by some to constitute early Chinese "urbanization" and even "modernization"—accompanied the emergence of a mature civil-exam system (Chaffee 1995; Hartwell 1982). Before as now, movement up the geographical hierarchy was associated with spatiotemporal expansion of the self: Imperial exam candidates sojourned to progressively more central places in the central-place hierarchy as they progressed through the hierarchy of examination degrees (Elman 2013). Each progressively more central place was associated with better schools and more prestigious examination titles, just as today's central places are

associated with more prestigious universities and higher examination scores—the score-value hierarchy.[130]

As a case in point, the Xiamen–Ningzhou–Mountain-County hierarchy where I conducted my fieldwork has historical roots going back to the Tang dynasty (618-960 CE). The incorporation of this area into the Chinese civilizational hierarchy lives on in the popular imagination, inscribed in the mythology surrounding the hierarchy of local gods. Chinese popular religion understands the pantheon of deities to form a celestial bureaucracy (Feuchtwang 1992). The origins of many deities can be traced to apotheosized historical officials. In Ningzhou, for example, the state apotheosized a Tang official who Chinese annals say "opened up the wasteland for settlement" *(kaihuang*) by exterminating bandits and pacifying aboriginal populations. In the celestial bureaucracy of gods, this deity's association with the prefectural capital positions the deity at the top of the local hierarchy of gods; thus the deity's temple in downtown Ningzhou attracts pilgrims from all over the prefecture, as well as from diaspora populations of Ningzhounese in Taiwan and Southeast Asia. Citing such popular-historical mythological lore, people suppose more central places to possess a more ancient history—a view that excludes possible alternative narratives of history such as aboriginal views. As one local put it, "The history of Mountain County is not as old as that of Ningzhou because Mountain County was opened up for settlement later than Ningzhou." Note, therefore, that the incorporation of this periphery into the Chinese civilizational hierarchy over a millennium ago lives on in the historical imagination of many locals.

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[130] Critics will object that such a *longue-durée* view of history runs the danger of essentializing historical trends and glossing over important nuances in recent history. I agree that such essentialism should be avoided. In my view, however, a Western-impact approach commits a complementary fallacy by taking an overly narrow view of history. This approach essentially assumes what it sets out to prove by narrowing its historical focus to the period of Western impact on China. In subsequent chapters, I focus my view on China's recent history. In the present discussion, however, I gesture toward broader historical patterns and continuities that only a *longue-durée* perspective can reveal.

Following the settlement of the periphery, education formed an important tool for incorporating peripheral places into this hierarchy—a process sometimes referred to as "transformation through education" (*jiao hua*) (Rowe 1994; L. Yi 2008). As part of China's "civilizing project" imperial policies aimed to civilize the periphery by recruiting broad swaths of the population into the meritocratic project of the examination life (Harrell 1995). In Mountain County to this day, peripheral settlements of Hakka—Chinese settlers who intermarried with aboriginal groups—proudly display monuments that earlier generations erected to civil-exam graduates during imperial times.

In sum, the desires to transform the civilizational hierarchy, on the one hand, and to achieve self-transformation through mobility, on the other, are not new. Belying the supposed radical historical break that Western colonial influence produced in China, the longstanding existence of recognizably modern forms of meritocratic ideology probably owes much to the enduring relevance of China's central-place hierarchy and accompanying center–periphery distinctions in Chinese cultural life. As the foregoing example illustrates, China possessed its own internal forms of colonialism long before China encountered Western colonialism. This internal colonialism continues in altered but recognizable forms into the contemporary era of Chinese Communist ethnopolitics (Fiskesjö 1999; Fiskesjö 2006; Xiaoyuan Liu 2004).

For all these reasons, Western-impact narratives overstate the impact of the West, thereby obfuscating other trends, such as Chinese forms of internal colonialism. Historians now widely agree that in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Qing government was more concerned with the Taiping Rebellion—a civil war of unprecedented proportions that threatened to overthrow the dynasty—than with a few strange foreigners located in far-flung coastal provinces (P. A. Cohen 1984).

But the impact of China's experiences with the West should not be ignored—particularly their psychological impact. Persuaded of the effectiveness of Western science and technology by Western gunboat diplomacy during the nineteenth century, early reformers of China's "self-strengthening movement" in the late Qing period (late nineteenth century) emphasized that China should retain its cultural "essence" while adopting Western "function."[131] This dichotomy remained influential, but later generations adopted an even more ambivalent stance toward it. In the first decades of the twentieth century, China's May Fourth generation combined cultural iconoclasm with nationalism, forging an ambivalent national sensibility that remains influential to this day: Chinese are widely proud of their culture but consider it an impediment to modernization. The very nomenclature that this ambivalence adopts renders ludicrous any suggestion that "traditional" China may have been truly "modern." In the present, the ideological needs of the Party-state account in part for the tenacity of the Western-impact view of history in China. To shore up nationalist zeal for development, official ideology emphasizes the humiliations suffered by Chinese in the colonial era (Gries 2004; Y. Guo 2004). The deep psychological roots of this zeal for development are everywhere observable: People widely desire to "catch up with the West" on the journey of development toward the telos of modernity. Nevertheless, Chinese remain deeply proud of their "traditional" cultural accomplishments, and the notion of a "great restoration" suggests a cyclical notion of time in which China—the Central Kingdom—regains its rightful place itself at the world's civilizational apex.[132]

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[131] This formulation remains influential today. Note its similarity to such formulations as "Socialism with Chinese characteristics."

[132] "Modern" China is characterized by much more variation in experiences of time and history than it is widely supposed to be. The same can be said of "pre-modern" China. Despite the relative historical novelty of Western teleological thinking, a teleological logic of development is not entirely without historical precedent in imperial China. I discuss in chapter 1, imperial ideologies conceived the imperium to be developing toward a Confucian utopia of "Great Unity" (*Datong*); moreover, some notion of long-term scientific progress did exist (Elman 2005; Nylan 2001). The state's project of civilizing the periphery also contains the outline of such a progressive vision. On

Scholarly and popular views of the Gaokao incorporate this ambivalence: On the one hand, critics widely perceive the Gaokao to be the heir of the imperial civil exams—a relic of China's feudal past. This "traditional" quality is exemplified by how the exam unduly emphasizes formulistic regurgitation of memorized patterns. Such "traditional" pedagogy is widely supposed to impede China's development toward modernity. On the other hand, people widely argue that the Gaokao, as China's "only fair examination," is uniquely suited to facilitating the development of the country under its current "national conditions" of overpopulation and guanxi. In the latter view, the suspension of the Gaokao during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) represented an interruption in China's national development—an unfortunate event that significantly waylaid it on its path toward modernity (R. Zheng 2007). According to this view, largescale anonymized examinations facilitate the fair and rational distribution of social resources—a sentiment that would not be foreign to European Enlightenment thinkers who were influenced by the Chinese civil exam (chapter 1).

In sum, current modernization policies follow an ambivalent attitude that has overlaid a teleological vision—derived from Marxist-cum-Hegelian thinking and international development models—onto older, imperial-era ideologies of civilizational hierarchy and "transformation through education." In other words, developmentalist ideology merely represents the newest strain of an older form of meritocratic ideology. But alternative views of time and history as cyclical persist, and are especially prevalent in rural areas.[133] Such views demonstrate that not all

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the whole, however, a cyclical sense of history dominated during imperial times: This historical view emphasized the wax and wane of dynasties and the alternating temporal rhythm of unity and disunity.

[133] Just as teleological thinking was not totally alien to people of imperial times, cyclical time plays an important role in contemporary life. As I further note in the conclusion, so-called "superstitious" beliefs in dynastic cycles persist, especially in relatively marginal or rural populations. Natural disasters and social disorder, for example, are widely taken to be signs that Heaven disapproves of state leaders. In general, moreover, cyclical notions of time continue to assume an important role in everyday life, particularly in the countryside. Even today, a major difference between urban and rural places consists in the telling of time: People of rural origin generally reckon their birthdays by the traditional lunar calendar, which repeats in sixty-year cycles. This use of the lunar calendar facilitates

experiences can be subsumed under such a teleological vision—be it labeled "capitalism," "modernity," "Socialist modernization," or whatever. Ironically, however, these alternative views often serve to reinforce developmentalist perceptions of rural areas as "backward."

According to this developmentalist logic, educating the next generation is developing the country. This meritocratic narrative binds the fate of the nation with the striving of individuals. Development—a better life for everyone—represents the just reward for the collective diligent efforts of the Chinese people under the stewardship of the Party-state.

Middle-Class Flight and National Transcendence

In recent years, people have increasingly extended this developmentalist logic beyond the confines of the nation: Aspirants to middle-class status, whose numbers are expanding, have are sending their children to be educated abroad in rapidly increasing numbers (Fong 2011; Ong 1999).[134] Just as the Gaokao provides a "way out" of rural existence, emigration provides a "way out" of China. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in urban areas, where wealth is greater, but rural elites, like Mr. Jian and Ms. Zhang, likewise favor international education.

Mr. Jian's position on the local Political Consultative Conference (*Zhengxie*)—a political advisory board consisting largely of local entrepreneurs—gave him special insight into this trend.

"A few weeks ago," Mr. Jian said, "the secretary of the Committee told me that around 70 percent of its members either have foreign passports or immediate family living abroad. Parents who send their children abroad—about half of them want their kids to come home,

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geomantic practices, which are more prevalent in peripheral places. Urbanites, meanwhile, tend to rely on the linear Gregorian calendar and pay less credence to superstitious geomantic beliefs.

[134] See also my discussion in the introduction of the rising numbers of Chinese students studying abroad.

another half are aiming to 'diversify their portfolio.' That is, they want a way out [*chulu*]. The Party could come tomorrow and take everything away from us. We don't really own anything. Everything is up to the whims of corrupted officials. People don't feel secure. They say 'the political macro-environment isn't good [*zhengzhi da huanjing*].'"

"Which is a euphemism," I replied.

"Yes. For political corruption, environmental problems, the fear of losing everything."

"And social unrest?"

"Yes, they say that too."

Mr. Jian counted himself among those who saw educating children abroad to provide an escape hatch, a path toward emigration. Like Mr. Jian, many of China's elites are anxious about their wealth (Osburg 2013). Entrepreneurs are reliant on state patronage, which could be withdrawn at any time; moreover, China's increasing inequality raises the specter of social unrest.

In addition to being motivated by fears about the future, such educational emigration draws momentum from growing aversion to the Gaokao—an aversion that Mr. Jian and Ms. Zhang shared. Indeed this disdain for the Gaokao reflects a general sentiment among parents, teachers, researchers, and the media—particularly in urban areas or among the rural elite.

Mr. Jian and Ms. Zhang knew the Gaokao: As senior educators, they were like high priests of the examination ritual—the elders and initiators in this rite of passage. Like the majority of teachers, however, they felt deep antipathy toward the test—a view shared by many parents. Among the upper echelons of society for whom the Gaokao is losing persuasiveness, the chief complaint consists in the test's relentless, mechanical focus on the diligent memorization of "useless knowledge" (*meiyou yong de zhishi*)—an ethic that they considered to be a retrograde

holdover from China's "feudal" (*fengjian*) traditional examination culture. As Mr. Jian put it, the middle class "no longer believe" in this ethic of diligence, considering "quality" rather to consist in "creativity" (*chuangzaoxing*) "innovation" (*chuangxin*), and "practical skills" (*shiji jineng*).

Since the 1990s, officials have responded to such critiques by instituting a wide variety of reforms under the rubric of "education for quality" (*suzhi jiaoyu*) (chapter 4). Despite this litany of reforms, however, people complain that Chinese education remains overwhelmingly focused on "coping with exams" (*yingfu kaoshi*). By contrast, Chinese perceive Western education to provide a "genuine" (*zhenshi de*) focus on quality. As people said to me on many occasions "in the West, education for quality is real, whereas in China it is fake." My Chinese informers were incredulous that "the West" is increasingly resembling the Chinese one in many respects: In particular, I told them, the United States has been increasing its use of standardized examinations. In part, this expansion of standardized assessment represents a response to the perception that China's allegedly superior performance on examinations poses a threat to Western geopolitical domination.[135] But such trends are not limited to the United States. People in many countries complain of an increasing focus on credentialization, professionalization, and standardized examination.

However ironic the Chinese perception of the West as a locus of "quality" may be, this perception follows logically from the Western-impact view of history that dominates in orthodox developmentalist ideology: If development leads to quality, and if the West represents the model of development, then quality naturally concentrates in the West.

[135] U.S. officials characterized China's 2008 performance on the OECD international PISA assessments as a "Sputnik moment," although scholars have since pointed out that the assessments only measured a narrow cross-section of students in Shanghai's best schools (Loveless 2014). See also my discussion of the widespread fabrication of educational statistics (chapter 3).

These perceptions beg the question of how foreign places fit into Chinese conceptions of civilizational hierarchy. As I describe above, people see quality to concentrate in central places, but worry that this quality is largely "performed" (*biaoyan hua*) or "fake" (*xujia*) in contrast to quality in the West, which they perceive to be comparatively "authentic" and "real." The above-mentioned trend of sending children abroad to be educated thus seems to represent a desire for transcendence of the national hierarchy.[136] The accompanying critiques of Chinese "education for quality" as "inauthentic" or "fake" likewise seem to signal a desire for transcendence or transformation. Accordingly, the widespread criticisms of the Gaokao in the media and in upper echelons of society—as well as widespread calls for educational reform—can be read as an oblique critique of economic development under Chinese Party-state rule. Under these conditions, more and more of the middle class are "voting with their feet" by emigrating to foreign countries.

Yet as Mr. Jian was also fond of pointing out, media discussions are largely dominated by wealthy people. For most poor people, he said, the Gaokao remains sacred.

"Lost and Confused"

Mr. Jian knew whereof he spoke. He himself had transformed his fate through the Gaokao—from ordinary factor worker to college grad. While working days in a factory as a young man in Ningzhou during the early 1980s, he studied late into the night, rubbing his eyelids with a menthol tincture to stay awake. "Your eyes would tear up," he said, "and then you could study for another hour or two."

[136] As I note above, my discussion of "national transcendence" derives inspiration from Anagnost's (1997a) article of the same name.

Mr. Jian and Ms. Zhang thus both belonged to a generation of people whose fortune had transformed along with that of China's. Born in the Cultural Revolution, this generation had lived through the grand social and economic policies of recent decades—market liberalization, industrialization and urbanization, the one-child policy, and the rapid expansion of higher education since the early 2000s. These massive efforts of social engineering had largely fulfilled expectations that life should improve under Communist Party stewardship. Standards of living had risen for most. College education came into the reach of many ordinary families.

Ordinary working-class and rural parents saw a main goal of college education to consist in giving their children "a better life"—the increased status, comfort, and security of a non-menial, white-collar job. Increasing levels of education signaled increasing opportunity under development. As a forty-something Ningzhou fruit seller put it to me, "my father only graduated from primary school. In the 1990s, I made it through eighth grade. My daughter is about to graduate from college. When China was poor, the general education level was bad. As China develops, the education level is rising." Thus people in China identify education with development, development with opportunity for a better life, a better life with transformed class status.[137]

As long as their children could expect a better life, people could turn a blind eye to the many problems that accompanied these policies, including environmental degradation, rural–urban inequality, and demographic imbalance. But the success of people like Mr. Jian and Ms. Zhang, achieved through orthodox mobility strategies, increasingly seems to represent the

[137] Gaokao harnesses desire for social change by turning it inward toward desire for self-transformation—toward "changing one's fate." Consider, for example, how Mr. Jian gave up his revolutionary dreams in the wake of the Tiananmen protests to pursue his interlinked "callings" as a teacher, entrepreneur, and father. Thus the Gaokao constitutes a sublimated form of class conflict. High-school administrators know this motivation well, encouraging students to see the examination as "the only chance to beat the second-generation rich" (*pin de guo fu'erdai*) (chapter 4).

exception not the rule. Pointing to a glut of college graduates in the wake of higher-education expansion, many say under- and unemployment among college grads is reaching crisis proportions. Voicing such anxieties, the above-mentioned fruit seller repeated a view shared by many: "These days, it's better to have guanxi than to have a college education," he said.

After a lifetime spent in the monomaniacal pursuit of getting into a good college, a whole generation of college grads worry that they have "sacrificed their childhood" for false hopes. These disappointed expectations produce widespread feelings of "lostness and confusion" (*mimang*)—an existential malaise that may be reaching epidemic proportions (chapter 6).

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As Mr. Jian, Ms. Zhang, and I gazed out over the mountain ridges toward the plains of Ningzhou and the metropolis of Xiamen beyond them, Mr. Jian's thoughts interrupted my reflections: "You come to Mountain County. You meet Ms. Zhang. She introduces you to me. That is also a kind of destiny," he said. Indeed, the coincidences that brought me to Mountain County did in hindsight seem like destiny.

Part II: Looking Outwards from the Center: "The Urbanization of Places"

Whereas the foregoing section focuses on the "urbanization of people," adopting the perspective of people on the periphery, the following section foregrounds the "urbanization of places," adopting the perspective of recent rural-to-urban migrants. I describe my first journey to Mountain County, using this occasion to reflect on how migrants experience the geographical hierarchy.

I first traveled to Mountain County as a tourist on a Dragon Gate High School teacher outing on a Sunday in late November 2011.[138] This trip to Mountain County predated my fieldwork there. At the time, my initial rural field site had fallen through when local officials decided to veto the presence of a foreign anthropologist there. As I worked through contacts to explore options for another rural field site, I started teaching at Dragon Gate. When I joined my new colleagues that morning to board the bus for a tour to the countryside, I could not have guessed that my destiny would become so entwined with that day's destination, nor that this journey into the mountains was a trip that I would make dozens of times.

Dragon Gate is a low-ranking high school, located in a peripheral area of Xiamen Island. Ten years earlier, this area was considered rural. Breakneck urbanization, however, had since enveloped the school in the city's rapidly expanding penumbra of development. In some ways, therefore, this journey into the countryside felt like a trip back in time—from the ordered and regulated vertical cityscape of Xiamen, to the chaotic and dusty hurly-burly of the prefectural capital of Ningzhou, to the relative halcyon tranquility of the Mountain County countryside. Processes that are associated with modernization—for example, the construction of high-rises, the regulation of traffic, the implementation of educational policy—percolate into peripheral places from central ones. Thus, increasingly remote areas appear to exhibit progressively earlier stages of development. In this way, the ideology of a unilinear, teleological vision of history becomes physically instantiated or objectified in the hierarchy of places itself, which then in

[138] Such excursions to the countryside form a perq of teaching at urban high schools. To the envy of their colleagues in smaller cities and the countryside, teachers at Dragon Gate and other high schools in Xiamen regularly organize outings to rural "scenic spots." Such luxuries are denied to ordinary teachers in more peripheral areas, where schools ran on Spartan budgets. In contravention to central educational policy, moreover, peripherally located schools held classes on Saturday and even Sunday, leaving little time for anything else.

circular fashion provide material testament to the commonsensical correctness of that ideology.[139]

But people are deeply ambivalent about modernity. For example, many people consider processes associated with modernization as "simulated," "counterfeit," or "fake." Such assessments apply in particular to various universalistic ideals such as "regulation" (*guifanhua*) "the rule of law" (*fazhi*) Thus many consider modernization to be staged in the dramaturgical sense. By the same token, people consider interpersonal relationships more genuine and real in the countryside, which people see as a bastion of real human sentiment (*renqing*).

Precipitous Urbanization

Dressed in fleece, light jackets, or vests against the nippy air, the teachers—twenty-five or so of us (the whole senior-one teaching team)—congregated inside the school gate just before 7:30 a.m., then piled into a tour bus hired for the occasion. Taking a main highway north and west out of the city, the bus passed through suburban Xiamen toward the smaller city of Ningzhou—seat of Ningzhou Prefecture—and from there up into the mountains of Mountain County, an administrative subdivision of Ningzhou.

Dragon Gate High School occupied the frontline of urbanization and development. The school sat on the border of two worlds, provisionally demarcated by the six-lane highway that cleaved the city beside it. Beyond this thoroughfare to the north, high-rise apartment buildings lined the streets. Cozying up to the school on the south lay the squat structures of Gold Mountain village, now mainly home to migrant workers. In the city's frenzied efforts to modernize and urbanize, the old was giving way to the new. High-rise thirty and forty-story apartment blocks,

[139] I draw inspiration for this analysis from Bourdieu's (1977a) discussion of the objectification of cultural practices.

Western-style fast-food restaurants, cafés, shopping centers, and roads wide enough to accommodate shiny new SUVs—the infrastructure of "modernity"—swallowed up the old villages, which mainly consisted of agglomerations of two and three-story buildings in various states of disrepair. In stark contrast to the boulevards blazing their way through the sparkling new developments, warrens of streets and alleys—many too narrow for cars to pass—crisscrossed the older settlements. Despite their decrepitude, however, these places possessed a busy liveliness (the atmosphere Chinese call "hot and noisy," *renao*) rarely matched in the modernized developments.

Watching me gaze out the window, my bespectacled seatmate—an English teacher, Ms. Yao—said that when she arrived in Xiamen ten years earlier from the neighboring city of Longhai, farmland still surrounded the school. Now, not a single swath of cultivated land could be seen.[140]

Ms. Yao's rural origins were no exception in this group. In fact, all save three or four of these teachers were beneficiaries of the Xiamen government program to "attract talent" (*yinjin rencai*) from rural areas of Fujian and from other provinces. Precipitous urbanization since the early 2000s had rapidly increased the municipality's population. Between 2000 and 2010 the population increased seventy-two percent from 2.05 million to 3.53 million.[141] As schools expanded to keep pace, the demand for teachers skyrocketed. The municipal government responded by implementing special tests to attract qualified and ambitious teachers from the countryside. Teachers came from far and wide.

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[140] However, one finds remnants of popular religious agrarian tradition within the modernizing cityscape. Near the school, for example, a lonely local village temple incongruously peeked out from the side of a multi-story parking garage like a pentimento from an earlier era. Saved from demolition in a specially constructed alcove, this temple occasionally still hosted religious activities.

[141] See Xiamen government statistics at http://www.stats-xm.gov.cn/tjzl/tjdy/201211/t20121108_21423.htm (accessed August 1, 2015).

Most Dragon Gate teachers belonged to a generation in which people had been assigned their jobs. Many of them had long dreamed of improving their lots through migration to an urban area, but had never had the opportunity to do so. Xiamen's program to "introduce talent" had thus offered a rare opportunity. Ms. Yao and her colleagues personified Xiamen's modernization: They arrived from the countryside just as the city swallowed up its rural periphery. In a sense, the city expanded to meet them.

But lingering regrets sometimes punctuated these rural-to-urban journeys of self-transformation. On a later occasion, Ms. Zhang—a mid-level administrator from peripheral Yongning prefecture—guiltily voiced her ambivalence about having left her students and colleagues behind in the countryside: "It's so poor there. I do not feel like I have done enough. I have abandoned them," she said.

"Wandering the Lakes and Rivers"

Our excursion that day to Mountain Valley thus constituted an instance of *reverse sojourning*, by which I mean movement down the hierarchy of central places: Under most circumstances, movement up the hierarchy forms the normal, unmarked practice; by contrast, reverse sojourning forms a marked category—against the normal grain of desire.[142]

In my usage, sojourning describes temporary movement, whereas migration refers to movement of a more permanent nature.[143] Much of what is described in English as migration,

[142] Despite its markedness, such urban-to-rural sojourning includes many well-known examples. In what has been dubbed the "largest annual migration on the planet," every year migrants return to their rural places of origin for Chinese New Year or "Spring Festival." In an earlier era, the sending of young graduates "down to the countryside" (*xiangxia*) during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) formed a more permanent form of urban-to-rural migration. Our excursion that day, by contrast, belonged to a growing new category of reverse sojourning—ecotourism to experience rural rusticity. Note that this desire to experience rural rusticity is not merely a contemporary phenomenon. Starting in Song times, literati journeyed into the countryside for cultivated experiences of rusticity.
[143] In this usage, I follow G. William Skinner. To elaborate, I reserve *migration* to describe long-term shifts in a whole family's primary place of residence. By contrast, I use *sojourning* to refer to movements of shorter duration

therefore, might be designated with more analytical rigor as sojourning, which corresponds more accurately to the emic Chinese terminology. Consider the expression "going out to work" (*dagon*g), which refers to people's leaving their native place for temporary or seasonal work in factories or other venues. In China, such workers are described as the "mobile" or "floating" population (*liudong renkou*).[144] But people themselves often describe such itinerant existences in terms of "wandering the lakes and rivers" (*zou jianghu*).

The distinction between sojourning and migration possesses heuristic utility but is hard to maintain in practice. Chinese families have always been *polycentric* to some degree, which muddies this distinction. The degree of polycentrism that families possess has long varied with geographical locale, economic cycles, mobility strategies, number of children, and other factors. In recent decades, precipitous urbanization has greatly increased polycentrism by drawing members of rural households into cities and by blurring the boundaries between city and countryside.

In the same period, however, Chinese families have increasingly shifted from patrilocal to neolocal residence. Divorce rates have increased, and even many Chinese married couples have started to maintain separate households. For example, one spouse may keep a stable job or watch the farm in the couple's home town while the other strikes out as an entrepreneur or works in the city, or both spouses may work in different cities. In general, Chinese are alleged to be more self-focused than they were in times past. Some scholars have interpreted these trends as

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by certain members of the family to conduct economic activity, broadly construed. In other words, sojourning designates migratory circuits of travel that use one's primary place or places of residence as a base. Sojourning takes many forms, ranging from orthodox types—study, trade, factory work, pilgrimage, tourism, or development work (NGOs and volunteers)—to unorthodox types—such as smuggling, banditry, theft, or prostitution. Note that movement down the hierarchy usually consists in short sojourns. If people wish to establish new longer-term perches, or what Mr. Jian refers to as a "platforms for destiny," then they generally do so by moving up the hierarchy, which extends the family's reach into the center.

[144] This is the politically correct language preferred in the media and academic venues. In everyday language, such workers are referred to as "farmer workers" (*nongmingong*).

signaling a "rise of individualism" during the post-Opening-and-Reform era (Y. Yan 2009; Hansen and Svarverud 2010). Such scholars typically attribute this rise to such factors as laissez-faire economic reforms ("neoliberalism"), modern communication technology (cellphones and social media), and the long reign of the "one-child" policy.

These factors have undoubtedly had great effects on Chinese society; moreover, Chinese social attitudes have clearly undergone large shifts in recent decades. But describing these shifts in terms of a "rising individualism" tends to obscure their social causes and effects.[145] I suggest that the alleged increase in individualism might be more usefully described as an increase in *polycentrism*. As Myron Cohen (1970) observes, the domestic unit or *jia* may be geographically dispersed over a wide area.[146] During the Maoist era, such polycentrism was limited by draconian household restrictions. But during the era of reform, the "land of lakes and rivers" has gradually expanded as sojourning has increased. Instead of an effect of "neoliberalism," it might be more useful to describe current social trends as a constituting a partial return to patterns of sojourning that were more typical in the pre-Maoist era.[147]

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[145] This discussion would be facilitated by an increase in analytical clarity over the meaning of "individualism." I suggest that Xiaotong Fei's (1992) treatment of the problem may provide a useful starting point: Fei distinguishes between "egocentrism," which he describes as the attitude of people who occupy the center of a guanxi network, and "individualism," which he describes as the attitude of people who occupy co-equal positions within an organization. The former is typified by particularism, the latter by rule of law. Fei (admittedly writing for a popular audience) tends to essentialize the former attitude as being typically Chinese, and the latter as being "Western"; however, he notes that these attitudes my coexist in hybridized form. What I like about this formulation is that it gives the lie to the notion that Chinese—belonging to a allegedly "collectivist" society—are necessarily less "individualistic" than others. In Fei's view, by contrast, those who occupy the center of a guanxi network are always attempting to leverage that network for egocentric goals. In sum, individuals are always social and the social is always composed of individuals. In my view, therefore, we should disaggregate the ideology of "individualism" (which may be a "modern" phenomenon) from the humanly common reality of the individual, that is, personhood.

[146] Myron Cohen (1970) refers to this phenomenon as "dispersal." Note, however, that dispersal suggests that the family maintains a center, whereas polycentrism suggests several simultaneous centers of activity. Nevertheless, in what follows I use polycentrism and dispersal as close synonyms.

[147] Of courses, it would be difficult to overstate the epochal nature of the social and technological shifts in the twentieth century (chapter 1). But cyclical patterns and rhythms in Chinese history are also important to consider. Rather than a simple "return" to earlier patterns, therefore, I suggest that we conceive of such developments in more complex terms. Instead of always following a line, historical change may assume the form of cycles and other complex patterns.

Despite increasingly being composed of "individuals," family members—even if separated by great distances—largely strategize mobility as a unit (M. L. Cohen 1970; Ong 1999). In other words, individual mobility is increasing, but it would be mistaken to see Chinese extended families as breaking up into autonomous individual units. "Neolocal" households would often be most accurately described as following a hybridized patrilocal/neolocal form of residence.[148] Even in families typified by highly neolocal residence, great affective debts typically exist between parents and children and among siblings. This principle likewise applies to married couples who live separated from each other. Such couples usually say that they undertake such arrangements for the benefit of children, not for the pursuit of individual autonomy per se.[149] Consider also how families whose members are scattered across the country may coordinate remittances to help put a child through college.[150] Note, moreover, how modern communication technology—often associated with an uptick in "individualism"—facilitates the economic cooperation of such polycentric households.

Consider an irony of these arrangements. Many suppose urban singletons to be some of the most "individualistic" members of Chinese society. But singleton children actually experience much *less* autonomy than many children in multi-sibling families. Representing a family's "only hope," singleton children often experience high levels of control over every aspect of their lives (Fong 2002). By contrast, children of multi-sibling families may have relatively high degrees of autonomy. For example, a young migrant woman whom I interviewed

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[148] Consider, for instance, how the following common arrangements hybridize patri- and neolocal forms of residence: Typically, newly married couples move into a house purchased by the bridegroom or bridegroom's parents. Although residence is technically "neolocal," therefore, agnatic kin typically have a much greater say in the running of the household. In my rural field sites, moreover, pregnant women typically return to their mother-in-law's home for post-partem isolation ("sitting the month" or *zuo yuezi*), and mothers-in-law typically move in to the couple's new home to help care for new babies. Conflicts continue to take place between women and their mothers-in-law, thought these conflicts are perhaps more muted than in times past.

[149] For example, one member of such a couple may migrate up the hierarchy of central places to gain access to better schools, whereas the other member may stay in the countryside

[150] For examples of such economic cooperation in polycentric households, see note 127 above.

on several occasions. When I met her, she was working as a clerk in a Xiamen clothing store. She had been forced by her parents to drop out of high school to pay for the college education of her twin brother. These arrangements struck her as unjust, particularly since her test scores had always been higher than her brother's. But in contrast to her brother, she said she experienced relative freedom. She traveled around the country, job-hopping in different cities. As long as she remitted a portion of her income to her parents, they had little oversight over her daily life. Such examples could easily be multiplied.

This trend toward increasing polycentricism can be observed in many phenomena. Most notoriously, successful businessmen and officials may maintain multiple households to get around population control and official prohibitions on polygamy. Other officials—including, during my fieldwork, the female vice-magistrate of Mountain County—commute regularly between the city and the countryside, preferring to raise their children in the city. Even ordinary long-term migrants with prestigious jobs, such as Dragon Gate teachers, usually maintain close affective and practical ties with their native places—*laojia*—and their previous perches or centers of activity at other places lower on the hierarchy. Forming a category of sojourner that people call "migratory birds" (*hounjao*), less well-established migrants may return on a regular basis to their native places to farm or to conduct other economic activities. Even many long-term migrants to the city maintain their household registration in their rural place of origin either because they are unable to secure an urban registration or because they are hopeful of benefiting economically from rural development. Like the garbage collectors described in the introduction, many rural-to-urban migrants leave their children behind in the care of grandparents. More and more rural settlements thus now form "empty-husk villages" (*kongke cun*), with only the very old and very young in residence.

Within families, sojourning patterns vary widely and exhibit great complexity. Multiple generations within one household may be sojourning as "migrant workers," only to return home for the holiday. As the floating population enters its second and even third generation, moreover, job-hopping has become more common. Consider, for example, how a recent college graduate from Anxi—the oldest of four siblings—described her family arrangement: In recent years, her mother and father were both working at factory in Jiangxi Province while all four siblings were located in different cities along the Southeastern seaboard. Despite this dispersal, the family maintained close economic cooperation; for instance, the eldest sister regularly sent money to her mother and was helping a younger sister move to Xiamen. The family reunited once per year for Chinese New Year in their native place.

Such examples of polycentricism, which could easily be multiplied, upset facile developmentalist narratives and complicate reductive rural–urban distinctions. Dragon Gate teachers formed no exception, maintaining strong connections to the countryside. Although they had transferred their nuclear family's household registration to the city, their larger family—including parents, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles—were still largely based in their native places or at other points in the central-place hierarchy. Given the polycentrism of their own households, Dragon Gate teachers played the role of ecotourists or "dudes" only with great irony.

Traveling Back in Time

Crossing the one-kilometer bridge from Xiamen Island to the mainland, the bus passed massive arrays of longshore equipment, then skirted row after row of newly constructed towering apartment blocks in Xiamen's peripheral Haicang District and on the outskirts of the bordering municipality of Longhai. Billboards lined the roads, often two or three wide ("Western City

Flames, 92 Proof Spirits Distilled from Gapes;" "Xiamen Saige Electronics Market;" "Fujian Farmer's Credit Union—Covering the City and the Countryside"). The smoggy haze that perennially besets China's cities obscured the mountains of Ningzhou Prefecture in the distance and gave even the passing billboards a blurred appearance.

Gleaming new glass-walled complexes exuded acrid chemical odors, then gave way to dilapidated developments, rusty warehouses, rust-stained apartment buildings, and small factories. Leaving the city, the bus traversed brief oases of sporadic cultivation—wide-leafed banana trees, vegetable gardens, rice paddies—interspersed by dusty settlements of two- and three-story brick and tile-covered buildings and the occasional small, dirty factory or slouching warehouse. Crossing the sprawling Supreme Tranquility River, we entered the Ningzhou prefectural capital.

Compared to the vertical density of Xiamen's relatively orderly conurbation, Ningzhou seemed at once sleepier and more crowded and chaotic. High-rise apartment blocks reappeared, but more sporadically. They seemed out of place amidst Ningzhou's squat collection of six and eight-story dirt and rust-stained buildings, which crouched over bustling store-lined streets. Xiamen's busy but relatively orderly traffic consisted mostly of cars and trucks, while Ningzhou exhibited a panoply of transport devices in a constant state of lazy commotion. Electric scooters, motorcycles and pedicabs (now outlawed in Xiamen) weaved back and forth between all manner of four-wheeled conveyance, which breezed by more primitive transports—bicycles ridden by uniformed high-school students, or wooden carts pulled by sun-baked old men in rattan hats. Someone had abandoned a pickup truck in the middle of a busy intersection. The police had not yet arrived. A teacher remarked on the relative lack of "regulation" (*guifanhua*) and "public morality" (*gongde*).

Shoppers thronged the streets. People dressed in saturated hues—brown, black, blue, red—in styles that denizens of more centrally located places describe as "earthy" or "hick" (*tu*). Nearby, oblivious to the traffic, a shaggy-haired man—besmeared with grime and completely naked except for the tattered rag of one soiled jacket sleeve clinging precariously to his right arm—tottered across the main road, occasionally learning over the ground in a jerky, pincer-like movement to inspect a cigarette butt. Cars weaved nonchalantly around him. I reflected that this laissez-faire approach to maintaining social order contrasted with the relative sterility of Xiamen streets, which, in the pursuit of "modernity," were swept clean of any too-glaring public manifestations of insanity and disorder.

Exiting the city back into the countryside, the bus passed by ever stubbier and dustier structures, mostly more two- or three-storied brick or white-tiled buildings. Further outside the city appeared larger fields of dust-covered, wide-leafed banana trees, their yellow fruit enveloped in protective blue plastic sacks. Rising gradually in elevation, we passed into an area of denser settlement, then descended into a wide valley filled with buildings—Mountain Town, seat of Mountain County.

The bus slowed down. Hitherto obscured in smoggy haze, the surrounding mountains now emerged for the first time in relative clarity, revealing the steep green peaks between which the town was nestled. Its sleepy tidiness contrasted starkly with the urban commotion of Ningzhou and Xiamen. Aside from a few isolated ten- or fifteen-story structures, most buildings reached no higher than six stories, the height at which they could be constructed without elevators. Girls and women washed clothes in the river. Fertilizer and farm-equipment shops appeared on the streets, which struck me as uncrowded and very clean. We passed by an incense-smoke-breathing temple with curved eaves that crouched in a shady lane under a banyan tree. A

road-sign advertisement for a new housing development with the auspicious name "Family of Scholars" (*shuxiang mendi*) displayed a proud father with his arm around a smiling boy under the slogan, "A famous school is at the doorstep–produce the next generation of elites!" (*mingxiao jiu zai menkou, chengjiu xia yi dai jingying*). As I would later learn, however, the general mediocrity of Mountain Town's schools compelled most students with ability or means to move up the central-place hierarchy for high-school study. This reality lent pathos to the advertisement's promise of social mobility.

Leaving Mountain Town, our driver powered up the precipitous mountain roads winding out of the valley. The bus lifted completely out of the cloak of smog, which receded to a remote haze in the lowlands, visible like a cloud bank in the distance below the foliaged-covered slopes.

After three hours on the road, we arrived at our destination, the picturesque mountain village of Nine Clouds. Along the banyan-lined old wooden storefront, which locals said dated back to the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 C.E.), the village seemed almost unsullied by modernity. But behind the time-blackened buildings one could glimpse, as if in the wings of a theater set, a more prosaic existence of dirty white-tiled buildings and parked motorcycles.

Some of the female teachers bought sugarcane to chew on, nostalgically reminiscing about consuming the treat during their girlhood in the countryside. This conversation prompted Mr. Liu, a Mountain County native, to recall the backbreaking labor of growing sugarcane on his family farm before the Gaokao changed his fate. "Growing sugarcane–now *that* was hard work," he said. Such memories of arduous farm labor contrasted with nostalgia for a childhood that was lost to today's children. Ms. Yao recalled her high-school studies in the late 1990s in another rural locale: "We didn't study quite as hard back then. We had time to play outdoors and play ping pong. From a young age, all the kids know today is books, books, books."

After a quick tour of two of the most impressive earth buildings, we had a lunch of rustic food. All the food was "organic" our hosts insisted, but Vice-principal Jian, himself Hakka, complained that the rice wine was a diluted concoction. Ms. Yang, also Hakka, publicly grumbled about the "stingy" portions. The restaurant displayed an advertisement for rustic accommodation: "None of the hustle and bustle of the city, no filthy dust, no cold concrete walls; only the serenity of the village, fresh air, the light fragrance of real wood: Listen to your heart's world (*xin de shijie*), enjoy a life of distinction!" Dismissively gesturing at the olden wooden shop buildings, however, Ms. Wu, another English teacher, remarked, "In my part of Fujian, villages like this are a dime a dozen."

After lunch we hurried through sightseeing and a group photo. Then, as suddenly as we arrived, everyone boarded the bus again. As we passed through a small town, a chemistry teacher, Mr. Jian, discussed the locality. Mr. Jian was another Mountain County native. Unfailingly garbed in his anachronistic uniform of navy-blue Mao-style coat and pants, his dire mien struck a stark contrast to the casual style of the younger teachers. He pointed to a large two-story rectangular modern-style building in the distance.

"That's Mountain County Number Three High School," Jian said. "I taught there for a few years after college. They've now closed the senior high school. There's only a junior-middle school division left, and it mostly has only part-time teachers. This area used to be very remote (*yiqian hen pianpi*). It's still quite backward (*luohou*)."

Peering out the window at the school building, I reflected on the temporal dimension of the spatial hierarchy of market systems. These rural places, once even more remote and backward than they were now, still lagged far behind the city in development, which now drained rural areas of resources. Yet the promised inexorability of socialist modernization

presaged—in principal at least—the eventual fusion of all localities with the civilizational center in the perfect, monadic contemporaneity of an ideal modernity, in which no place would be remote and no time out of joint with the future.

Traveling back up the hierarchy was like traveling back into the future. Churning down the mountain roads, we entered the commotion, the smog, the factories, and the high-rises of Ningzhou and Xiamen. As the bus pulled back into the school gates, Mr. Shen, the senior-one politics teacher, turned to me joking—his mischievous smile revealing tobacco-stained teeth—"You know the old saying—that's Chinese tourism for you: Get off the bus to take a leak, get back on to go to sleep; take some pictures of the attractions, come back home with no recollections."

The Countryside in the City, the City in the Countryside

In sum, Dragon Gate teachers—who themselves led polycentric existences—approached such performances of rusticity with an ambivalent combination of nostalgia and irony. This nuanced attitude reflected their complex identities. Belying the static categories of household registration and the stereotyped assumptions of the ecotourism industry, Dragon Gate teachers maintained strong ties with native places, new homes, and places in-between.

That very evening, Mr. Shen invited Ms. Yang and me to join his wife, Ms. Li (also a Dragon Gate teacher), and his college-aged daughter for dinner together with some friends just back from his home county of Anxi, another rural county just three hours' drive northeast of Xiamen. Mr. Shen's friends were a tea-trading family who frequently sojourned between Anxi and Xiamen. To mark the occasion, Mr. Shen produced a bottle of home-made clear spirits infused with hornets and angelica root. My hosts remarked that we had not needed to travel to

the countryside that day; the countryside would come to us. Ms. Yang commented on the "authentic human feeling" (*zhen zheng de renqing*) of our evening gathering. In comparison, the commoditized rural hospitality of Nine Clouds seemed highly artificial. The liquors that we drank—one deemed to be "fake" (*zuojia*) and the other "genuine" (*zhenshi*)—emblematized this contrast.

As I later learned, however, this dinner indexed a more general phenomenon. Using polycentricism to their best advantage, urban residents of rural origin enjoyed the benefits of urban residence while using their rural connections to circumvent some of its alienating constraints.

As I later learned, for example, Ms. Li and Mr. Shen had used connections to side-step the one-child policy. Mr. Shen desired a boy to continue his lineage, but his wife, the fifty-something Ms. Li, was beyond child-bearing age. Nevertheless, a baby boy joined their household following what Ms. Li told school authorities was a protracted "illness." At Dragon Gate it was an open secret that the boy had been adopted from another rural family, but Ms. Shen and Ms. Li raised him as their own. Using guanxi, they had arranged for the boy to attend a good public elementary school. This arrangement seemed novel to me, but did not merit much comment from other teachers, who appraised such adoption as a normal rural practice. Ms. Yang, who later became a close friend, observed: "These kinds of things happen all the time in the countryside." Note, however, that my interlocutor defined "countryside" both in terms of practice and physical location.

Among Dragon Gate teachers and other Xiamen residents whom I met, Mr. Shen was far from alone in maintaining strong native-place ties. Ms. Yang, for example, hailed from a small town in Longyan Prefecture where her father had worked as a contractor in the highway-

construction business. As he amassed wealth, his family had moved to a home in the prefectural seat, where Ms. Yang studied in the best public high school. Following a good performance on the Gaokao, Ms. Yang moved again up the central-place hierarchy to Xiamen when she secured her teaching job at Dragon Gate. Unfortunately, her father had died in his 50s from liver cancer—probably, the family thought, as a result of the alcohol consumption required to lubricate government deals. During his illness, Ms. Yang's mother moved to Xiamen, followed by her sister and brother. Her ne'er-do-well brother was involved in a shrimp-farming business in his hometown but resided in Xiamen. Her sister had married another Longyan contractor—a young man who had just returned from working on a construction project in Libya. Ms. Yang's husband, Mr. He, a PE teacher at Dragon Gate, was the only one of the group who could defensibly claim Xiamen heritage, although in his case he had grown up in a rural subdivision of Xiamen, Tong'an, which had only recently been incorporated in the city. Ms. Yang complained that her husband was "the biggest hick [*caobao*] of them all," despite his ostensibly urban origin. Even the older teachers at Dragon Gate, who complained that the newer rural arrivals of Ms. Yang's generation were crowding out their jobs, did not identify themselves primarily as urbanites. The older generation of teachers hailed from surrounding villages, now razed and replaced by thirty-story apartment buildings during Xiamen's urbanization.

Guanxi and Rules: Geographical Variation

Xiamen has expanded with such rapidity in the last fifteen years that it is exceedingly difficult to define Xiamen identity. This difficulty is probably generalizable for most cities at the same level of the central-place hierarchy. Even many of those who define themselves as Xiamen natives usually maintain a history of sojourning ties to other places. For most, Xiamen is more like a

perch or a temporary nest—or, in Mr. Jian's words, a "platform for destiny"—than a permanent home. Living there is associated with a certain status and certain opportunities, but most of the city's migrants maintain strong connections with rural places, just as they imagine better opportunities for their children in even more centrally located places or overseas.

Above I discuss the opportunities associated with central places, including higher income, better schools, better social welfare. I also adumbrate less easily quantifiable factors, such as prestige and charisma. Here I point out another type of opportunity, which concerns the structure of relationships in central places. In rural places, particularistic relationships or *guanxi* play a relatively dominant role. In places higher on the central-place hierarchy, by contrast, universalistic or rule-based sociality, identified with better general "regulation" of society and high "public morality," plays a comparatively larger role. Migrants to the city, therefore, generally expect that competition for employment and other resources—although still requiring *guanxi*—will contain a larger element of "fair," rule-based selection than such competition does in rural places. This ethos of "fairness" provides an additional incentive to move to the city.[151]

In other words, a guanxi-based ethos of particularistic solidarity more or less openly dominates in rural places, whereas the ideal of relationships based on universalistic notions of equal treatment for equal status—rule of law—is more conscientiously performed in urban places. The lower one goes on the hierarchy, therefore, the more selectively "rule of law" is implemented. Mountain County police, for example, were famous for enforcing a controversial

[151] Of course, nepotism and patrimonialism still play a prevalent role in the economies of places like Xiamen. Moreover, education forms a particular domain of focus for such nepotistic activities. As Ms. Shen and Ms. Li did for their adopted son, for example, it is not uncommon for high-school teachers of recent rural origin, some of whom assume senior administrative positions, to go through their connections in Xiamen to arrange places for rural kin in Xiamen schools. Overall, however, Xiamen schools are more tightly regulated than their rural equivalents. As I explore in chapter 3, however, the staging of modernity compels people in Xiamen to hide such nepotism in the backstage whereas people in Ningzhou and Mountain County use guanxi more openly.

local motorcycle helmet law only on outsiders: If one saw someone riding a motorcycle with a helmet in Mountain County, one could be assured the rider was a tourist.

As they migrate up the central-place hierarchy, people strive to transform guanxi (which people associate with traditional, rural, "feudal" practices) into quality (which people associate with modernity and urbanity). The orthodox way in which people strive to achieve this transformation is through the objectification of social labor into test scores. In Ms. Yang's case, for example, her late father had used his connections in Longyan to secure every feasible educational advantage for her, which, through much added "hard work" (*nuli*), she translated into the "meritocratically" earned charisma of a prestigious government job as a public-school teacher in Xiamen.

As a result of these arrangements, cities generally draw migrants only from positions lower on the central-place hierarchy. Nationally renowned for its strong economy, relatively clean air, and good climate, Xiamen—the economic center of the southern Fujian or Zhang-Qian macroregion—attracts migrants from all over the country. By contrast, Ningzhou draws its residents mostly only from wider Ningzhou Prefecture, with some migrants from places lower on the central-place hierarchy in Fujian and surrounding provinces. At the bottom of the local hierarchy, Mountain County has very few outsiders. While I was there, Mountain County Number One High School, had only two teachers from outside Mountain County, of which I was one.[152]

[152] The above-described geographical arrangements produce a multitude of effects, notably, for example, on language. In Xiamen, Mandarin has supplanted the Amoy dialect of Hokkien in most contexts. In Ningzhou, the Ningzhou dialect of Hokkien still prevails in many public settings. For this reason, most long-term migrants to Ningzhou learn at least to understand Ningzhou Hokkien. In Mountain County, speaking anything other than Mountain County Hokkien brands one as an outsider. Even teachers only speak Mandarin with a heavy accent—referring to this style of speech self-deprecatingly as a "sweet-potato tone" (*digua qiang*). Some teachers even interspersed Hokkien with Mandarin in their lessons in contravention to government regulations and ubiquitous school propaganda notices urging teachers and students to "speak Mandarin."

The relative prevalence of guanxi in rural areas constitutes an important reason why people perceive rural places to be out of joint with modernity and development. As noted above, people perceive the predominance of particularistic relationships in the countryside to be a mark of low "quality" and an index of underdevelopment. Recall, moreover, that people take guanxi as a part of a cultural syndrome that includes China's overpopulation and underdevelopment, which, taken together, form China's unique "national conditions." The relationship between guanxi and overpopulation should now be more apparent. People widely associate overpopulation with the excessive fertility of rural people; moreover, the vast majority of China's population, and thus the bulk of its overpopulation "problem," is considered to be rural in origin. The transition from "quantity" to "quality" to which state authorities aspire simultaneously constitutes a transition from rurality to urbanity and (at least in ideal) from the particularistic politics of guanxi to the universalistic ethics of rule of law.

Yet rapid urbanization has not so much produced the quantum leap into a future of urban modernity, which to large degree remains a fantasy, as it has heightened the traditional polycentrism of Chinese existence. The purportedly rules-based ethos of institutions in "modernized" urban places, although more deeply instantiated than in rural places, remains to large degree a façade. People widely complain that the modern appearance of urban centers masks the realities of exploitation, pollution, and mistrust.

Nostalgia and the Ambivalence of Progress

During my later commutes between Xiamen and Mountain County, I found myself in frequent conversation with fellow travelers about the disconnect between the ideal and the reality of urbanization: Far from being a journey into a utopian future, movement up the hierarchy seemed

to constitute a descent into an increasingly polluted lowland industrial hell. This apocalyptic landscape was only finally shrouded upon entering the Xiamen city center—a mirage of modernity. In this idyllic scene, office buildings and Western-style hotels and cafes surround a man-made lake populated by a government-supplied flock of snow-white egrets. The tourist who never ventures away from this downtown dreamworld can imagine China has catapulted itself into a gleaming, albeit smoggy, future. Yet ordinary migrants know that this veneer of modernity is belied by the relative squalor of their living conditions, the environmental depredations of the factories that produce this wealth, and the gulf of inequality that looms between the countryside and the city.

Such realities undergird the widespread perception that modernization is staged, urbanization "false," "fake," or "empty." People say, therefore, that the "rule of law," "regulation," and "public morality" form surface-level realities that have not "percolated into people's heads and hearts" (*meiyou shenru naojin/xinyan*). As many put it, the "software" (*ruanjian*) of people's conceptions have not caught up with the "hardware" (*yingjian*) of urban infrastructure. One migrant poignantly observed that the city resembles a "gilded turd" (*dujin de dabian*).

Such attitudes are symptomatic, on the one hand, of widespread cynicism about the Party-state's ability to pilot China toward the telos of modernity and, on the other hand, of growing ambivalence toward this state-orthodox unilinear, teleological narrative of history itself. Consider how discomfiture with development feeds the demand for the burgeoning ecotourism industry. In the words of the above-mentioned advertisement, this industry invites urbanites to "enjoy a life of distinction" in the countryside. Ecotourism thereby revalues rusticity into a superior form of sophistication. As the foregoing description of the Dragon Gate excursion

illustrates, rural migrants themselves are not immune to such nostalgic revaluations: People experience "going back to the countryside" (*hui nongcun*) as an occasion to reflect nostalgically on a rural past that lies spatially and temporally removed from their urban present. Sojourners and migrants of all backgrounds opine that life in the countryside is cleaner, quieter, and safer; the food more reliable ("we grow it ourselves"); the people simpler (*pushi*), more honest (*zhencheng*); the relations among them more down to earth (*shizai*). By contrast, the city lacks "humanity" or "human feeling" (*renqing*): Acting outside particularistic webs of relationships, city folk are "slick" (*hua*), "sly" (*jiao*), and "untrustworthy" (*bu ke xinren de*). Such views reverse the urban bias that the countryside is a lawless, immoral place. Consider how a Mountain County High School student—the daughter of a teacher—expressed her concern about moving to the city for college: "I worry about moving to the city. My parents say that I am very childlike; they worry about me getting cheated … The city is chaotic [*luan*]." For all these reasons, people see rural places to be relatively "genuine" or "real," urban places to be "fake" and "empty."

In sum, many migrants agree that life "in itself" (*benshen*) is better in the countryside; however, jobs there are scarcer, wages lower, and education inferior. Unmarried migrants sometimes relish the freedom of an urban existence. By middle age, however, most Chinese face the double duty of caring for the younger and older generations, or, as people say, "having the old above and the young below." For many people, urban sojourning or migration seems to provide the only viable option for meeting these demands. With particular frequency, moreover, people cite their children to be their main reason for working in the city. Expressing a view shared by many, one Ningzhou taxi driver of Jiangxi described his feelings about only seeing his children once per year for Chinese New Year: "If it wasn't for my children, I wouldn't be here.

I'd be with them. It's all for the children." Of course sacrifices for the children are sacrifices for the self: Parents acquire status and security from successful children (chapter 1).

In the face of looming rural–urban inequality and slowing economic growth, the dream of "changing one's fate" through the Gaokao seems increasingly out of reach of many ordinary Chinese. If the middle-class increasingly fails to see the Gaokao as consequential, therefore, the disenfranchised and marginalized of society are increasingly failing to see it as undetermined—that is, as providing a real chance for improving one's fortune. Without doubt, such changing attitudes toward the Gaokao contribute to producing revolutionary and millenarian desires—the marginalized person's analog to the middle-class desire for transcendence through emigration. Thus people say, "What Chinese fear most is chaos [*luan*]. As long as the Party can guarantee social stability, the majority of people will accept the Party." On the whole, moreover, people widely agreed that the Chinese Party-state is doing "a relatively good job" in the face of China's "national circumstances," namely, "overpopulation and underdevelopment."

Despite increasing dissent, people generally trace social problems in the last analysis to overpopulation rather than to the depredations of development. The phrase, "There's nothing to be done [*mei banfa*]—China just has too many people [*ren tai duo*]" is an oft-repeated refrain. According to this view, the Gaokao is a necessary social ill: When pressed on why it is necessary to have a Gaokao, many students and teachers will explain that China has just "too many people" (*renkou guo duo*). In a country that is so overpopulated, they reason, competition is unavoidably fierce. Thus the Gaokao provides the only way to ensure fair distribution of scarce social resources, particularly in a society dominated by guanxi.

In recent years, Chinese have widely appealed in the last analysis to overpopulation to account not only for the Gaokao but for every social ill, from pollution to social inequality.

People say that the "national circumstances" of overpopulation and guanxi will only be transcended long in the future, if ever. In this way, the discourse of "national circumstances" resembles that of "fate." Both concepts refer to allegedly unchangeable conditions of existence. One might say that "overpopulation" constitutes fate in the register of national history.

Overpopulation or Underdevelopment?

Consider, however, how urbanization turns overpopulation into a self-fulfilling prophecy. By drawing crowds of migrants into the city from the countryside, urbanization creates high levels of population density that people associate with overpopulation. Just as China's developmentalist ideology is objectified in the hierarchy of places, urbanization sustains the perception of overpopulation, thus impelling people to accept and pursue even more drastic forms of urbanization. This evidence of overpopulation is objectified in overcrowded public transportation, overloaded public education, and congested streets. As I found, however, even this apparently irrefutable evidence of overpopulation appears suspect from the perspective of someone traveling up the hierarchy from more peripheral places.

Note how a Ningzhou teacher of rural origin, the above-mentioned Ms. Liu (introduction), reacted upon her first visit to Shanghai, China's largest city—a trip on which I accompanied her and her husband. "It's so quiet!" she exclaimed with great surprise. At hours when Ningzhou busses would be packed with people and Ningzhou streets lined with ad hoc marketplaces bustling with "hot and noisy" activity, largely suburban Shanghai seemed empty—a ghost town. Her observations led her to reflect that the places that best embody "heat and noise"—a desirable characteristic in Chinese aesthetics of place—are often among the most underdeveloped.

Shanghainese friends of mine who met with us contested these observations: "Have you visited Nanjing road, the main shopping street?" they asked. "Have you taken the subway during rush hour?"

Out of politeness, Mr. Li acceded to these objections, but later confided in me that she did not feel persuaded:

> They think I am a country bumpkin who hasn't seen anything of the world [*meiyou jianshi*]. … Of course, any big city has a shopping street, or rush hour. But your friends should see Ningzhou at 10 p.m. You can't even find a seat on the bus. But Shanghai—most of the day it feels empty. Everything is just so well organized and well regulated [*guifanhua*]—you don't see the people. … Even the air here is better than it is in Ningzhou. It makes me seriously wonder whether or not China is really overpopulated. I think it is just not developed enough.

Upon returning to Xiamen, I shared Ms. Liu's perceptions with other friends and colleagues in Xiamen and Ningzhou. But few had traveled to such far-flung places as Shanghai or Beijing. The notion that China was not overpopulated, only underdeveloped, generally met with extreme skepticism. Consider, for example, the skeptical reaction of Mr. Lin, a Dragon Gate High School math teacher who came from a small town in Ningzhou. As a government employee, Mr. Lin had resigned himself to the reality of the one-child policy. As with many urbanites, however, he regretted not being able to have a second child. In the face of his sacrifices, Ms. Liu's theory seemed to him like a frivolous challenge to scientific fact. "Overpopulation is just the reality [*xianshi*]," Mr. Lin said.

Although government policies have helped produce this vehement belief in overpopulation, even state-affiliated demographers now widely agree that China needs to produce more children to stem off the draconian consequences of population imbalance. But population control is difficult to reform. As the recent transformation of China's one-child policy into a two-child policy suggests, reform is likely only to occur in a step-wise fashion. The tenacity of population control has many reasons. For one thing, population control possesses

great bureaucratic momentum: Policy enforcement employs millions of people. Moreover, the belief that China is overpopulated runs deep, reinforced by the traumatic sacrifices that families have made both to comply with it and to subvert it.[153] Above all, however, "overpopulation" plays an extremely important role in the Chinese ideology of developmentalism. This irreducible national fate provides a theodicy for all social ills.

Part III: Hierarchical Effects

In the foregoing analysis, I discuss experiences of time and place. Inferable from these experiences are a series of what I term *hierarchical effects*. I use hierarchical effect to refer to any hierarchical variation in experience or perception along the central-place hierarchy. Adumbrated in the foregoing analysis, such hierarchical effects include the following:

1. Peripheral places are experienced as relatively "chaotic" and "backward" whereas central places are seen as relatively "regulated" and "advanced."
2. Since people see modernity as largely staged, they experience central places as relatively "empty," "fake," "counterfeit," whereas they see peripheral places as "true," "genuine," or "down to earth"; however, people may see "modernity" as more "real" in centrally located places, where this staging is taken more seriously, than they do in peripheral places, where modernity is considered to be strictly performative.
3. The "quality" of people is seen to increase the farther one moves up the geographical hierarchy, but the "sincerity" and "humanity" of people increases in more peripheral places. By the same token, urban people are "sophisticated" but "sly" whereas rural people are "simple" and honest.

[153] Ironically, this deeply held belief that China is overpopulated, along with rising costs of having children, may form an important but understudied reason why urban couples now widely refrain from having more children even when policy reforms allow them to do so.

4. Centrally located places have a more ancient history than peripherally located places, which were more recently incorporated into civilization.

Hierarchical effects apply not only to perceptions, but also to systematic variations that underlie those perceptions. Examples of such variations include the score-value hierarchy (the more central the place, the higher the Gaokao score), sociolinguistic patterns (the more central the place, the greater the use of Mandarin), and many other aspects of culture.

Note, therefore, hierarchical effects contain both subjective and objective, emic and etic dimensions. For example, the perception that "rural people are more genuine" implies that people at different points of the central-place hierarchy have different cultural understandings, different notions of reciprocity, and, in a phenomenological sense, inhabit different worlds. Moreover, perceptions of the hierarchy vary along the hierarchy. For example, many people of rural origin contest that they possess lower quality than their urban counterparts. Moreover, people may encounter and inhabit different experiences of the hierarchy as they move up and down the hierarchy.

Hierarchy and Critique: Harnessing Revolutionary Desire

As discussed in chapter 1, Skinner conceives the central-place hierarchy to consist in "patterned flows." These flows are usually construed to comprise predominantly material realities such as goods and services, money and credit, and people. But these flows also include more abstract qualities such as messages and symbols, and, I would add, attitudes and desires (Skinner 1980). Note, moreover, that the geographical hierarchy simultaneously constitutes a spatial hierarchy and a temporal process. Therefore, this hierarchy provides one answer to calls by scholars to

conceive of a spatial-cum-historical vision of totality that is not reductively linear or dualistic (Sangren 2010).

Although many critique such conceptions of totality as economistic or reductively systematic, they need not be either; moreover, any social theory probably contains some notion of totality, whether implicit or explicit (Friedman 1994; Jay 1984; Sangren 2010; C. A. Smith 1976). On the one hand, various calls to appreciate human difference give praiseworthy salience to variation but tend to divide human experience into discrete spatial or temporal units. Spatially, these units appear as cultures, "worlds," or "ontologies"; temporally, they appear as historical eras or stages (Lukács 1972). In either case, theorization results in a totality that emphasizes the discreteness of various human experiences. Such a meta-theory implies the risk of exoticizing or "allochronizing" the other and glossing over commonality, hybridity, and interaction (Fabian 1983). On the other hand, suggestions to appreciate cultural interaction and hybridity or the coexistence of "multiple temporalities" have produced attractive visions of hybridity or "structural totality," but usually reduce that hybridity and interaction "in the last instance" to a single cause—such as "capitalism" (be it neoliberal or otherwise), "power," or "the economy" (Althusser 2009).

The approach that I propose joins other calls for an open-ended spatial-cum-historical totality that attempts to transcend the vulgar dualisms of "modernity" and "tradition" or "capitalism" and "precapitalism" on the one hand, and "urban" and "rural" or "developed" and "undeveloped," on the other (Friedman 1994). Such a conception—even if considered only to be a heuristic analytical tool—provides a dual advantage: On the one hand, it brings into focus historical patterns (repetitions, cycles, or dead-ends) that narratives of unilinear development or a "break" between modernity and tradition mask. On the other hand, it enables observers to

consider spatial patterns of rural–urban variation that the fiction of a bifurcation between city and the countryside obscures.

But China presents an irony—one that is common to many places that embrace developmentalist ideology: A unilinear, teleological development narrative of the kind to which I am counterposing Skinner's schema has become objectified in the central-place hierarchy itself. Consider, for example, the above-mentioned perception that rural places are relatively "chaotic" and "backward" whereas urban places are "well regulated" and "advanced."

In other words, such attitudes are themselves inscribed in the social-cum-natural environment or 'world'. In short, common experiences of place confirm the validity of the vulgar Marxist narrative of modernization that presents China as meritocratically developing toward the telos of a Utopian future. Ironically, therefore, one of the hierarchical effects that Skinner's schema allows the social observer to trace is the objectification in that hierarchy of another schema, that of the unilinear teleology of socialist modernization and developmentalism.

Thus the central-place hierarchy simultaneously forms a phenomenal experience or world, on the one hand, and an analytical tool, on the other. Consider, for example, how Chinese administrators—past and present—have used various conceptions of the central-place hierarchy to administer the state. As I have presented, moreover, schools teach students about the hierarchy and families use their own experiences of the hierarchy to strategize mobility.

In other words, the administrative transformation of the hierarchy through policymaking from above and the self-transformation of one's place in the hierarchy through mobility strategies from below both require a conception of that hierarchy. This conception might be labeled either critique, to highlight its objective or etic aspect, or cosmology, to highlight its subjective or emic aspect.

Any attempt to find a strong boundary between those two types of conception will prove fruitless, although a heuristic distinction between them may be drawn. In this spirit, I alternatively use ‘conception’, ‘cosmology’, ‘ideology’, and ‘critique’ as terms of convenience to label different aspects of these experiences of space and time. Similarly, I use such terms as ‘social order’ and ‘society’ as synonyms for the central-place hierarchy, broadly conceived. But I do not mean to imply any strong dualism between “individual” and “society,” “culture” and “nature,” or “cosmology” and “social order.” I assume that all such terms index different vantages on the same phenomenal totality—vantages that may be relatively emic or etic. The emic, subjective, or ideological quality of such conceptions may be more readily apparent; however, such conceptions are simultaneously etic, objective, and critical whenever they question—in small ways or large—what is given (that is, “natural” or “fated”).

Critique and conformity are never far apart. In chapter 1, I suggest that the Gaokao reflects a hegemonic negotiation of conflicting interests. This chapter adds to that picture by showing how that negotiation takes place against the background of a doxic belief China’s “national circumstances.” Buttressed by this belief, negotiation leads to a working consensus. But the motive for negotiation derives from desire for change, broadly construed.

For this reason, recruiting people into a hegemonic project requires harnessing their desire for individual and social change. All theories or cosmologies, including hegemonic ones, contain a gap between ideal and reality—between the world as desired and the world as given. Thus every ideology contains a more or less explicit project for changing society or one’s place in it, be that project relatively conservative or radical. In short, every cosmology is also a critique insofar as it contains a theory of social and/or self change.

In short, the Gaokao comprises a sublimated form of class conflict. As I investigate in later chapters, therefore, the Gaokao functions in part by harnessing the energy of this revolutionary desire—what Deleuze (1983) might term the "war machine"—to the ends of the social reproduction of the state. In sum, the belief in developmentalist ideology derives motive force from revolutionary desire directed toward social and self-transformation.

Mobility as Method

Such developmentalist ideology represents a dominant type of cosmology in contemporary Chinese society. But conceptions of the central-place hierarchy display great variety, ranging from highly abstract and quantified administrative maps to localized notions of the hierarchy of gods. Nostalgia and disaffection with modernity, moreover, reveal dissenting views on commonplace developmentalist cosmology. By the same token, polycentricism renders peoples' experience polyvalent: As one moves up and down the central-place hierarchy, one encounters different cosmologies. Modernization has reduced the plurality of perspectives to some degree; but mobility has exponentially increased peoples' exposure to that plurality. In the course of a single day, Chinese may inhabit vastly different phenomenological worlds.

Intriguingly, such differences may be experienced by people as cognitive effects. As Ms. Liu put it to me suggestively, when she travels to more central places, she feels an openness of thought; his mind takes a more critical turn: She is able to perceive and critique her own rural traditions. These cognitive effects perhaps contribute to why people say that travel to central places "broadens one's horizon" (*kaikuo yanjie*). Note that people do not necessarily experience these effects as durable, but rather as contextual. When Ms. Liu travels back down the hierarchy to rural areas, she reports experiencing a narrowing of his horizons. She feels more bound by

tradition and reports feeling a reduced capacity for self-objectification and critique. The foregoing is *not* to suggest that critical perspectives are only available in central places. It does seem, however, that a certain kind of capacity for critique relates to movement through different social worlds. As noted, I suggest that this capacity derives from how movement defamiliarizes one's ordinary assumptions. Mobility has a distancing effect. It pulls one out of one's normal subjective immersion in one's surroundings, making it possible to see oneself and one's surroundings as an object in a new way.

To say that all conceptions of the central-place hierarchy are to some degree emic and to some degree etic is not to say that they are all equally so. By the same token, to suggest that perspectives are always somehow interested is not to suggest that we should not strive for objectivity. Caution must be exercised, however, that objectivity itself does not become a powerful new god, as "science" has done in Chinese education (chapter 4). Ultimately, however, the ability to change society in large ways or small—to imagine a future outside "capitalism," or "power," or "neoliberalism" or whatever watchword we use to label the dominant hegemonic ideology, or even just to imagine incremental changes in those systems or one's life—requires the uncanny ability to perceive society from a more objective point of view, to denaturalize what is given.

I suggest that mobility is a powerful tool for such denaturalization. When people move up and down the hierarchy, they trouble their own assumptions about the world, becoming in a sense anthropologists of their own society. Those who travel between the disparate social worlds of the dispossessed and the middle class attain a relatively objective, etic awareness of social disparity. By contrast, those mired within those separate worlds have little frame of reference to produce such an objective understanding.

These considerations help account for why China's revolutionary and millenarian leaders have typically drawn their ranks from itinerant strangers. The Chinese popular outlaw imaginary of vagabonds, outlaws, martial artists, and revolutionaries evokes precisely such an experience of itinerancy, in which strangers from afar congregate in the "lakes and rivers" of the floating life to share what they have seen and heard about the world. As mentioned, many migrants consider themselves as "wandering the lakes and rivers"—an experience they say "broadens ones horizons" and "opens one's eyes to new worlds" (*kaikuo yanjie*). As the examples that I adduce demonstrate, my own analysis of hierarchical effects owes much to my encounters with other travelers while myself being on the move.

Orthodox mobility, too, can lead to social insight. Now as before, the examination life is a floating life. Rural-to-urban examination migrants may achieve radical new perspectives on life. But the Gaokao does not produce as much mobility as many suppose. A pernicious effect of the examination system, therefore, lies in how it creates just enough controlled mobility to undergird the ideology of meritocracy while limiting levels of mobility that would have genuinely socially disruptive effects, either by producing widespread critical insight or upsetting the existing hegemonic consensus. From this perspective, lack of mobility plagues all levels of society, stifling critical insight. Members of China's middle classes who have witnessed the rapid growth and change from the periphery, like Mr. Jian, possess relatively great understanding of such social processes. But those members of the middle class who have lived their whole lives within the cultural prison of the Gaokao and their gated communities in Shanghai and Beijing

may find themselves more benighted about social disparity than the "simple," "superstitious," and "backward" itinerant workers.[154]

For these reasons, I have consistently found interlocutors who experience the largest degree of mobility, no matter where their origins, to possess sharpest critical insight. My own analysis represents an attempt to synthesize their insights, which I have gathered on my own travels. In this sense, mobility constitutes not just an object of theorization but also a critical method.

Conclusion

This chapter argues that the interconnected beliefs that China is overpopulated, on the one hand, and that life is getting better all the time, on the other, form a generally unassailable kernel of "hard reason" (*ying daoli*) or hegemonic belief that provides people both with "last-analysis" justifications for social problems *and* the hope to keep striving for a better life. Coupled with the utopian imaginary of inevitable improvement, the dystopian specter of overpopulation—China's incontrovertible "national circumstance"—functions as a theodicy: Overpopulation explains the gap between ideal and reality on a societal scale much as fate does on an individual one. Without these binding premises, the meritocratic promise of orthodox social reciprocity—success repays hard work—seems empty. But this meritocratic ideology of developmentalism is objectified in the central-place hierarchy itself, forming a hegemonic consensus. Such consensus, however, incorporates dissensus—desire for change. This dissensus manifests itself many ways. Relatively unorthodox desires include those to rebel or even militate for revolutionary change. But the

[154] It remains to be seen how the vast numbers of Chinese traveling overseas will affect Chinese society. But these international students are mainly of urban origin. Moreover, they tend to ghettoize themselves within Chinese cultural enclaves while studying abroad. Such factors do not militate for the creation of critical consciousness.

majority continue to pursue orthodox social advancement through the Gaokao or educational emigration.

Orthodox social advancement—attaining a greater platform for destiny—requires mobility. To change one's fortune, one has to change one's position in the social-cum-spatial hierarchy. Thus parents migrate to cities to provide better opportunities for their children, and children move further up the hierarchy to be educated. And so it goes that "water flows downward and people move upward."

Mr. Jian's equation of destiny and movement thus harbors deep insight into Chinese realities. On the one hand, people perceive the good fortune of chance encounters among strangers—"destiny"—to have its own inexorable logic founded in the unseen workings of cosmic reciprocity (chapter 6). Paradoxically, however, such good fortune relies on the change and vitality that people bring into their lives volitionally through movement.

At a larger scale, moreover, the social-engineering policies of recent decades reflect and implement a national meritocratic narrative of social mobility—developmentalist ideology. An important plank in this ideology consists in the desired transformation of "quantity" into "quality": Eugenicist policies and educational reforms, coupled with urbanization and expansion of higher education, harness the collective efforts of the Chinese people to increase their population quality, thus hastening China on its path toward the eventual telos of socialist modernity. By the same token, these policies attempt to ward off the specter—imagined or real—of overpopulation.

By effecting massive transformations of the spatial hierarchy itself on a grand scale, such policies implement the meritocratic logic of developmentalism at a national level. In this way, they link the fortune of individuals to the fortune of the nation. If individual meritocratic striving

represents the individual's journey toward modernity through the ascension of the central-places hierarchy—"the urbanization of the population"—then national meritocratic striving represents the percolation of modernity down the spatial hierarchy—"the urbanization of places." To deny the national meritocratic narrative is to deny the individual one. These fundamental arrangements remain relatively stable across different cosmologies or phenomenological worlds: Despite increasing ambivalence and nostalgia, ordinary people continue to equate movement up the hierarchy with increase in status. In the contemporary era, most people associate this movement with "modernization." But the association of central places with civilization possesses long historical roots and resonates deeply with Chinese popular religion.

To stay engrossed in the promise of mobility, however, people need to continue to believe in some promise of social reciprocity: They need to believe that they can "transform fate" and "change fortune." Ironically, however, this process of "urbanization" is itself undermining the perception of the examination's fatefulness. As resources and human capital flow up the score-value hierarchy into the ever-widening cities, people are experiencing the examination to be less undetermined and thus less "fair."

CHAPTER 3

INDETERMINACY AND LEGITIMACY:
"MY GENERATION WAS RAISED ON POISON MILK"

In China, as elsewhere, superficial appearances—for example, of the authenticity of a product or the genuineness of an intention—can be deceptive (Blum 2007; Lin 2011). Citing educational disparities and the prominence of guanxi, Chinese widely consider educational "fairness" (*gongping*) to be a hoax. Note, for example, how a Mountain County Number One student, Mingfeng, responded to my question about how he maintained psychic equilibrium in the face of nepotism and unequal treatment at his school. Alluding to the tainted-milk scandal that rocked China in 2008, he compared his school's assertions of fair treatment to a counterfeit product: "If you don't have a good attitude, you're done for. My generation is strong. We were raised on poison milk."[155]

Mingfeng's comparison of examination fairness to tainted milk possesses great cultural resonance. In recent years, food safety in China has become a topic of pervasive national concern, symbolizing a general lack of trust in official pronouncements, public morality, and institutional ideals. As Ms. Liu, a Ningzhou teacher, said of Mingfeng's comparison, "What really makes you numb [*mamu*] is when you know that something is poison, but have to eat it anyway." This predicament—knowing that something is poison but having to eat it anyway—

[155] In this scandal, milk producers concealed the widespread practice of diluting milk with water by adding melamine, a poisonous chemical that simulates protein (Xiu and Klein 2010). My analysis of China's examination fever draws inspiration from Derrida's notion of "archive fever" (Derrida 1996) and his discussion of writing as *pharmakon* (in this case, figured as examination ritual) that ambivalently constitutes both poison and remedy (Derrida 1981). Some parts of my discussion in this chapter build on, incorporate, or adapt material that I present in my forthcoming *Social Analysis* article, "China's Examination Fever and the Fabrication of Fairness."

forms the gist, I believe, of Mingfeng's remark. In part, Mingfeng's notion of "good attitude" refers to cynical resignation—a form, as Ms. Liu calls it, of "numbness."

But despite Mingfeng's critical attitude toward his school, he possessed faith in the examination itself. He emphasized that the exam gave him hope of "getting out of the countryside" (*tiao chu nongmen*). Like countless others, Mingfeng complains that guanxi and politics distort the education system, but believes that the examination has the power to "transform fate." In short, attitudes toward the examination are complex: "Fairness" may be counterfeit to a significant degree, but the examination remains China's "only relatively fair competition." People feel proud, moreover, of their resilience—their ability to keep struggling despite (or even because) of the poison of unfairness. In spite of his cynicism, however, Mingfeng was little aware of the actual degree of disparity in the Chinese educational system. As I explain in this chapter, this paradoxical combination of cynicism, resignation, and hope is typical of participants in the Gaokao.

Overview: Gaps between Appearance and Realities

This chapter focuses on the gap between appearances and realities. In particular, I observe that social disparities in the examination system are even larger than most people suspect. Thus people do not so much actively overestimate their own examination chances. Rather, they have little way of attaining a fully accurate picture of the disparities in those chances from place to place, school to school, and even sometimes class to class. Indeed, they are actively discouraged from doing so (chapter 5).

In short, objective information is hard to obtain. In pursuit of their special interests, teachers, administrators, and officials keep their subordinates in the dark about the degree to

which they manipulate the system. As I elaborate below, moreover, government authorities restrict access to information about admission rates so that even prominent government-affiliated Gaokao researchers have no direct way of obtaining official data. Unable to access an accurate picture of the actual degree of social disparity, people suppose the Gaokao to be "fairer" than it actually is. As a result, people overestimate the effects of diligent effort or "luck" and underestimate the effects of family background, cultural environment, and money—social, cultural, and economic capital. In short, people lack an accurate picture of their examination chances—that is, of the degree of *indeterminacy* inherent to the exam.

Recall that indeterminacy possesses an aleatory dimension and an agonistic dimension (chapter 1). People tend to account for the former dimension, which I term chanciness, through the serendipity of "luck" and the benevolence of "fate." They generally associate the latter dimension, which I term precariousness, with the virtues of diligence, persistence, and composure. In chapter 6, I return to indeterminacy's aleatory dimension to argue that people conflate these two dimensions of indeterminacy. This conflation reinforces people's impression that examination rankings result from the fair judgment of a universalistic, objective authority. This chapter, by contrast, focuses on the agonistic dimension of indeterminacy—in short, the degree to which the results of the exam are determined through individual competition front stage during the examination rather than through particularistic relationships backstage ahead of time.

As I argue in foregoing chapters, indeterminacy undergirds legitimacy: Participants are unlikely to become engrossed in fateful rituals, nor grant them legitimacy, if the outcome is presented as a fait accompli. Overestimating indeterminacy is underestimating inequality. Like Mingfeng, however, the majority of students complain that educational arrangements are unfair.

Why, then, do I maintain that people *lack* awareness of inequality? Like people elsewhere, people in China tend to believe that they know how bad things really are, even if the real situation is worse than they suspect.[156] An analogy here may be found in perceptions of corruption: Chinese know that their officials are corrupt, and the media reports on corruption; however, the true extent of corruption is shielded from public view.[157] In some respects, therefore, public life in China, as elsewhere, resembles a big con—a confidence game that authorities play using censorship and persuasion. By overestimating their insight, people contribute to their engrossment in the deception.

Thus people's attitude toward the exam is not only characterized by false consciousness—that is, false beliefs that enable people to be exploited—but also by *false confidence*: Such false confidence resembles Žižek's (2008) notion of cynicism as ideology.[158] Žižek argues that conventional Marxian notions of false consciousness present an oversimplified view of ideology. Instead of being deceived by their beliefs, as such conventional notions would suggest, people are actually "practical solipsists": They know that their beliefs are false, but follow them anyway. For instance, most people know that money has no value outside of the social relations that produce that value. Nevertheless, people generally act *as if* money had value. According to Žižek, therefore, ideology takes the form of "fetishistic disavowal," that is, "I know very well, but still…." In other words, people say one thing but do another. Following unconscious desire, they act in contradiction to their professed cynicism.

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[156] I am indebted to Yurchak (2006) for his lucid glosses of Žižekian/Sloterdijkian cynicism and Marxian misrecognition. I have modified his glosses slightly.

[157] Chinese are rarely shocked by allegations that their leaders are corrupt, but can be taken aback at the degree of this corruption. Consider the 2012 reports on the corruption of former Prime Minister Wen Jiabao. These reports were heavily censored in China. When I told ordinary Chinese about them, few reacted with surprise. As one middle-aged worker said, "there is no government leader anywhere—in China or elsewhere—who doesn't help and protect his own family." However, many expressed alarm about the sums of money involved.

[158] Žižek borrows this concept notion of cynicism from Sloterdijk (1988).

Note, however, that Žižek's understanding of ideology presents a highly monolithic view of the psychic life of power.[159] Žižek describes a world in which people—universally cynics—seem to be on autopilot, acting out of no motive but unconscious desire. However, cynicism is not merely a form of "fetishistic disavowal," as Žižek proposes, but also a strategy of self-preservation. In the real world, authorities respond with violence to rebellion. In a world where stronger forms of resistance result in punishment, censure, marginalization, ostracization, or worse, the choice to maintain cynical resignation—"a good attitude"—may seem the lesser of evils.

As I suggest above, moreover, people's cynicism is not perfectly well informed—social disparity is even worse than they suspect. People are cynical, but perhaps not cynical enough. As in many rites of passage cross-culturally, secret knowledge plays an important role in the Gaokao. High-level ritual specialists (administrators and officials) withhold knowledge from low-level specialists (ordinary teachers) and initiates (examinees) about their slim chances of success. In general, therefore, the actual level of indeterminacy in the Gaokao is shrouded in indeterminacy. This fog of indeterminacy prevents people's numbness from bubbling into alternative, rebellious forms of action. In short, people persuade themselves that the Gaokao can make a difference. They truly believe in its "relative fairness."

In other words, cynicism does not exclude false consciousness or misrecognition. False beliefs, alongside cynicism, play an important ideological role in Chinese society: Despite massive inequality, widespread principled belief persists in the soundness of national norm-based examinations as a fair selection method. To complicate matters further, this belief persists in part because people actually *do* make a difference in their lives through their diligent efforts to

[159] "Psychic life of power" alludes to Butler's (1997) book of the same name.

cultivate themselves and game the system, even if the scope for such "transformations of fate" are exaggerated.

In sum, ideology takes no singular form but constitutes a complex admixture of attitudes, beliefs, and degrees of awareness.

Investigating this complexity, this chapter is divided into three parts: Part I discusses the relationship between "appearance" and "reality" within Chinese society and elsewhere. In particular, I draw inspiration from Yurchak's (2006) influential notion of "performative shift" in late Soviet society. In my view, however, Yurchak's focus on "performativity," like Žižek's emphasis on cynicism, constitutes an overly unitary view of ideology, at least when applied to the analysis of China. In contrast to such relatively monolithic approaches, I advocate for understanding ideology multidimensionally. I suggest that ideology consists in a historically and contextually varying *spectrum of superegoistic effects.* I lay the groundwork for this analysis by discussing how Chinese assess various practices and phenomena as "empty" (*xu*) or "real," (*shi*), including the following: (1) "justice" and "fairness," (2) affirmative action, (3) efforts to *rig the system* and *game the system*, (4) the design and grading of the exam, and (5) test scores themselves. I suggest that the examination consists in an exploitative *chain of interests*, in which high-level actors (officials, administrators, and teachers) have greater access to secret knowledge than do low-level ones (parents and students).

Parts II and III investigate these conceptual relationships within concrete ethnographic contexts: Part II discusses indeterminacy at the macro-level of society by exploring how government censors withhold Gaokao data from the public to *fabricate indeterminacy* and how researchers attempt to circumvent this censorship. I suggest that schools resemble temples: Just as people consider the number of pilgrims to a temple to reflect the efficacy of its patron deity,

so do people see the number of high-scoring students at a school to reflect its reputation. In both cases, these arrangements produce the circular logic of self-fulfilling prophesy. Thus schools focus great efforts on securing good "student resources" (*shengyuan*)—that is, high-scoring students. Part III examines the battle for student resources within the intimate ethnographic context of my field sites. I examine the measures and countermeasures that students, parents, teachers, administrators, and officials employ in the pursuit of their particular interests. Refocusing the discussion on the politics of subregional disparities within my field sites, I discuss various efforts by authorities to fabricate indeterminacy and by families to game the system. I conclude the chapter with some remarks on the charisma of examinations.

Part I: Legitimacy, Indeterminacy, and Performativity

Performativity, Sincerity, and the Spectrum of Superegoistic Effects

In his influential and useful account of late-socialist culture in the former Soviet Union, Alexei Yurchak (2006) critiques both Marx's view of ideology as "false consciousness" and Žižek's view of ideology as "cynicism." In Yurchak's analysis, the former, "actors-in-masks" conception of ideology merely replaces one false dichotomy (that between "recognition and misrecognition") with another one (that "between 'truth' and 'falsity' … 'revealing' and 'dissimulating'") (Yurchak 2006, 17). Yurchak argues that both of these conventional approaches to ideological analysis embrace the false assumption of a "unitary speaking ego"—"a unified, bounded, sovereign individual" for whom meaning is fully formed before the act of speaking (Yurchak 2006, 18).[160]

[160] In other words, either view suggests that "discourse reflects knowledge and does not produce it" (Yurchak 2006, 18). Yurchak thus joins other critics who complain that such conventional understandings of ideology harbor naïve or essentialist assumption of philosophical realism—the notion that reality is ontologically independent from our conceptual schemes.

As an alternative to these concepts, Yurchak proposes a deconstructive, performative approach to ideological analysis that is inspired by poststructuralist thought, in particular that of Judith Butler (1990).[161] Yurchak describes post-Stalin Soviet culture as having undergone a "performative shift." In Yurchak's analysis, Stalin's death (1953) untethered discourse from any unitary source of authority. As a result, people ceased to believe that official state ideology said anything true about the world. To describe this shift, Yurchak draws inspiration from Butler's reading of John Austin's (1975) distinction between constative and performative speech acts: Following Stalin's death, state ideology largely lost its constative dimension—its ability to contain information. But people still *performed* adherence to ideology: Through such "ritualized acts," moreover, they produced and reproduced meaningful social relations in the world. Therefore, ideology maintained its performative dimension—its ability to do things in the world. Invoking a Butler-inspired Derridean understanding of performativity/citationality, Yurchak argues that such ritualistic performances—for example, through parody and irony—can gradually effect epochal shifts in power relations. In particular, Yurchak analyzes a widespread late-socialist form of irony, *stiob*, which consisted in ironic overidentification with official ideology (Yurchak 2006, chap. 7). Reportedly, even many practitioners of *stiob* themselves were not sure if they were celebrating socialism's eternal reign or anticipating its steady decline. Yurchak argues that the pervasiveness of such ironical attitudes enabled "millions [to be] quickly

[161] Butler forms a main source of inspiration for Yurchak's (2006) analysis, which I subject to a sympathetic critique in this chapter. In *Psychic Life*, however, Butler's approach has a much greater focus on subjectivity than does Yurchak's. I find this focus on subjectivity salutary, although I am surprised that neither Butler (1990; 1997) nor Yurchak (2006) cite Goffman, despite extensive discussions of performance. I suspect that this oversight derives from a general prejudice that Goffman unfashionably (in today's terms) subscribes to an unwarranted assumption of a "unitary speaking ego," but as I argue below I believe little evidence for such sins can be found in Goffman's writing. Hacking (2004) does not seem to share this prejudice, suggesting that Goffman complements Foucauldian/post-structuralist notions of discourse by telling us how discourse "become[s] part of the lives of ordinary people." Butler is a philosopher. Her disinterest in the quotidian details of ordinary lives is perhaps understandable. But such details (even if they are messy) should very much matter to anthropologists.

engrossed [in Soviet collapse], making [that] collapse … [paradoxically] unexpected, unsurprising, *and* [emphasis mine] amazingly fast" (Yurchak 2006, 282).

Although Communist control has not (yet) collapsed in China, Yurchak's notion of performative shift can be usefully applied to Chinese society. By the same token, however, the sincere belief of Chinese in the Gaokao may help account for why the Chinese Party-state survived the transition to a market economy whereas the Soviet state did not.

Like the Soviet Union in the late Soviet period, China in the post-Mao era (1977–present) can be described as having undergone a performative shift. People in China report no longer believing in state ideology to the degree that they did in earlier times. In China, however, I suggest that such a shift does not merely constitute a phenomenon of late socialism but also reflects broader historical cycles in central-state control. In other words, an analysis of such shifts in China profits from attending to historical cycles and rhythms. Since imperial times, state control has periodically waxed and waned, forming cycles of "tightening" (*fang*) and "relaxation" (*shou*). In this context, the period that people identify with "late socialism" or "postsocialism" in China—the Post-Mao era of "Reform and Opening" (1978–present)—might be broadly characterized as a period of "relaxation."

But such broad-brush characterizations miss much nuance. The first decade of Reform and Opening in the 1980s was a period of relaxation, followed by a period of retrenchment after the Tian'anmen protests in 1989. The first decade of the twenty-first century constituted another period of relaxation. Under the new president, Xi Jinping, however, central-state authorities are attempting to reassert control. This reassertion of control is reflected in many aspects of life, in particular Xi's widely publicized campaigns to weed out corruption and promote the "rule of

law" (*fazhi*). Both campaigns can be read as attempts to reassert central control over the particularistic politics of place, in short, guanxi.[162]

These cycles also affect the Gaokao. As the Chinese economy boomed in the first years of the twenty-first century, the state devolved authority for the design of the Gaokao to the provinces. The exam became national in name only. Under Xi, however, the state is renationalizing the exam. After 2016, all examinees across China will take the same Gaokao, made in Beijing. An important but understudied aspect of Xi's anticorruption campaign, this Gaokao reform aims to restore people's confidence in the universalistic authority of the national state (D. Cohen and Beauchamp-Mustafaga 2014).

If people can be persuaded that such reforms are "genuine," people may eventually embrace them. Such embracement would manifest itself in people saying that "front-stage talk" (*changmianhua)* is getting closer to "reality" (*xianshi*). But when the state first attempts to increase control over public discourse, the gap between official ideology and "reality" (*xianshi*) tends to widen: Under such conditions, people are obliged to pay increased lip service to official pronouncements even when it is still unclear whether or not those pronouncements ("anti-corruption"; "rule of law"; etc.) will be "implemented in reality" (*luoshi dao shi chu*).

Note, however, that China's history of "performative shifts" is much longer and more complex than this narrow focus on the reform era can encompass. Cycles of waxing and waning central-state authority can be traced back through imperial times (Hartwell 1982; Skinner 1980). In particular, the Tang–Song transition (chapter 1) might be broadly characterized as having produced such a performative shift in subjectivity: According to Neo-Confucian ideology, political authority *appears* legitimate without in fact *being* so. Thus Neo-Confucians' bifurcation

[162] A finer analysis would distinguish rhythms and cycles in China's macroregions and subregions, which may be out of synch with one another (Skinner 1964).

of moral and political legitimacy could be described as widening the gap between "appearance" and "reality." Recall that the emergence of Neo-Confucianism accompanied the historical decline of aristocratic authority and the rise of a credential-based meritocracy. In the context of the Tang-Song examination culture, I said that this shift produced a recognizably modern form of subjectivity. In short, "performative shift" seems to describe the psychic attitude that emerges in periods of relative disenchantment when people recognize that the charisma of traditional authorities is arbitrary, that is, humanly produced.[163] But such a "modern" subjectivity is neither inevitable, nor indelible, nor immutable. It is subject to cyclical and contextual variation (Friedman 1994).

Moreover, the abovementioned tensions between the constative and performative dimensions of language are probably not unique to modern or early-modern societies. Sinologists argue that an emphasis on performativity over sincerity has characterized Chinese cultures since ancient times: "Empty" social etiquette or rituals—termed "rites" or *liyi* in Confucian thought—have long undergirded social norms of interaction in China (Seligman et al. 2008). Indeed, such "empty" etiquette probably defines much human interaction cross-culturally, in China and elsewhere. People everywhere may not "mean what they say" when they act according to etiquette, but this "lack of sincerity" does not diminish the performative effectiveness of such norms. By acting "as if" something is true, people can transform their social relations (Seligman

[163] Just as such historical cycles have long existed, parodic forms of social critique are nothing new in Chinese society. One of the most famous parodies of late imperial times concerns the examination itself. The novel *The Scholars*, completed by Wu Jingzi during the Qing Dyansty around 1750, mercilessly burlesques overambitious scholars for taking the examination too seriously. Wu Jingzi's critique appeared at a time in Chinese society—the eighteenth century—when increasing prosperity led to a perception that wealth played an outsized role in determining exam success (Ropp 1981).

et al. 2008; Yurchak 2006). The Western obsession with sincerity tends to obfuscate this creative potential of ritual formalism (Seligman et al. 2008).[164]

Chinese may indeed possess particular cultural predilections for performativity (Blum 2007). But it would be incorrect therefore to conclude that they lack any sincere beliefs. Despite a broader "performative shift" during the reform era, Chinese keep faith in many convictions, including the efficacy of religious deities, the superiority of sons over daughters, the objectivity of science, the importance of genuine human relations among friends, and (most relevant to this analysis) the relative fairness and objectivity of examination rankings. Moreover, these sincere beliefs are laboriously produced (Sangren 2000). In particular, consider how diligence of effort helps produce sincere belief in the fairness of exams. People may consider much of the knowledge that they memorize to be "empty," but nevertheless maintain their belief in the relative objectivity of the examination ritual itself. In other words, they trust the ritual to judge their diligence, composure, attitude, and luck—in short, their merit.

In sum, performance and belief do not exclude each other. Indeed, they often reinforce and supplement each other. On the one hand, the achievement of great artifice requires great conviction. On the other hand, most people possess a sincere aversion to being deceived.[165] In other words, positive attitudes and negative attitudes toward performance complement each other. Sincere belief, embracement, or involvement coexists with cynicism, numbness, and fear of coercion.

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[164] As a corollary to this argument, perhaps it is even possible to suggest that Western cultural emphasis on sincerity renders Westerners in some ways less "modern" than their Chinese counterparts.

[165] Consider, for example, how the above-mentioned bifurcation of political and moral legitimacy represents the identification of such a deception: Political authorities are unmasked as hypocrites. But note how people interpret this hypocrisy as obligating them to the sincere pursuit of individual merit (chapter 1). As I discuss above, moreover, the sincere pursuit of this merit requires great efforts of dissimulation—the memorization of the exam orthodoxy—even if one does not "believe" in it.

Moreover, such attitudes exhibit great contextual and geographical variation. Different attitudes predominate at different times and at different points along the central-place hierarchy (chapter 2). In addition, people are rarely if ever "at one with themselves" over their attitudes, which may be open to suspicion, doubt, and ambivalence. In short, people oscillate ambivalently between different attitudes or combine them dialogically (Bakhtin 1981; Lacan 2006a). Following Sartre (1956), I term this dialogic oscillation or ambivalence *bad faith*. My analysis therefore refers to social roles and role attitudes without therefore intending to imply the existence of unified, sovereign individuals or speaking egos.

In consideration of these complexities, I suggest that we remain wary of embracing an overly unitary view of ideology, or of replacing old binaries with new ones. Yurchak seems to present us with an either-or proposition: Either we reject "misrecognition" and "cynicism" as analytical techniques, or embrace them. But this approach seems too black and white to me. In the same spirit that I join calls to move beyond a constraining rural/urban dualism (chapter 2), I suggest that we see people's orientations toward cultural practices as forming a continuum: People may act (or not act) for many different reasons, including physical coercion, fear, feelings of indebtedness, sincere belief, pangs of conscience, and unconscious habit. This list is not meant to be comprehensive. Many more motivations for action may exist. In the order that I have listed them, however, these motivations trace a spectrum from relatively conscious to relatively unconscious impulses. I term this spectrum the *continuum of superegoistic effects*.[166]

Within this complexity, sincere belief plays an important role. This role remains important even in places and times in which the gap between official ideology and people's lived experience stretches very wide, as in contemporary China. Although people in China complain

[166] Thus, unlike Sartre, I do not reject the importance of the unconscious. But I term these reasons for actions *effects* because only some of them are unconscious. Moreover, different effects may rise to different levels of consciousness.

about the "emptiness" of official ideology, their attitudes of sincere involvement in other parts of social life help undergird their belief in meritocracy and thus in the political legitimacy of the Party-state as guarantors of meritocracy (chapter 1). The widespread perception that the Gaokao constitutes China's "only relatively fair competition" suggests that the Gaokao shoulders a heavy burden in undergirding legitimacy. Indeed, this cultural significance of the Gaokao in China may help explain how the Chinese Party-state survived the transition to postsocialism whereas the Soviet one did not.

The crucial factor that enables people to keep producing sincere belief in the Gaokao is *indeterminacy of outcome*—that is, the perception that the outcome is determined during the event front-stage through universalistic, rules-based measures of merit instead of before the event backstage through particularistic relationships. The same principle applies to other fateful rites ranging from high-stakes gambling, to business transactions, to elections, to legal trials: *Indeterminacy of outcome undergirds legitimacy in such events by realigning the performative and constative dimensions of action.* In other words, indeterminacy enables people to believe that these events really mean what they say, thereby allowing people to give credence to the fateful rite's pronouncements on people's merit.

In sum, therefore, cynicism and performance may be omnipresent but such ironic attitudes rarely, if ever, accompany perfect knowledge of inequality; moreover, such attitudes are almost always attended by some type of misrecognition or sincere belief. Thus even if we question the philosophical assumptions that are implicit in some uses of such terms as "misrecognition" and "cynicism," these terms nevertheless remain useful in describing and critiquing social attitudes.[167]

[167] It may be true, in other words, that knowledge—as a practice of meaning making—does not precede discourse, as Yurchak and others maintain. I am not a philosophical positivist of the type who believes that ultimate objective

In Chinese society, this range of attitudes toward "appearance" and "reality" is demonstrated by how Chinese evaluate various practices as "virtual" (*xu*) or "real" (*shi*).

The Virtual and the Real

In Chinese, people say that the "the outside and the inside are not the same" (*biao li bu yi*). This idiom expresses the idea that a discrepancy exists between the surface and the interior, appearance and essence, of certain things, persons, and practices. In everyday speech, the "virtual/real" (*xu/shi*) dichotomy indexes this divide—a distinction that can also be translated as "empty/full": Many things seem one way "on the surface" (*biaomian shang*) but they are quite different "in actuality" (*shiji shang*). Such things are associated with emptiness in its many valences—among them, "fake" (*xujia*); "hollow" (*kongxu*; *kongdong*); "vain" (*xurong*); or "hypocritical" (*xuwei*). These things include "formalistic" (*xingshihua*) practices, which are often accompanied by speech described as "staged" (*changmianhua*) or just "fake" or "empty" (*jiahua*; *konghua*)—qualities that people associate with the style of official rhetoric (*guanqiang*).[168] Such fake things also include "guises" (*huangzi*), the classic exemplum of which is "selling dog meat with a lamb's head" (*gua yangtou, mai gourou*). To these virtual or empty things, people contrast

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reality is somehow humanly attainable. But it may be a slippery slope from the philosophical critique of "misrecognition" to the position that deception and exploitation do not exist, and that we do not have an obligation to resist them. In my view, such a position would be inconsistent with the goal of deconstruction. In other words, deconstruction should critique claims to authority, coherence, and objectivity wherever these claims are made. Therefore, deconstruction should be employed to deconstruct both theory and practice, both those of ourselves (as anthropologists) and of others. As Ian Hacking (1999), among others, argue, just because the contrast between "social construction" and "material reality" presents a false dichotomy does not mean that we cannot aspire to even more rigorous criteria of objectivity or reality. Deconstruction, in other words, implies if not the attainment then the pursuit of objective knowledge through constant questioning of claims to authority, including those of our informants. Questioning of claims to authority is pursuing social justice. Even if social justice proves to be ultimately unattainable, its pursuit is worthwhile (Derrida 1989). In this context, consider also Graeber's (2015) recent appeal to Roy Bhaskar's "critical realist" approach to ontology as a possible way in which to square the circle of desire for justice, on one hand, and resistance to overly positivistic approaches to social-scientific knowledge production, on the other.

[168] Sybrandt (forthcoming) provides a very useful analysis of the "emptiness" of official discourse and the "ritual production of political compliance." This section is adapted from my forthcoming *Social Analysis* article, "China's Examination Fever and the Fabrication of Fairness."

those that they describe as "genuine" (*zhenshi*); "real" (*xianshi*); "solid" (*tashi*); "practical" (*shiji*); or "down-to-earth" (*shizai*). The opposite of "empty talk" is "full talk" (*shihua*)—the literal translation of the Chinese word for truth.

In previous chapters, I allude to how the "empty/full" dichotomy pervades many Chinese institutional contexts. For example, I note that people perceive human relationships in urban places as relatively "fake" and "empty," whereas they see relationships in rural places as relatively "real" and "full" (chapter 2). Moreover, I argue that people regard the Gaokao as sacred because the exam reverses the normal polarity of the empty/full binary: In the Gaokao, what is normally seen as "empty" and "fake"—meritocratic social competition—transforms into something "true" and "real" (chapter 1). In light of the foregoing discussion, we can now understand this reversal in terms of how the exam aligns the constative and performative dimensions of human action: In contrast to other social competitions in the current era of extreme "performative shift," the Gaokao (allegedly) does what it purports to do—select people of merit.

Although I focus on the Gaokao, the empty/full dichotomy pervades Chinese institutions of all kinds: Emptiness, or virtuality, is associated with practices that are performed or fabricated front stage for an audience inside or outside the institution; fullness, or reality, with practices that take place backstage, have their own reward, and possess intrinsic effectiveness. In a sense, the latter are not staged but really are what they seem to be, with the caveat that "reality" itself is always already the result of ritualized social interchange and performance.[169]

[169] In other words, what we take as "real" in social life results from patterned interchange. This patterned interchange, even in the most intimate contexts, consists in ritualized performance. In this context, "ritualized" means subject to various cultural rules, precedents, and constraints, within which all human expression takes place. Various social theorists draw attention to this "performativity" of reality, including Butler (1990) but also Goffman (1959).

Consider how these arrangements play out within Chinese high-school life: On one hand, many students and teachers see "education for quality" (*suzhi jiaoyu*), extracurricular activities, the "humanities" (*wenke*), and organizational "fairness" (*gongping*) to be relatively "virtual," "empty," and "fake." On the other hand, they see exam-oriented education (*yingshi jiaoyu*), examinations, the sciences (*like*), and personal relationships (*guanxi*) to be relatively "real," "practical," and "down-to-earth."

Erving Goffman's (1974) notion of *fabrication* provides a useful rubric with which to approach the empty/full distinction. Fabrication refers to "the intentional effort of one or more individuals to manage activity so that a party of one or more others will be induced to have a false belief about what it is that is going on" (Goffman 1974, 83). For Goffman, fabrication is different from but similar to *keying*, which he defines as a modification of some activity, already meaningful in terms of a primary framework or gestalt of experience, into something "patterned on that activity, but seen to be something very different"—including rehearsal, make-believe, daydream, play, satire, and so on (Goffman 1974, 43–44). Unlike keying, fabrication involves an element of deception and collusion. Those *excolluded* from the fabrication are *contained* by it—that is, they believe that a falsification of some part of reality is what it appears to be, although this belief may be open to suspicion and doubt.

I propose that in normal speech, "empty" denotes fabrications or keyings whereas "full" designates unlaminated realities. In sum, these terms might in part be understood as emic categories of social-critical analysis: People use them to evaluate and critique various forms of authoritative discourse.

As in other Chinese institutions, social actors in the high-school milieu conceive as "fake," "virtual," or "empty" practices that they perform for higher ups, the media, or the public.

By contrast, they conceive as "genuine," "real," or "substantial," those practices that produce "actual effects" (*shiji xiaoguo*), focus on the "real job" (*zhenzheng de gongzuo*), have "authentic significance" (*shizai de yiyi*), or "pursue practical interests" (*zhuiqiu shiji liyi*). Empty practices typically involve paying obeisance to ideals. Such ideals may be noble, but are "difficult to implement" (*nan luoshi dao shichu*). Conversely, "practical" measures reflect or accommodate "reality." They are may be less noble but their methods are "down to earth," their results "genuine."

Note that "empty/full" dichotomy also implies different attitudes toward social roles. People tend to feel passionate about practices that they identify as "full" and "real" whereas they tend to feel detachment toward roles that they see as "empty" or "fake." When people adopt social roles that they identify with "empty" practices, people lack *embracement* (Goffman 1961)—a Chinese equivalent of which may be found in the term *touru*, literally, "to throw oneself into." In other words, embracement, which I also term *involvement* or *engrossment*, represents an attitude of sincere belief toward one's work or role. Embracement may, however, be feigned. In feigned embracement, "mouth and heart are not one" (*xin kou bu yi*)—a state that prevails, for example, when students simulate belief in official ideology to pass an examination. Note how these attitudes correspond to the above-described terms of ideological analysis: Feigned embracement represents cynicism, whereas sincere involvement represents misrecognition or "sincere belief." Note, however, that people may perform engrossment in ideals for sincere reasons: Subordinates do so to "give face" (*gei mianzi*) to superiors, friends do so to help each other, and children do so to express devotion to parents and to teachers. Thus deep sentiments of "human feeling" (*renqing*), "loyalty" (*yiqi*), and "filiality" (*xiaoshun*) may underlie such "empty" performances.

In contrast to their cynicism toward official slogans and ideals, people believe sincerely in the "relative fairness" of test scores. Despite paying front-stage lip service to raising the "all-around quality" (*zonghe suzhi*) of children, people consider producing high test scores to be the backstage "reality" of their work.

This perceived relative "genuineness" and "reality" of test scores is belied, however, by the efforts of parents, teachers, administrators, and officials to control the examination system in pursuit of their particular interests: As I analyze in the following, these various actors sacrifice the interests of others in pursuit of high test scores for their children, class, school, city, or region. Although the degree of excollusion varies along the central-place, score-value, and administrative hierarchies, the "relative fairness" of the Gaokao largely consists of fantasy and fabrication.

Indeterminacy and Legitimacy:

"Naked" Scores and the Contaminating Raiment of Guanxi

But what does "fairness" consist of? That is, what is being fantasized and fabricated? The Chinese word for "fairness," *gongping*, literally refers to a public weight or measuring scale, which can still be found outside some Chinese markets today. Such a public scale helps ensure that merchants do not cheat customers by improperly weighing goods. In examinations and other competitions, by the same token, fairness refers to the ideal that everyone should be evaluated according to a common measure of merit—that is, by the same scale. Note that such concepts as the "rule of law" are defined by the same universalistic principal—equal treatment for people of equal status. The particularistic politics of guanxi, by contrast, conflict with such universalistic ideals by measuring different people according to different scales.

In actual practice, this notion of objective universalistic authority represents an impossible ideal: Interests that claim universality always in fact represent the particular in the guise of the universal (chapter 1). Consider how equal treatment before the law always privileges certain groups over others: Laws invariably contain bias. Moreover, even if laws treated people equally, people themselves are not equal. A similar logic, of course, applies to examinations, markets, sports, politics, and any other supposedly rule-based "meritocratic" domain of competition, both in China and elsewhere. As many observers point out, examinations in particular contain cultural biases that favor those with the requisite cultural background or capital (chapter 4). But people nevertheless strive for "fairness," and associate fairness with "legitimacy." In Chinese, the word for legitimacy literally means "according-to-law-ness" (*hefaxing*).

Since the universal can never be completely purified of the particular, however, belief in the fairness of the law always rests to some degree on fabrication, deception, or self-persuasion. Thus belief must maintained, fostered, and promulgated—ritually constructed in moments of fateful action. In modern cultures of meritocracy, I suggest that such moments include various "meritocratic" rites of passage, such as court cases, market transactions, elections, the lottery, high-stakes gambling, and high-stakes examinations. In all cases, the construction of legitimacy requires the ritual purification of the moment of action by preventing its contamination with particularistic interests. This form of purification is labeled the "elimination of bias" or the "prevention of cheating." In practical terms, the construction of fairness requires the spatial and temporal circumscription of a well-policed ritual event in which participants receive no "unauthorized" assistance. In this way, the outcome of the event appears to be the result of individual character, charisma, and merit, however defined, rather than the result of the social

labor that helped create the individual's capacity for that display of merit. Thus meritocratic events like the Gaokao objectify or alienate social labor into a charismatic measure of individual merit (chapter 1). Consider, for example, how Gaokao participants put particularly high value on "naked points" (*luofen*). This term refers to people's score before any "bonus points" (*jiafen*) are added for special status, awards, or achievements, such as ethnicity or awards for "moral quality." People consider such bonus points to be easily perverted by guanxi, whereas the "naked" score is relatively "down-to-earth."[170] Through the exam, people in effect produce themselves as "naked" individuals, purified of the contaminating raiment of guanxi.

But ritual purification can never be perfect: Some people, as Chinese critics of the examination put it, "lose on the starting line" (*shu zai qipaoxian*). Universalistic ideals can never fully surmount particular interests, which haunt such ideals as uncanny reminders of the social origin of all charisma and authority. In the face of social inequality, the basic principle of meritocracy—"merit is reciprocated by success"—appears riddled with incoherence.

Justice versus Fairness: Preferential versus Positive Policies

The contrast between "fairness" *(gongping*) and "justice" (*gongzheng*) highlights this incoherence. Chinese policymakers and advocates appeal to "justice" to argue that traditionally marginalized groups—such as ethnic minorities—must be given help on the examination in the form of bonus points and increased admission quotas. Similar to debates about affirmative action in the United States and elsewhere, the Chinese argument between "social justice" and "individual fairness" turns on issues of reciprocity: This argument revolves around determining the appropriate level of reverse-handicapping that should be engineered into the examination

[170] Below and in the following chapters, I discuss bonus points in more detail—in particular, in chapters 4 and 6. An important component of examination reform under Xi Jinping consists in the severe curtailing of bonus-point awards, which many people perceived to get out of hand during the first decade of the twenty-first century.

system so that historically marginalized groups may be properly compensated for their disadvantage.[171] By contrast, other examination policies—such as artificially high admission quotas at top colleges for residents of Shanghai and Beijing—blatantly benefit already-dominant groups. For this reason, some scholars propose disaggregating the nebulous term "affirmative action" into a more analytically rigorous distinction between *positive policies*, which aid disadvantaged groups, and *preferential policies*, which aid dominant groups (Zhou 2010). China has a long history of both types of policies.

In imperial times, positive policies were employed as part of China's civilizing project to integrate the periphery into the center—a role that they still play today (Harrell 1995; Rowe 1994; Zhou 2010). In the present era, ethnic minorities generally receive five to ten bonus points on the Gaokao. In addition, peripheral areas, including many "backward" provinces in China's impoverished Western region, are given higher admission quotas, resulting in lower cut-off scores for first-tier universities.[172] Another prominent effort to increase perceptions of fairness

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[171] However, I should be absolutely clear that my comments in the following apply to the Chinese context alone, although I attempt to point out some similarities to and differences from other cultural contexts.

[172] Thus Western provinces such as Ningxia and Qinghai have a relatively high rate of admission to first-tier universities. Between 2013 and 2015, the first-tier admission rates for those two provinces averaged 17.9 percent and 17.23 percent respectively, whereas the rate for most central and coastal provinces ranged between 10 and 15 percent. Positive policies have also resulted in a relatively high rates of admission in Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang. The corresponding rates for these two provinces are 15.03 percent and 12.86 percent. Despite positive policies, however, Tibet has the second-lowest rate in the country, 5.62 percent. Tibet's rate is worsted only by that of Sichuan at 5.37 percent. Sichuan is another impoverished province, which is home to many ethnic Tibetans. For a breakdown of rates province by province, see http://edu.sina.com.cn/gaokao/2015-12-25/doc-ifxmxxst0406630.shtml (accessed January 15, 2016). On regional inequality see also Hannum (2006).

Many Chinese policymakers argue that China's poor Western and Southwestern peripheries, home to the largest population of ethnic minorities, remain poor and underdeveloped— "behind" (*luohou*)—in comparison to richer provinces in the East. They say that positive policies are therefore required to help these poorer regions catch up with the national level of development, in the interests both of social justice and social stability. The general public, however, remains skeptical. Stories abound of families making dubious claims of membership to an ethnic group. Affirmative action policies in general, meanwhile, were perceived by many students with great skepticism. A particularly memorable manifestation of this skepticism occurred in a Mountain County high-school geography lesson for a so-called "garbage" class. This class was composed overwhelmingly of farm children who had no hope of getting into a top-tier university. The teacher somewhat provocatively asked students if granting extra points to minority students was "fair," to which they students shouted in a resounding chorus, "not fair!" Laughing, the teacher replied, "But we have to make allowances for the fact that the level of development and quality of minorities

consists of the "directional" (*dingxiang*) high-school admission policies employed by some municipalities. This term refers to the practice of requiring top senior high schools to admit a certain quota of students from "bad" junior high schools. Just as provincial differences in admission quotas and cut-off scores serve as a form of reverse handicapping at the national level, so-called "directional" admission policies served as a form of reverse handicapping at the local level.

Now as before, moreover, preferential policies are employed in addition to such positive policies. In imperial times, metropolitan prefectures generally received higher quotas for passage of the civil exam than did peripheral prefectures (Elman 2013). In the present era, China's richest coastal provincial-level cities—Beijing, Tianjin, and Shanghai—enjoy the highest rates of admission to universities. In recent years, the average admission rates to first-tier universities has exceeded 20 percent in these cities—double or triple that of most other provinces.[173] These high rates reflect regional protectionism: These three cities are home to the lion's share of China's top universities. For many years, the quota of local Beijing students admitted to Beijing universities was equal to the quota for Jiangsu, Hubei, Anhui, and Sichuan provinces combined, although the population of those provinces was twenty times that of Beijing.[174] In contrast to inequality at the local level, such regional protectionism is difficult to conceal: Cut-off scores for each region are

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is relatively low." Note that expressions of bafflement and even anger by ordinary Han about reports of ethnic unrest in Western China frequently cite such preferential Gaokao policies as examples of Han-majority beneficence.

[173] See again the detailed province-by-province breakdown of admission rates for the years 2013–2015 at http://edu.sina.com.cn/gaokao/2015-12-25/doc-ifxmxxst0406630.shtml (accessed January 15, 2016).

[174] The situation in Shanghai and Tianjin is not much different. The rate of admission to elite Project 985 universities is those cities sometimes even exceeds that of Beijing. In such central metropolitan provincial-level cities, between 4 and 5 percent of students gain admission to Project 985 universities, whereas the admission rate to Project 985 universities hovers between 1 and 2 percent in ordinary provinces.

a matter of open record. Thus "unfair" advantage of coastal cities forms a particular source of ire for most families, and receives relatively frank discussion in the media.[175]

Whereas preferential policies provide sops to special interests, positive policies help maintain engrossment in the ideology of meritocracy among marginalized populations. Without doubt, such positive policies help certain individuals and groups. From the perspective of ensuring social justice, however, they tend to be idealist in their outlook: Changing the ethnic or even regional representation in higher education is changing the optics of fairness, but does little to address more fundamental problems of inequality.[176] Social inequality in education starts when children are very young, involving diverse factors including cultural capital, differing family pressures, and nutrition (Hannum and Adams 2007; Hannum and Adams 2008; Luo et al. 2012; H. Yi et al. 2012). Without more fundamental reform, positive policies have only a superficial effect. Certainly, these policies increase the representation of marginalized groups such as ethnic minorities and women in higher-education. But these groups are routinely funneled into relatively marginalized courses of study in the humanities (chapter 4). Thus even when such positive policies contribute to compensating marginalized populations for social disadvantage, they reproduce segregation, bias, and hierarchy. At the same time, positive policies

[175] Thus in 2015, Henan delegates to the National Party Congress famously protested regional protectionism, an event widely reported in Chinese and foreign media. See http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/03/10/henan-delegates-protest-inequality-in-university-admissions/?_r=0 (accessed February 11, 2016). Other widely commented Chinese news-media stories receive less foreign attention. During my fieldwork, a television exposé of Gaokao "unfairness" circulated broadly in social media. This report received praise from teachers and students as being particularly "real." Among other things, the report told the story of a Jiangsu construction worker who fell into conversation with a construction manager from Beijing. The construction worker, so the report went, had missed the score cut-off for college admissions by only a few points; however, instead of retaking the examination the next year (*fukao*)—a time-consuming and expensive process—he felt compelled to work so that he could help take care of his family. The construction manager, by contrast, had actually scored lower than his worker on the examination, but had been able to attend a good college because he came from Beijing.

[176] I borrow inspiration for this argument from Guillory (1993), although the context he describes, American higher education, is quite different in many respects from the Chinese context.

help keep disadvantaged groups engrossed in the examination by reinforcing the perception that they have something to win by participating.

In the final analysis, therefore, positive policies seem not so much to pursue social justice as they do social stability—a goal that educational officials routinely openly valorize, as I note below. In sum, all such efforts to "level the playing field" consist in tweaking the odds rather than in questioning the logic of the game. As currently conceived, neither "fairness" nor "justice" really questions the underlying assumptions of meritocratic arrangements. But such concepts do help to recruit marginalized groups into the ideology of meritocracy.

Superficially, therefore, "fairness" and "justice" seem quite different. On a more abstract level, however, the concepts are equivalent: Those who support various kinds of affirmative action in China are really arguing that the examination system is dominated by particular interests, thus "unfair." One person's "justice" is another person's "unfairness." In the final analysis, the tension between preferential and positive policies constitutes a hegemonic negotiation in which the interests of the urban elite dominate those of the rural dispossessed.[177]

"Gaokao Migration" and "Remote Gaokao Reforms"

Both positive and preferential policies have additional unintended effects: They produce migration—"Gaokao migration" (*Gaokao yimin*). This term refers to the practice of changing children's place of schooling to secure an advantage on the Gaokao. Generally, two types of

[177] It might be possible to imagine a radically different approach to reverse-handicapping. Intriguingly, Nicholas Lemann (1999) reports that U.S.-based test researchers have suggested that ethnic disparities in admissions largely disappear when test scores are adjusted for social class as measured by income and wealth: Lemann suggests that this research has been swept under the carpet by test companies. A analogous policy proposal in China would consist in reverse-handicapping test score based on examinees' position in the score-value hierarchy. Positive policies such as "directional admissions," which I discuss in the following, represent limited efforts in this direction, but mainly work merely to achieve the above-mentioned goal of encouraging people to stay engrossed in the examination life rather than that of providing the dispossessed with an across-the-board boost in the system.

Gaokao migration exist. The first type takes advantage of positive policies. Termed "going into the West and down to the South" (*Xi jin Nan xia*), it consists in the practice of sending children to poor Western and Southwestern provinces to benefit from relatively high admissions quotas, which are produced by positive policies. The second type, which people term "dashing to the East" (*Dong chuang*), similarly exploits preferential policies by sending children to rich coastal cities.

Both types of Gaokao migration require parents to circumvent household residency restrictions, either through legal or illegal means. In general, students have only been able to take the Gaokao in places where they have long-term residency, which usually means "household residency" (*huji*) (chapter 1). Household residency can be obtained through various licit, quasi-licit, or illicit measures, but all such measures generally require large sums of money, great guanxi, or both. Thus these measures far exceed the reach of normal families. For this reason, household residency restrictions put children of many migrant workers at a particular disadvantage. In the past, such children might not be able to take the Gaokao in the same province where they go to school. They often had to "go home" the last year before the Gaokao, giving them little time to adapt to the curriculum in their home provinces. The policy under Xi Jinping of re-nationalizing the Gaokao helps address this problem, as do recent "remote Gaokao reforms" (*yidi Gaokao*). [178] Such reforms make it easier for the children of migrant parents to take the Gaokao in the place that they live. But the state proceeds in such reforms only with great

[178] As with partial reforms to make it easier for migrants to obtain household residency, the bar remains very high: To enable their children to take part in the Gaokao "remotely," migrants must demonstrate "stable job, stable residence, and stable income"; they must pay into social security; and although they do not have local household registration, they must be long-term residents. In practice, these requirements mean that migrants must purchase a deeded local residence, but soaring house values put such properties out of the reach of many ordinary migrants. In addition, reforms impose the condition that the "development of the city need [the] occupation [of the migrants in question]." But critics have pointed that this nebulous condition excludes illicit activities often occupied by women, such as sex work, and could exclude a variety of licit but marginalized professions. See this Southern Weekend (*Nanfang zhoumo*) article for an overview of the new law and the above-discussed problems of implementation: http://www.infzm.com/content/91367 (accessed March 18, 2016).

caution since they have enormous effects on the economy, house prices, and migratory pressures.[179]

A third type of Gaokao migration should also be mentioned—"international Gaokao migration" (*Guoji Gaokao yimin*). This type enjoys less prevalence than the others but is gaining in notoriety as the number of Chinese families with dual citizenship increases. National and provincial authorities have instituted a variety of preferential policies to attract Chinese returning from overseas, or "sea turtles." Such students take a special, easier version of the Gaokao or receive extra points. International students, moreover, do not face the household registration requirement that Chinese citizens do. In recent years, therefore, Chinese with dual citizenship have taken to abjuring their Chinese citizenship to gain an advantage on the Gaokao. Many ordinary Chinese are highly critical of such "counterfeit foreigners," but teachers report that this practice is increasingly widespread.[180]

Special Interests: Rigging the System versus Gaming the System

Consider the above-described arrangements from the perspective of indeterminacy. Without indeterminacy, there is no captivation, no engrossment. Few desire to participate in a competition when the results are known in advance. As I argue, therefore, positive policies constitute a form of reverse-handicapping: Increased examination quotas in poor Western regions are intended to

[179] Remote Gaokao reforms have been hotly debated. Residents of cities such as Shanghai and Beijing fear an influx of migrants. These cities thus interpret the new remote-Gaokao guidelines strictly. Such strict interpretation enables these cities to maintain protectionist policies. By contrast, Guangdong, which never had such a high rate of university admission as Shanghai and Beijing, reportedly has implemented relatively lax remote-Gaokao policies, presumably hoping to attract and maintain a labor force of skilled migrants. See the discussion in this Southern Weekend article: http://www.infzm.com/content/113428 (accessed June 1, 2016). In all cases, rate of admission is highly correlated with housing prices. It is possible that relaxing positive policies by allowing increased competition in places like Shanghai and Beijing could cause confidence in house prices to fall. In such a moment of economic slowdown, such concerns weigh heavily on jittery officials.

[180] In a Ningzhou Number One High School class that I followed, for example, a student of local roots with Brazilian citizenship studied along his classmates for three years of senior high school but took a special version of the Gaokao. The high school was happy to cooperate because this practice improved its showing on the exam.

raise students' hopes by increasing their odds of success, thus heightening their engrossment in the examination ritual. The same is true of "directional admissions" at the local level. As Dragon Gate teachers said, directional policies motivate teachers and students at low-ranking schools such as theirs. Without such policies, they would have no reason to work. As I observe above, therefore, such policies do not merely pursue "justice" or "fairness." They also serve state and regional interests in maintaining China's social stability and territorial integrity.

All such reverse-handicapping efforts constitute efforts to *manufacture indeterminacy*. I use this term to distinguish such efforts from the practice of *fabricating indeterminacy*, which I subsequently address in more detail. Manufactured indeterminacy is "real" (that is, it directly affects students' statistical odds of succeeding in the exam) whereas fabricated indeterminacy is "empty" or "false." That is to say, fabricated indeterminacy only gives the appearance of indeterminacy without directly affecting students' odds of success.

Such efforts to manufacture indeterminacy are not disinterested; nevertheless, they are quite different from preferential policies, which openly promote special local and regional interests. Thus I term preferential policies ways of *rigging the system* to the advantage of certain groups.

Now, consider Gaokao migration, in which people use power, connections, or money to exploit regional differences in probabilities of success. Like efforts to rig the system, Gaokao migration advances particular interests. In the case of Gaokao migration, however, these interests are much more limited in scope. In most cases, Gaokao migration comprises a mobility strategy of individual families. Many other such strategies exist, including the purchase of a house in a good school district, the payment of "school-choice fees" (*zexiaofei*) or "loan-study fees" (*jiedufei*), or the pursuit of various kinds of bonus points, such as those awarded for status as

ethnic minority or for accomplishments in the sports and arts. I term all such strategies ways of *gaming the system*.

Note that despite such widespread attempts to rig and game the system, people persist in their view of the Gaokao as relatively fair. Ironically, these persisting impressions of fairness can partly be explained by people's admiration of efforts to game a rigged system. Such industry is widely appreciated as an expression of "cleverness" (*linghuo*) and "diligence" (*nuli*). But the ability to game the system is unequally distributed. As do states elsewhere, the Chinese Party-state largely serves the interests of the wealthy elite, from which the Party increasingly draws its membership (chapter 1). Despite official Communist rhetoric, "social stability" is about uniting disparate groups into a common hegemonic national interest so that the ruling elite can continue business as usual. To perceive this hegemonic interest as legitimate, however, people must understand its judgment to issue from an objective, universalistic authority.

"Science" versus "Fairness": Xi Jinping's Gaokao Reforms

In September 2014, China's State Council announced sweeping reforms to the Gaokao (D. Cohen and Beauchamp-Mustafaga 2014; Postiglione 2014). These reforms constitute the most significant nationwide changes to the exam since the radical expansion of higher education starting in 1999.

As the *People's Daily*, a leading national newspaper, commented, reforms attempt to strike a "difficult balance between [increasing] fairness and [adhering to] objectivity [*kexue*]."[181]

The reforms are intended to increase "fairness" in several ways. As previously mentioned, the reforms renationalize examination design, which had been devolved to the

[181] The *People's Daily* piece is quoted in Cohen and Beauchamp-Mustafaga (2014) and can be found online at http://opinion.people.com.cn/n/2014/0905/c1003-25607020.html (accessed February 19, 2016).

provinces during the expansion of higher education. As I subsequently elaborate, this renationalization of the examination is mainly intended to increase perceptions of the exam's objectivity. But renationalization also has practical ramifications. On the one hand, it disincentivizes Gaokao migration, which was partly based on the perception that the examination was "easier" in some provinces than in others. On other hand, a unified national exam paper, along with the above-mentioned "remote Gaokao reforms," helps to remove the disadvantage faced by children of migrants, who were forced adjust to a new curriculum when they returned to their home provinces to take the examination. A second way in which reforms encourage "fairness" consists in how they encourage universities to adopt further positive policies toward students from rural areas, disadvantaged ethnic groups, and inland and Western provinces. Third, the reforms reduce the number of schemes for awarding bonus points.[182] Fourth, students will be able to take certain sections of the exam more than once, reducing the consequentiality of any individual examination performance. In this way, the reforms ameliorate the impression that "one test determines one's whole life" (*yi kao ding zhong sheng*). Finally, the reforms promise to make the Gaokao more transparent through a "sunlight policy."

These efforts to make the exam "fairer" are largely conceived to be at odds with making it more "scientific" (*kexue*), that is, objective. A "scientific" exam is one that conforms to dual ideal: On the one hand, examinations are supposed to provide an objective measurement of individual ability. On the other hand, this measurement should match up with the real needs of the economy (R. Zheng 2011). I address this notion of "science" at greater length in subsequent chapters. For the present it is sufficient to note that a "scientific" is conceived to raise the "quality" of China's human capital. To this end, the reforms give more autonomy to universities

[182] In particular, reforms work to eliminate the award of extra points for achievements in art and sport. Such awards were widely perceived to provide ample opportunities for corruption.

to consider multiple factors in admission (*zonghe pingjia zhaosheng*). Reforms also expand opportunities for vocational training for students of "low quality." But recall that "high quality" is largely associated with opportunities that are available only to people in high-ranking schools and urban areas (chapter 2). Thus Chinese of rural origin complain that "increasing quality" is "reducing fairness" (chapter 4).

Despite such efforts to make the exam more "scientific," the general tenor of the reforms focuses on "increasing fairness." In sum, "increasing fairness" consists largely in attempts to address regional disparities and to close off various ways to game the system. In this way, reforms aim to address complaints that the exam can be polluted by guanxi.

The authorship of the reforms is murky, but their general tendency conforms with the stated aims of Xi Jinping's administration to shore up Party legitimacy during a period of economic slowdown by "battling corruption" (D. Cohen and Beauchamp-Mustafaga 2014). The announcement of the reform by the State Council rather than the Ministry of Education suggests the involvement of decision makers at the highest levels of political power. In this respect, the current round of Gaokao reforms recall earlier reform efforts, in particular the expansion of higher education. Recall that higher-education expansion similarly formed an effort by the Party's highest-level decision makers to improve social stability and undergird political legitimacy during a period of economic uncertainty (Q. Wang 2014).

But teachers and administrators express great skepticism about these reforms. They note that reforms to ameliorate regional and socioeconomic disparities take the form of modest, vague guidelines rather than vigorous, specific measures.[183] Under reform, moreover, the Gaokao will

[183] According to State Council figures, 76 percent of applicants nationally are currently admitted to some kind of college, but the figure is only 70 percent in disadvantaged areas. The State Council aims to reduce this gap from 6 percent to 4 percent (D. Cohen and Beauchamp-Mustafaga 2014). Note, however, that this target seems quite modest. Moreover, these guidelines do little to address disparities in the *type* of college to which students are

remain, as before, the "directing baton" (*zhihuibang*) for the Chinese education system. As one teacher said, "at the end of the day, the Gaokao is still the Gaokao. Students are still going to exert their utmost strength [*pinming*] to conquer the exam." And if responses to previous reforms provide any guideline, efforts to tighten loopholes in the system will only incite individuals to discover new, creative ways to game it. Consider how a prominent Chinese Gaokao researcher described the balancing act of reform: "Gaokao reform is like a trying to fold a balloon. You twist on one side, and the air pops out on the other side."

In sum, many ordinary educators view these attempts to improve "fairness" as relatively "empty," amounting more to impression management than fundamental change. But the significance of these reforms should not be underestimated. In particular, the renationalization of the exam will help shore up ordinary people's association of the exam with objective, universalistic national authority.

The Profanity of Test Design and Grading: Guanxi, Hierarchy, and Objectivity

In large part, people consider the Gaokao objective because of its association with national institutions: Local examinations are seen as biased by local interests and guanxi, whereas the Gaokao is understood to represent a more universalistic, fair, and legitimate judgement (chapter 1).

Note the striking resemblance between these arrangements and those of the imperial era: In the imperial era, higher levels of civil-examination distinction were associated with more centrally located places. The most prestigious examination degree—"advanced scholar"—was

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admitted. As mentioned, students from rural areas and poor regions overwhelmingly pursue their education in two-year associate's programs (*zhuanke*) or low-ranking institutions four-year programs (Yeung 2013). Granted, the reforms encourage elite universities to admit more people of poor, ethnic, and rural background. As with policies to address regional inequality, however, these measures take the form of general guidelines rather than hard requirements.

conferred by the emperor himself in the capital. Similarly, present-day examinees proceed through a series of practice exams, each of which is associated with a progressively more centrally located place. Ordinary weekly and monthly exams are created and administered inside students' schools. At elite high schools, mid-term exams may be authored by teachers at "sister schools"—generally, schools that occupy a similar place in the score-value hierarchy in neighboring prefectures. In the months before the Gaokao, students take the "municipal quality assessment" (*shizhijian*)—a municipality-wide practice examination. During their final weeks of preparation, they take a "provincial quality assessment" (*shengzhijian*)—a province-wide practice exam. The provincial practice exam is followed by the big test itself, the Gaokao, which, as mentioned, people associate with national authority. Consider, moreover, the resemblance of notions of examination objectivity to those of religious power and efficacy: Just as cults associated with larger geographical regions are ascribed greater "efficacy," exams associated with larger geographical regions are ascribed greater objectivity.[184]

But students have very practical reasons for supposing that these exams form an ascending hierarchy of objectivity and fairness. Consider how the exams are graded and authored: Although examinations contain many multiple-choice questions, to which there is an "objectively" right or wrong answer, large sections of the examination incorporate "subjective" essays and short-answer sections, which must be graded by hand. Local exams are graded by the students' own teachers, the municipal quality assessment in the county seat, and the provincial quality assessment in the prefectural capital. The final examination, the Gaokao itself, is graded

[184] As I discuss in chapter 2, the hierarchy of local gods is closely associated with the hierarchy of places. In general, people conceive the place of a deity in the "celestial bureaucracy" to correspond to the position of its cult in the central-place hierarchy. By the same token, the wider the geographical area from which a temple draws its pilgrims, the more efficacious its deity is conceived to be. The most encompassing cult, that of Heaven (*Tian*), forms the apex of this "celestial bureaucracy"—the emperor's cosmic counterpart. In short, both examinations and popular religion associate charismatic authority or spiritual efficacy with position in the central-place hierarchy. In a Durkheimian sense, more encompassing geographical communities are associated with more transcendental forms of authority.

in the provincial capital. Students and parents assume that the more geographically encompassing the area with which an exam is associated, the more unlikely it is that graders will recognize an individual test paper's origin. Therefore, people widely suppose that graders of national exams are unlikely to be swayed by guanxi.

A similar logic applies to people's perceptions of the authorship of examinations: Local exams are created by local teachers. Teachers point out that such local tests favor particular teachers' pedagogical approaches. By contrast, people generally assume that prefectural, provincial, and national examinations—crafted in each case by progressively larger teams of teachers originating from increasingly higher levels of the central-place hierarchy—possess less bias.

As experienced teachers emphasize, however, examination authors and graders are not supernatural, transcendent beings but "people like us too."

Gaokao-grading duty is widely considered to be an onerous task. Teachers are asked to "volunteer," but few do it willingly. Young teachers describe the deflated sense of awe that accompanies their initiation into the secrets of grading: Like Dorothy peaking behind the curtain of the Wizard of Oz, they experience disillusionment upon confronting the backstage reality of this holiest of examinations: Graders work under tight deadlines in factory-like conditions. For two weeks, they cloister themselves in dirty motel rooms and crowded offices, spending long days making split-second decisions that will have momentous effects on the fates of students. Graders are awarded for efficiency and spend less than a fraction of a minute on essay responses, which can run to a page or more (800 words) of hand-written text. All graders whom I interviewed reported feeling like "machines" (*jiqi*).

Note, moreover, that graders are generally drawn from top schools in centrally located places. Many first-time graders, therefore, have been isolated their whole lives from the social disparities of China's examination system. Confined to the upper levels of the score-value hierarchy, they lack the mobility that would afford them a more objective, critical perspective on the examination (chapter 2). Grading affords them their first chance to see test papers from ordinary schools. One English teacher, accustomed to giving her own students sixteen or seventeen points out of twenty on the English essay, reported being stunned when she first saw essays from schools in the countryside, where students' "poor efforts" may only earn them a few points or even "goose eggs"—a zero score.

Even in this hallowed center of examination power, moreover, corruption reaches its polluting fingers: One grader reported being asked by her supervisor, a vice-principal, to be on the alert for the specific students' examination papers, which she could identify through certain keywords in their essays.

A similar sense of disenchantment accompanies young teachers' first exposure to the creation of examinations: Of course everyone knows that examinations are designed by real people, not gods; nevertheless, when teachers begin to design examinations themselves, they reflect on the examination in a new way. As one teacher said, "We all look to big cities like Xiamen or Guangzhou or Beijing for model examination questions, but why should we do so? Actually, the designers of those tests are just people too." In private, some teachers complain about test design being predominantly carried out by teachers in centrally located places. They say that this practice gives unfair advantage to elite urban schools: Since high-ranking "sister schools" routinely share practice examinations, and since the designers of the Gaokao are

predominantly drawn from such schools, people argue that students at such schools are better prepared for the type of question that is likely to appear on the actual exam.

Few ordinary people, however, possess knowledge of such back-stage mysteries.

The "Reality" of Test Scores: The "Chain of Interests," "Student Resources," and Ritual Secrecy

Despite such backstage distortions of "fairness," students, teachers, administrators, and educational officials alike measure their success by test scores: As a quantified and auditable measure of human value, scores represent a calculating rationality that is extraordinarily well suited to the purpose of ranking people and institutions. People say that in the final analysis test scores are how students get into college, teachers secure status and bonuses, and educational administrators and officials achieve promotions. Literally termed "accomplishments" (*chengji*), scores are thus used by educational officials as an important measure of "political accomplishments" (*zhengji*). For this reason, people say of exam-orientated education, with a resigned sigh, that it is just the "reality" (*xianshi*).[185]

To describe these arrangements, a particularly thoughtful Mountain County Number One High School student, Zhiwei, employed the term "chain of interests" (*liyilian*). In Zhiwei's parlance, "chain" refers to the above-described hierarchy—students, parents, teachers, administrators, and officials. Zhiwei suggested that a relationship of "exploitation" (*boxue*) exists

[185] Test scores thus resemble other such auditable measures of value, notably GDP. Increasing GDP for the region under one's administrative control has long formed the greatest predictor of official career advancement, at the expense of less easily quantifiable accomplishments such as protecting the environment. Test scores and GDP relate in multiple ways. On the one hand, they both reflect a meritocratic audit culture. Raising GDP is a test of official merit. On the other hand, test score and GDP correlate with each other: The highest echelons of the score-value hierarchy have the highest GDP. This relation is not trivial. The easiest way for officials to increase GDP is to develop land for housing. Land and property values increase most rapidly in central places with high placement rates in good colleges. Thus "scholastic accomplishments" (*chengji*) translate into "political accomplishments" (*zhengji*) in more ways than one.

between people on the chain: Officials claim credit for the accomplishments of administrators, administrators claim credit for the accomplishments of teachers and parents, and teachers and parents do the same for the accomplishments of students. In Zhiwei's Marxian analysis, scores constitute the currency of surplus value that is exploited from people lower on the chain.

Zhiwei's model contains great insight but is biased toward a student's point of view. Glorifying the labor of students, this model fails to account for other kinds of labor that contribute to the production of test scores: What this account misses, in other words, is how test scores objectify the social labor that produces them. As I address in more detail in the following, the average test score of a school, place, or region relates more closely to policy decisions, cultural capital, and economic factors than it does to individual students' diligence. In short, individual diligence is a necessary but insufficient condition for the production of high test scores. Chinese students at all levels of the score-value hierarchy are diligent. But only those at the top of the hierarchy go to top colleges.

In contrast to students, people at higher positions in the chain of interests generally have greater appreciation for the relative importance of the political, cultural, and economic factors that produce high test scores. They know that diligence is necessary for good performance on the exam, but they also know that schools have a relatively minimal overall effect on students' scores. "Good" students will get good scores, "bad" students will not. Thus a major task of educational administrators and officials consists in vying for "student resources" (*shengyuan*)—that is, top-scoring students.[186]

Note how the chain of interests encompasses both administrative and geographical hierarchies. But these two hierarchies tend to overlap: The influence, rank, and power of

[186] The term appears to be inspired by the more general term, "human resources" (*renli ziyuan*), which in China, as in other places, has become a fashionable term to describe a company's workers.

administrators and officials generally corresponds to their position in the central-place hierarchy. Centrally located high-school administrators oversea schools that attract students from a greater geographical region. Centrally located officials oversee larger regions and possess higher official ranks than their peripherally located counterparts. In principal, therefore, the interests of central administrators and officials ought to align more closely with universalistic notions of the common good. But people at all levels of the hierarchy generally pursue strategies that will maximize test scores for their domain of special control—be it a single student, a class, a school, a city, a prefecture, or a province. In the pursuit of high scores and good "student resources," therefore, different geographical and hierarchical interests routinely come into conflict with each other.

Knowledge about such conflicts varies contextually and geographically. Even some actors low on the chain of interests possess uncommon insight into the functioning of the system. But the average student, parent, and even teacher has little inside knowledge of back-stage realities. The efforts of people high on the chain of interest take place largely in secret. In general, the higher on the chain one goes, the more secret the activities. Thus the examination is more prone to backstage manipulation than people imagine.

Part II: Secret Knowledge and the Charisma of Test Scores

In some cases, gaming the system involves (at least from the perspective of the state) fabricating a status. Consider, for example, how "fake foreigners" eschew Chinese citizenship or how Gaokao migrants obtain test admission certificates under false pretenses. In such cases, however, indeterminacy *itself* is not actually fabricated. In other cases, various actors are directly complicit in maintaining an impression that the chances of examination success are higher than they

actually are. In the latter cases, clear lines exist between the excolluded and those "in the know." Therefore it becomes useful to speak of the *fabrication of indeterminacy.*

As I learned, the most wide-scale and significant example of such fabrication consists of fabrication by omission or censorship. My gradual discovery of this censorship provides insight into how it functions.

The Duplication of Data and the Dampening of Discussion

When I started my field work, I was eager to acquire objective, quantifiable measures of social inequality at my field sties. For example, I aspired to create a comprehensive map of the score-value hierarchy, correlating each school's average Gaokao score with the school's position in the regional system. I also hoped to conduct surveys to examine the relationships between parental occupation, educational history, and college-admission outcome. I hoped such efforts would complement my ethnographic work and contribute to quantitative studies of educational inequality in China.[187]

As I stayed longer, however, I began to observe that schools and government offices themselves gather much of the data that I aspired to collect. Indeed, the collection of such data forms a logical consequence of the "reality" of test scores in China. Every head teacher's job is to maximize the scores of his or her (usually her) class. Similarly, every section leader's job is to maximize the scores of his or her (usually his) year. School leaders do the same for the school, and officials for the region.

[187] The most noteworthy examples of such studies include those of Scott Rozelle and his collaborators in the Stanford Rural Education Project and those of Emily Hannum and others working on the basis of the Gansu survey (C. Liu et al. 2011; C. Liu et al. 2011; X. Wang et al. 2013; Hannum, An, and Cherng 2011; Hannum and Wang 2006; Hannum, Wang, and Adams 2008). As I note in foregoing chapters, these and other studies underscore the reality of stark and growing educational inequality in China. Such studies indicate wide gulfs between rural and urban areas and between social classes. In my view, however, the central-place hierarchy remains a woefully under-used methodology for describing and accounting for such inequality.

No one leaves these tasks to guesswork. Upon entering high school, students are tracked into classes based on their performance in the high-school admission exam. In many schools, head teachers create spreadsheets correlating performance on the high-school entrance exam with detailed data on students' families, including occupation of mother and father, ethnicity, and home address. The subsequent collection of high-school test scores starts immediately. Head teachers work closely with section leaders to produce detailed analysis of every student's test result on every formal examination—monthly exams, mid-terms, and finals (figure 8).

2012届高三下学期省质检成绩(理科)　　高三（ ）班

班次	段次	进退	班号	市名次	姓名	总分	语文	语次	数学	数次	英语	英次	物理	物次	化学	化次	生物	生次
1	3	30	601	7		655	115	18	139	6	131	143	114	8	77	94	79	1
2	6	26	605	11		650	107	112	135	15	139	20	111	23	87	13	[illegible]	35
18	161	10	619	641		584	93	448	124	102	131	143	91	296	73	153	72	29
19	208	-66	617	953		572	99	324	115	222	138	30	93	272	72	176	55	381
20	214	68	621	1013		570	109	75	106	354	116	371	98	188	78	86	63	192
20	214	43	624	1013		570	101	263	112	264	131	143	99	176	62	317	65	132
22	226	-76	616	1055		568	87	497	120	150	129	173	87	337	84	24	61	236
22	226	31	620	1055		568	99	324	124	102	128	197	91	296	65	285	61	236
24	232	35	606	1083		567	104	181	109	317	128	197	105	76	71	195	50	448
25	276	-49	618	1398		557	111	40	120	150	120	327	89	321	61	331	56	359
25	276	136	627	1398		557	109	75	115	222	110	432	94	263	60	347	69	60
27	295	90	625	1585		552	99	324	114	233	111	421	99	176	64	295	65	132
28	305	-6	632	1678		550	104	181	106	354	132	123	70	462	74	132	64	159
29	310	45	626	1797		547	108	87	101	400	123	287	98	188	60	347	57	335
29	310	109	636	1797		547	110	55	109	317	122	302	98	188	50	440	58	318
31	317	-12	637	1888		544	99	324	102	394	111	421	103	106	72	176	57	335

Figure 8: Head teacher's record of students' practice-test scores
Scores are listed by subject. Individual students' class and school rankings appear on the left, along with their change in rankings vis-à-vis the last practice exam. The head teacher has circled scores that do not meet the cutoff for first-tier universities in each subject.
Source: Photo by author. Identifying information has been removed.

Administrators use this data to strategize the placement of personnel and make pedagogical decisions. Head teachers use the same data to coordinate the efforts of subject teachers, to administer their classes, and to plan interventions into the lives of individual families and

students (chapter 5). To strategize their pedagogical approach vis-à-vis other educational institutions, administrators at different schools use back channels to obtain or share test data. Just as teachers and administrators gather test-score data to manage their classes and schools, educational officials conduct audits of this data to coordinate efforts across the region under their control. The above-mentioned prefectural and provincial practice exams form important occasions for such audits. Many a teacher or administrator can recall meetings in which they were berated by local officials for "poor" performance on these exams. In sum, then, educational bureaucrats at all levels of the chain of interests collect comprehensive data on students and their test scores, which form the central focus of nearly every aspect of high-school life. The obsessiveness with which high-school administrators analyze this data constitutes a paradigmatic example of Chinese audit culture, the history of which stretches back to early times (Kipnis 2008).

But consider how the collection of this data largely duplicates the efforts of academic educational researchers. Indeed, the comprehensiveness of high-school test-score and family-background data means that this corpus could, in theory, supplant many sociological surveys. At minimum, school data could form a useful source of supplemental information for academic research. Consider, moreover, how the data analysis performed by high schools and educational authorities employs scientific methods and approaches—large-scale sampling, quantitative analysis, targeted intervention, control groups, and so on. In short, the analysis performed by academic researchers and that performed by educational bureaucrats duplicate each other in many respects. Researchers and bureaucrats even share similar goals. Educational sociologists presumably wish to influence policy, whereas bureaucrats set policies. In many cases, the values of researchers and bureaucrats—especially street-level bureaucrats like head teachers—may even

be aligned. Researchers generally wish to describe and ameliorate inequality. By the same token, many head teachers work concertedly at the street level to combat the effects of inequality in their classes, despite the overwhelming pressure to raise test scores (chapter 5). And although administrators and officials are mainly concerned with raising the test scores of the school or region under their control rather than ameliorating inequality per se, their efforts work to the benefit of many ordinary families.

But despite the overlap in goals and methods between researchers and bureaucrats, official data is not made available to researchers, much less to the public. In short, such data is top secret, and large-scale academic surveys are only carried out with great difficulty. I did obtain access to some internal school data, which sympathetic interlocutors gave me on the condition of strict confidentiality. I use this data in this and other chapters to paint a picture of educational inequality. For reasons that I explain below, however, high-school administrators and government officials were not forthcoming with their internal data, nor did they agree to my conducting large-scale surveys of educational inequality. But I am by far the only scholar who encounters such difficulties. Even highly renowned Chinese educational researchers face great challenges in accessing such data.

In theory, making high-school data available to the public and to researchers would be fairly straightforward. Like other Chinese government organizations, the Chinese educational bureaucracy is highly centralized. It would be relatively uncomplicated for central authorities to ask high schools to report test-score and demographic data up the administrative hierarchy. Central authorities would then be well placed to act as a clearing house for this information.

Indeed, before 2009, central authorities played the role of clearing house for Gaokao scores. Fujian provincial education authorities distributed the results of the Gaokao, broken down

by school, to local education ministries, which passed these results on to school administrators. But in 2009 this practice was stopped. The reason is telling: By controlling the circulation of test-score data, authorities hoped to lower the fever pitch of Gaokao competition between regions and schools. Around the same time, provincial authorities also stopped announcing municipal and provincial first-place examinees or "champions" (*zhuangyuan*). The rationale for ceasing such announcements was the same: The government hoped thereby to dampen the ferocity of examination competition. Under the old reporting system, examination champions had been treated with much fanfare. Some municipalities even held public ceremonies to honor champions at temples to the Great Sage, Confucius. Such ceremonies advertised the educational superiority of the champions' home regions and schools, attracting top-scoring students and garnering the envy of competitors. Officials viewed the resulting rivalries as an "unhealthy tendency" that led to the exacerbation of underlying inequalities.

In practice, however, little changed after the provincial education authorities stopped disseminating Gaokao results. Schools and regions merely found another way to gather this data. Head teachers now collect Gaokao scores from individual students. Schools then collate this data, passing it up the administrative hierarchy to local governments. Now as before, therefore, local education ministries review and compare the Gaokao scores for different schools. And now as before, regional Gaokao champions are widely feted. From the perspective of individual schools, the new policy has merely resulted in increased workload: Schools must laboriously collect and collate Gaokao scores. But this extra work affords school administrators an opportunity that they did not previously possess—the opportunity to massage the data. For example, a head teacher with whom I worked closely was requested by her year leader to tweak some of her students' score results by a few points to help improve the showing for the whole

year. This teacher surmised that if all teachers had been similarity instructed (she was not sure), the effect would be subtle but profound. The upshot is that competition between schools and regions continues more or less unchecked, but local governments and schools are not quite as sure of the data as they once were.

Note, however, that such reporting policies merely concern the internal circulation of Gaokao scores among school administrators and government bureaucrats. As I note above, these scores have never been widely reported to the public or to researchers. In theory, individual schools can publicize their data, but most schools have no motive to do so. Since only key schools in central places have significant placement rates at top-ranking colleges, only such schools have any reason to tell the public about their test results. Indeed, top high schools publish these accomplishments widely on their websites and in local media. By contrast, schools lower on the score-value hierarchy keep their results a closely guarded secret. Little information can be found about them in the public domain, expect perhaps vague announcements that numbers have improved. This circumspection applies equally to government officials. In general, only large cities, like Xiamen, publish municipal admission rates. Little public data can be found about peripherally located localities.[188]

In sum, high schools and government organizations gather detailed data on students but do not make this data public. In light of these circumstances, the non-publication of such data seems to be a glaring omission—a loud silence. Conversations with prominent Gaokao researchers confirmed my suspicions about the treatment of this data. Consider the testimony of one such researcher, Professor Wang:

[188] Recently, Shenzhen seems to have bucked the trend of this policy of concealment by publishing first-tier admission rates for all the high schools within the municipality, including low-ranking and peripherally located school. See http://sz.aoshu.com/e/20150604/556ff2906ea3f.shtml (accessed June 2, 2016). People in touch with educational officials in Shenzhen report that the city is pursuing a muscular "sunshine policy." However, Shenzhen seems to be the exception that proves the rule.

> My colleagues and I sit on national-level advisory committees for Gaokao-reform policies, but none of us have any access to detailed government data. Regional differences in admission rates are really only the tip of the iceberg from a researcher's perspective. We are also on our own in collecting data about which schools have students getting into exactly which kinds of universities, and so on. … Without such data it's difficult to provide an objective assessment of policy. … I have many former students working in the provincial education ministry, but they can't help me obtain data. If I want to do research on such discrepancies, I have to send graduate students around to individual schools. I have to go through guanxi with administrators at individual high schools to gain access to the data each school, one by one.

When I asked about the motivation for this suppression of information, Professor Wang replied, "By withholding this information, the government is attempting to attenuate [*danhua*] discussion of inequality [*bu junheng*]. The government doesn't want people to focus their attention on this problem. Keeping the scores under wraps is a way of putting the whole discussion on ice [*leng chuli*]."

Educational Disparity and Censorship as Fabrication

In fact, Professor Wang had earlier asked me to help one of her graduate students collect test-score data form Dragon Gate High School in Xiamen—a request that had alerted me to the extent of researchers' difficulty in obtaining this information. I felt honored to be assisting a prominent researcher, but alarmed that such measures were necessary. Professor Wang's student, Yuanda, was writing a master's thesis on educational inequality, but needed personal introductions at each of the schools that she was researching. Wang suggested that I meet with Yuanda after she finished her thesis, which I did. Combined with information that I collected, Yuanda's data produce a picture of stark regional inequality.

Within the municipality of Xiamen, the admission rates to first-tier universities (that is, "first-tier admission rates" or *yiben luqu lü*) range from 77 to 90 percent at top-ranking high schools to .3 percent at the lowest ranking schools. Moreover, these admission rates are closely

correlated with schools' positions on the geographical hierarchy.[189] The three most successful high schools in Xiamen—Xiamen Foreign Languages School, Xiamen Number One High School, and Xiamen Double Ten High School—all have main campuses located close to the city center. All of these schools have first-tier admission rates exceeding 77 percent. Within the municipality of Xiamen, high schools can be further divided between those located on the island of Xiamen proper (*daonei*) and those in neighboring mainland districts (*daowai*), most of which have only recently been urbanized. Mid-ranking high schools in Xiamen proper, which are located in slightly more peripheral areas than the top-ranking schools, have first-tier admission rates that range from 25 to 37 percent. Situated in a peripheral area of the island that has been only recently urbanized, by contrast, Dragon Gate High School possesses a corresponding admission rate of only 1 to 2 percent. Outside the island, the top-ranking schools have first-tier admission rates of only 10 percent while the lowest rate of .3 percent belongs to a low-ranking school in a recently incorporated rural district.

Data that I collected for Ningzhou and Mountain County demonstrates similar patterns of geographical variation cross-regionally. Whereas the top-ranking schools in Xiamen self-reported their top-tier admission rates to be 90 percent, the top-tier admission rate for the highest ranking school in neighboring Ningzhou Prefecture, Ningzhou Number One, hovers around 80 percent. By contrast, the top-tier admission rate for the best high school in Mountain County, Mountain County Number One, is under 30 percent. The admission rates of low-ranking schools in Ningzhou City are similar or worse than those of low-ranking schools in Xiamen.[190] Further

[189] This correlation is complicated by the tendency of large, successful high schools—emulating the practice of successful universities—to build satellite campuses in suburban areas. Nevertheless, a clear trend emerges: Schools with more centrally located "old campuses" have higher rankings in the score-value hierarchy.

[190] Within the city of Ningzhou, geographical variations in the score-value hierarchy demonstrate similar patterns to those in Xiamen, but are scaled down in amplitude: Ningzhou schools are fewer than those in Xiamen, and fall off in admission rate more quickly. The second-ranking public school in Ningzhou probably has a first-tier admission rate

down the hierarchy in Mountain County, the situation is even more dire. As one Mountain County Number One administrator told me, "not even a few" (*mei ji ge*) students at Mountain County's remaining two senior high schools gain admission to top-tier colleges.

These limited data allow only cautious generalizations, but suggest a picture of stark inequality. In short, the examination performance of schools corresponds overwhelmingly with their position in the local and regional marketing system. In short, schools form what I term above a score-value hierarchy: Just as the admission rates of schools within a municipality form a continuum from top-ranking, centrally located schools to low-ranking, peripherally located schools, admission rates between centrally located municipalities, peripherally located municipalities, and their subordinate counties form a similar continuum. Moreover, the college admission rates of the lowest ranking high schools in centrally located municipalities resembles those of ordinary rural schools.

But first-tier admission rates only tell part of the story. As Professor Wang points out, such rates do not paint a fine-grained picture of educational outcome, nor do they say anything about differences in educational outcome by gender or parental occupation. Moreover, top high schools no longer put great store by first-tier admissions, emphasizing instead admission rates to Project 985 universities, which possess greater prestige. And the greatest index of prestige consists of the number of students a school can get admitted to China's two top universities—

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of about 20 percent. The remaining three public high schools have negligible admission rates. But the situation within Ningzhou is complicated by the existence of three private schools (see more on the phenomenon of the privatization of education below). The top-ranking private school has a first-tier admission rate close to that of Ningzhou Number One. The first-tier admission rates at the other two private schools probably hovers around 50 percent. But the rates at the latter two private schools are distorted by these schools' aggressive recruitment of a small cohort of strong students, who are offered scholarships. The accomplishments of such scholarship students serve as advertisements for attracting weaker students, who pay full tuition. In sum, private schools are a major cause of brain drain in Mountain County and other outlying counties.

The admission rates that I report for Ningzhou are rough estimates, but are adequate for the basis of comparison. Although I do not have raw admission-rate data for schools within Ningzhou city, I was able to obtain the results of the English section of a municipal practice examination. I base my estimates on comparable data from other schools for which I do possess first-tier admission rates.

Qinghua University and Beijing University. Of particular prestige value is the admission rate to such colleges by "naked score," which, as mentioned, refers to "pure" Gaokao score before it is adulterated by bonus points.

This phenomenon of emphasizing "naked score" suggests another problem in comparing admission rates between schools. Many students at top schools obtain "direct admission" (*baosong*) to top colleges through various special programs. Education reformers intended direct admission to identify students who possess "high quality" (*suzhi*) but not necessarily high test scores. In practice, however, such programs favor students at top high schools, which are awarded greater quotas for participation in such special admission schemes. To avoid the impression that such "direct admissions" opportunities are awarded on the basis of guanxi, moreover, administrators tend to use test scores to select students for participation in such programs, thereby contradicting their originally intended effect.[191] In addition, note that top high schools in central places have been sending growing numbers of students abroad in recent years. For these reasons, as a Xiamen Foreign Languages High School administrator informed me, only about one-third of students from top high schools in Xiamen obtain admission to top-tier colleges through testing alone. Another third obtain admission through various special direct-admission programs and added points, and the remainder go to college abroad.

In sum, the available data suggest a stark picture of extreme geographical and social inequality. Given the strong correlation between centrality of place and admission to top colleges, it is unsurprising that the limited data available suggest that students of rural origin at China's top colleges form a small and probably diminishing minority (chapter 1).[192] People are

[191] But scores too can be manipulated: Various statistical methods or sampling approaches can be found to favor one student or another. The performance of universalistic fairness can serve particularistic interests (chapter 1).
[192] Note, moreover, that this phenomenon has wide-ranging ramifications for demographic composition of higher education in China. College students in high-ranking, centrally located universities like Xiamen University tend to

widely aware that such inequalities exist, but without access to specific data their awareness lacks empirical verification. Although authorities could in principle easily make such data available, these data remain top secret. The censorship or non-publication of such data, as Mr. Wang says, acts to attenuate or "put on ice" discussions of inequality.

Thus, I would argue, such censorship serves as a kind of fabrication by omission. Ordinary people know that their odds of admission to college are bad, but they do not understand the precise degree of their handicap. Just as a casino operators keep the house odds secret so that gamblers will keep putting money in the slot machines, China's educational officials and high-school administrators restrict the public dissemination of admissions rates to keep families engrossed in examination competition.

Later in my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to speak with a provincial educational official about this censorship policy. This official justified the policy as necessary to preventing the further exacerbation of inequality. Comparing the Gaokao to China's imperial examination, he suggested that the test undergirds social stability by "giving ordinary people [*laobaixing*] hope." But, this official said, parents' efforts to game the system had already increased educational inequality to an unsustainable degree, threatening to undermine their hope. To substantiate this remark, he pointed out that students must test into senior high school, but access to good primary education is largely determined by the location of one's home. Without a good primary education, he observed, students cannot do well on the high-school entrance exam; however, property prices in good school districts have soared to such a degree that they lie

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hail from urban areas. But graduates students at such universities are overwhelmingly rural in background. If they choose to pursue graduate education, graduates from China's top colleges generally go abroad or to one of China's top graduate programs in Shanghai or Beijing. Students of rural origin, on the other hand, attempt to make up for a second-rate undergraduate institution by pursuing graduate study in a higher-ranking graduate institution. But such efforts may largely be in vain. Employers prefer students with prestigious undergraduate degrees. Thus a graduate degree from a top-tier university may do little to erase the stigma of an undergraduate degree from a low-ranking one.

outside the reach of most ordinary families.[193] As this official noted, the same trend is replicated between regions: The property prices of a place are closely related to that place's position in the core–periphery hierarchy, which in turn closely corresponds to educational performance and college admission.

Alluding to these trends, this official suggested that publicizing the "real" admissions statistics would only "increase this unfair trend," leading to further increases in house prices, further educational competition, and greater potential for social unrest.

Self-Fulfilling Prophesy: The Similarity between Schools and Temples

In many respects, therefore, schools resemble temples. Worshippers prefer temples that they consider to be "effective" (*ling*)—that is, temples whose patron deities are deemed to be efficacious in responding to worshippers' prayers. Similarly, parents prefer schools that they consider to be "good"—that is, schools that have a good track record of getting children into good colleges. Temples are considered to be "effective" if they attract many worshippers, but attract many worshippers because people consider them to be effective. In other words, worshippers' assessment of effectiveness is characterized by circular thinking (Sangren 2000). By the same token, schools are considered to be "good" if they attract top-scoring students, but attract top-scoring students because they are considered to be good. Thus the success of both temples and schools relates in a circular fashion to their perceived efficacy. Like the "efficacy" of deities, therefore, the "reputation" (*mingyu*) of schools seems to have the character of a self-fulfilling prophesy.

[193] Some students can gain admission to top primary and junior high schools through a combination of testing and lottery systems. But only "good" schools routinely produce good results on the high-school entrance exam. As in other countries, therefore, the location of one's home is closely related to the educational outcome of one's children. For this reason, the competition for success on the Gaokao begins before children are born when prospective parents buy houses (chapter 1).

Consider, moreover, how schools and temples even use similar methods for promoting reputation: At temples, worshippers typically make a donation as a votive offering to "repay" (*huanyuan*) the temple's patron deity for fulfilling the worshipper's wish. To advertise efficacy, temples prominently display the names of donors and the amount of their donations. Similarly, schools prominently post the names of students who have gained admission to top universities. The display of such "joyous announcements" (*xibao; xixun*) or "honor rolls" (*guangrongbang*) even possesses aesthetic similarities with the display of temple donations. Moreover, schools and temples are not the only institutions to employ this advertising strategy. State-sponsored lottery stores likewise display "honor rolls," which in this case takes the form of prize-winning lottery tickets. Just as temple donations are understood to provide evidence of magical power and high Gaokao scores to provide evidence of educational quality, such winning lottery tickets are deemed to provide evidence of "good luck" (*haoyun*).

Skeptics may counter that reputation must be understood differently in the contexts of schools, on the one hand, and of temples and lottery stores, on the other: As a critic might argue, teachers and schools have "real effects" on students' Gaokao scores whereas deities and "luck" do not "in reality" exist. In practice, however, I found that school insiders—administrators and teachers—expressed much more agnosticism with regard to the efficacy of schools than did the average layperson.

Whereas parents ascribe great efficacy to teachers—or at least blame teachers when students fail to achieve high test scores—administrators and officials place more emphasis on "student resources." They say that "good student resources" contribute more to the success of a school than does any other factor. As previously noted, "good student resources" is jargon for

students with high test scores.[194] "Teacher resources" (*shiyuan*) are deemed important too. But administrators say that the quality of teacher resources derives much of its importance from how high-quality teachers tend to attract good students. For example, Mountain County administrators persuaded top-scoring students to stay in Mountain County by offering to put them in special classes taught by only the best teachers.

Of course, good teachers sometimes do make a difference in students' test performance. Ms. Liu at Ningzhou Number One received praise for increasing the average score of her English class by 10 points—an improvement that could make a real difference in students' fortunes. Teachers at Dragon Gate High School earned commendations for raising the school's rank on Xiamen Island from dead last to third-to-bottom in three years.[195] But one notes that these differences are of an order that might be described as incremental rather than transformative. Recall, moreover, that Dragon Gate teachers largely hailed from the best schools in the countryside, where first-tier admission rates hover around 30 percent or sometimes higher. Despite these experienced teachers' best efforts, however, Dragon Gate students never exceeded a first-tier admissions rate of 2 percent. Many teachers, moreover, would argue that such improvements could be attributed to the effects that they had on motivation and "attitude" rather than on pedagogical efficacy per se.

In short, good student resources can make or break the reputation of a school. And the better a school's reputation is, the better the student resources it can attract.

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[194] Note, however, how this terminology has an abstracting, distancing effect: All trace of individuality is erased. First, individual students are reduced to a single number—a test score. Then that score is averaged to create an average for each class or year. In other words, student resources further abstracts the already abstracted test score: "Student resources" refers to an aggregate capacity—a standing reserve of high-scoring potential.

[195] Schools are ranked by the incoming first-year class' average score on the high-school admissions test and, for comparison, ranked again three years later by the exiting third-year class' average score on the Gaokao.

Part III: Measures and Countermeasures

For the above reasons, educational administrators and officials saw the acquisition of good student resources as a significant, if not paramount goal of their work. The ensuing battle for student resources, and the corresponding efforts of parents and families to game the system—these measures and countermeasures—dominate the local and regional politics of education. In my field sites, the narrative of this battle forms a local history of education. Over the past two decades, this battle has been characterized by increasing educational disparities caused by urbanization and the partial privatization of education. But this history is largely written backstage in the grey areas between official policy and illicit activity.

Homeroom Hierarchy

"Do high schools in the United States also use the pretense of treating every student fairly to do things that are utterly unfair?" This question was posed to me by a Mountain County Number One student, Chunxiao, in a message that she sent me after I visited her class.[196] Curious about what lay behind the question, I arranged to meet Chunxiao and her friend, Shanshan, for dinner in the cafeteria. I often ate lunch and dinner in the cafeteria to chat with students. These cafeteria conversations provided good opportunities for candid dialog. The ordinariness and publicity of the occasion set everyone at ease, but the hubbub of chattering teenagers and clacking aluminum trays foiled unwanted eavesdroppers. Over small spoonfuls of meat and vegetables and heaping portions of white rice, we discussed Chunxiao's question. As it turned out, one of Chunxiao's

[196] Chinese teachers frequently communicate with students by online message program, often forming online-chat groups for their class. While I was doing my fieldwork, the messaging program "QQ" was popular. I generally wrote my QQ account number on the board of every class that I taught, encouraging students to get in touch with me if they had any questions.

main complaints concerned the "tracking" (*fenban*) of classes into "fast classes" (*kuaiban*) and "slow classes" (*manban*).

"Students like me in slow classes—we feel like second-class citizens," she said.

Shanshan, whose class was ranked slightly higher than Chunxiao's, demurred. "It's not so bad," she said. "I think I'd rather be a big fish in a small pond [*ning wei feng wei, bu wei ji tou*]."

"Tracking" refers to the phenomenon of organizing students into homeroom classes or forms, which, depending on the school, may be ranked into two, three, or even four or more levels of hierarchy by student test score. High-ranking classes are termed "fast," low-ranking classes "slow." Officially, these terms designate the relative speed with which classes progress through the high-school curriculum, but are understood metonymically to refer to the "quickness" of students' minds. By performing well on regular monthly examinations, students can be promoted from slow classes to fast classes. Poor performance results in demotion.

Note that these arrangements result in a strong but not absolute correspondence between test score and class rank. Students with poor test scores can (and frequently do) gain access to superior classes. Such access can be secured through licit means, such as the payment of "school-choice fees" (*zexiaofei*), or illicit means, such as nepotism, bribery, and guanxi. As the schoolyard jingle goes, then, "Studying mathematics, physics, and chemistry is not as good as having a 'good daddy'" (*xue hao wu li hua, bu ru you ge hao baba*).

The practice of tracking classes varies along the central-place hierarchy. In urban areas, generally only two levels of tracking exist. Fast classes are usually referred to as "keypoint classes" (*zhongdian ban*) or "experimental classes" (*shiyan ban*). All other classes are called "parallel classes" (*pingxing ban*). This label is intended to pay lip service to the ideal that

students of varying ability levels should be equally divided among classes. Such "parallel" tracking constitutes a legally mandated, if often subverted, requirement for the compulsory phase of education, which lasts up through junior high school. But no such anti-tracking law binds senior high schools. Nevertheless, the practice of aggressive tracking is publically frowned upon.

In rural areas, tracking tends to increase. The relative paucity of educational institutions in the countryside means that schools there must cater to students with widely ranging test scores. Also, schools in rural areas are less closely supervised by central authorities than their urban counterparts. Thus rural schools feel less need to conform to centrally dictated norms (chapter 2). Mountain County Number One possesses a particularly hierarchical ranking system, with four levels of homeroom class: At the top of each year's class hierarchy are one or two "experimental classes" (*shiyan ban*)—also known as "extra-fast classes" (*tekuai ban*)—followed in descending rank by "fast classes," "middle-fast classes" (*zhongkuai ban*), and "slow classes."

In a nod toward urban norms, Mountain County Number One's "slow classes" are officially known as "parallel classes." Ordinarily, however, everyone just calls them slow classes. Behind students' backs, moreover, slow classes are sometimes even referred to as "garbage classes" (*laji ban*). My lunchtime interlocutor, Chunxiao, found herself on the bottom rung of the hierarchy in the slowest of slow classes—a "garbage class."

In practice, Mountain County administrators explained, students in such "slow" classes tend to hail from outside Mountain Town. Overwhelmingly, they are the children of farmers. By contrast, students in "fast" classes tend to be the sons and daughters of teachers, businesspeople, and officials located in Mountain Town. Administrators argue that aggressive tracking is the best way to make efficient use of limited student resources. They say that slow-class students are relatively unteachable; in addition, many have "disciplinary problems."

Unsurprisingly, however, students in "slow classes" resent tracking. Among slow-class students, Chunxiao was not alone in feeling like a second-class citizen. As one student told me, the difference between fast and slow classes is "like the difference between the rich and the poor." Another punned on his class number, B4, which is homonymous with the Chinese word for "despise" (*bishi*) when pronounced with a regional accent: "Being in class B4 [*B-si*]—that makes people despise [*bishi*] you."

But students' resentment of such arrangements goes deeper than a name. Although students vary in their awareness of the use of bribery and guanxi to obtain coveted places in top classes, all students understand that top classes are provided with "unfair" access to various perqs, opportunities, and resources. For one thing, quality of instruction differs greatly between fast and slow classes. Fast classes are taught by the best teachers—those with superior experience and a "serious" (*renzhen*) attitude. Slow classes, by contrast, receive unserious, even unskilled instruction. Several slow-class students complained, for example, that their math teachers were sometimes stumped by the problems that they reviewed in class—a particularly galling index of unpreparation and incompetence. English teachers had poor pronunciation; Chinese teachers spoke with a heavy "sweet-potato tone" (*diguaqiang*)—that is, a thick regional accent; science teachers told stories instead of reviewing problems, and so on.

Students also complained about unequal access to various ostensibly merit-based opportunities. For example, invitations to join the Communist Party, which are subject to strict quotas, are supposedly distributed to students according to broad criteria of general merit; however, in practice these invitations are reserved only for students in top classes. Similarly, only students in top classes receive scores of "excellent" in the general merit or "all-around quality assessment" (*zonghe suzhi pingjia*). The ostensible purpose of this assessment is to

counterbalance what people widely perceived as an excessive emphasis on examinations in college admission. But by guaranteeing that only students in fast classes receive top marks in this assessment, teachers and administrators made "all-around quality" synonymous with high test score.[197]

Students perceive similar subversions of fairness in the distribution of other forms of recognition, such as invitations to participate in municipal and provincial academic contests or to compete in the special "autonomous admission tests" (*zizhu zhaosheng*) organized by individual colleges and consortiums of colleges.[198] The exclusivity of such invitations can be rationalized by appealing to alleged differences in student abilities. Much less easy to justify, however, is the imbalance in nomination for other honors, such as "Three Good Student" (*sanhao xuesheng*). Being named a "Three Good Student" supposedly recognizes all-around development—"good study," "good physique," and "good moral quality." But in practice such awards go only to high-scoring students. Students like Chunxiao resent the implication that they are morally inferior just because their test scores are lower.

Of course, university admission is based almost exclusively on test score; thus, most of the above-mentioned perqs and opportunities seem at first blush relatively inconsequential. In more centrally located schools, coveted opportunities for "direct admission" are unfairly distributed to high-scoring or well-connected students, but Mountain County Number One has few such perqs to distribute. It is true that extra points on the Gaokao can be earned by "Three Good" students and by participants in contests and autonomous admissions exams. But recruitment to the Communist Party and ranking in the "all-around quality assessment" have

[197] In conducting the assessment, teachers openly subverted administrative practices meant to guarantee fairness. For example, the general merit assessment included a peer-appraisal system in which each student rated every other student; however, students in slow classes reported being encouraged to rate one another no better than "good" while students in fast classes received instructions to rate one another as "excellent."
[198] Such autonomous admissions tests are further discussed in chapter 4.

little effect on college admissions. As I have suggested, even the varying quality of teachers may be relatively inconsequential to students' educational outcomes, although no one in Mountain County has seriously considered the experiment of assigning "good" teachers to "bad students."

But many "slow-class" students themselves think that they might have a better chance with better teachers. As one student said, "The system is illogical. The students who need the most help get the worst teachers." And as another complained, "Our test scores are low, but we work hard. We deserve a better chance." Moreover, such "unfair" access to accolades and awards contributes to an all-around ethos in which only test scores seem "real" (*xianshi*). By contrast, the institution's rhetoric of embracing "quality education" and the all-around moral development of the individual seemed highly "empty," "hypocritical," or "false."

As a result of aggressive tracking, students in different classes almost literally attend different schools. In sum, Mountain County's top high school resembles several schools rolled into one. Administrators and officials consider this creation of schools within a school to be the most effective strategy for raising the region's all-around showing on the Gaokao. From the perspective of educational bureaucrats, one of the main benefits of tracking consists in improving the school's reputation—its public face. "Good" classes are a recruiting tool for "good" students.

Public Presentation and Face Giving

Even if students like Chunxiao are relatively disabused of any illusions that they are treated equally, administrators take pains to present the school in the best light to the public and to centrally located officials. The school's reputation, and thus its ability to attract good student resources, relies on projecting the best possible public image. For this reason, only the top classes and their teachers have a public existence. This arrangement can be observed in many

phenomena. Most obviously, the announcement board in the central quad contains a full roster of all the fast-class teachers, extolling their accomplishments. The same announcement board contains a list of students who have won awards in various prefectural and provincial English contests—all of them fast-class students. Local, prefectural, and (much rarer) provincial "Three-Good Students" likewise have their photos prominently displayed. Similarly, only fast-class students and their teachers have a presence in promotional brochures for the school. By contrast, the practice of aggressive tracking is masked, especially from inspecting municipal authorities: Official school schedules make no mention of "experimental classes"—the highest level of the school hierarchy. In general, any visitor or casual observer will receive the impression that the school is made up entirely of "good" (high-scoring) students.

In particular, public ritual occasions exclude slow-class students. Every year around Tomb-Sweeping Day (*Qingmingjie*), an early-April festival in which Chinese honor their ancestors, senior-one students march to the local Tomb of the Revolutionary Martyr to be ritually inducted into the Communist Youth League by local political and military leaders; however, only top classes are allowed to participate. In 2013, moreover, only fast-class students were invited to give speeches at a "mobilization rally" (*dongyuan dahui*) to boost morale 100 days before the Gaokao. In the face of widespread disgruntlement, however, administrators acceded to letting representatives from slow classes participate. Such examples could be multiplied.

To my dismay, I was recruited more than once into such publicity efforts. Although I was critical of these efforts, I found myself—to my surprise—a willing collaborator in them. On one occasion, a local television station filmed my daily "English corner." This English conversation group was ostensibly open to all students. However, no slow-class students attended, reporting that they felt too "ashamed" to participate alongside their fast-class colleagues. On another

occasion, the local newspaper observed me teaching a group of the best fast-class students, who had been cobbled together to appear like a normal class. The purpose of such exercises was to create good publicity for the school by creating the impression—in fact, false—that all students had regular and unfettered access to a foreign English teacher. Although I still taught all senior-one students, school leaders had asked me to stop teaching all but the fast classes in senior-two (more on this below). Of course, I made efforts to befriend slow-class students, like Chunxiao and Shanshan. But they were not included in any of my publicity activities.

Following such publicity stunts, students and I would joke about their highly staged-managed feeling. Students compared these efforts to many other "virtual" (*xu*) or "fake" (*xujia*) occasions in which they were asked to perform adherence to the tenants of "quality education," for example during special "demonstration lessons" and school inspections (chapter 4).

Like many students, I found such public performances uncomfortable. However, these occasions had real consequences for the status and reputation of teachers, administrators, and officials—people who had without exception treated me well. Some had even become my friends. In alcohol-lubricated group dinners to which I was sometimes invited, school leaders (almost without exception men) regularly swore their fraternal loyalty to each other. On such occasions, they had addressed me as "brother" in a context in which—as the clock ticks into the wee hours of the night and empty bottles litter the table—men, as they say, "tell the truth" (*jiang shihua*). Just as I helped my brothers by being a willing participant in publicity efforts, students helped *me* by enthusiastically participating. Such was a basic requirement of the "human feeling" (*renqing*) between students, teacher, and leaders.

Of course, such a gap between "appearance" and "reality" characterizes not only Chinese high schools but many institutions in China and elsewhere. By all accounts, however, this gap is

becoming particularly large in contemporary China, constituting a "performative shift" that is widely discussed by Chinese. Consider, for example, a joke that circulated in social media during my fieldwork. Alluding to Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, the joke lampoons the "emptiness" of the media, in which I had directly participated: "I have a dream, a dream forever to reside in the world of the nightly newscast, where no children are poor, everyone gets good healthcare, the environment is clean, the traffic uncongested, salaries are rising 11 percent per year, the employment rate of college grads is 99 percent"—and, I would add, every rural student has access to a good education and foreign English teachers.

As I have suggested, however, public conformity to ideals—even when everyone knows this conformity to be "empty"—provides an occasion for the expression of "sentiment" and "loyalty" between people whose reputations are staked on the maintenance of those ideals. Consider, for instance, how a home-room teacher admonished one of her students for smoking in public: "When people see you smoking, they say that I'm not doing my job. I don't care what you do in private, but when you're at the school, you have to give the teacher face [*bixu gei laoshi mianzi*]. Giving people face is a fundamental principle of being a person [*zuoren*]. How do you expect to survive [*zenme neng shengcun*] if you can't even do that much?"

The Principal's Bastard Children

As mentioned, after a few months teaching at Mountain County Number One, I was asked to focus my efforts on the senior-one students. Senior-three students were off limits because they were in the final stages of preparing for the big test. My presence in senior-three classes was

understandably considered a potential distraction.[199] But I was unsure why senior-two students were removed from my teaching rounds. The rationale only gradually became apparent to me.

As I later discovered, three private high schools had opened in the early and mid-2000s in the prefectural capital of Ningzhou. These private schools drew top students away from the countryside by offering them generous scholarships. Experienced teachers were likewise recruited by these private schools with the promise of better salaries and higher bonuses. Then in 2008 one of these newly opened schools headhunted the principal of Mountain County Number One, Mr. Zhang. As the newly appointed principal of this Ningzhou private school, Zhang used his personal networks to recruit students and teachers away from Mountain County. Teachers and administrators who remained in Mountain County widely resented this development, which they referred to as "stealing" (*qiang*) student and teacher resources. The resulting outmigration of teachers, moreover, exacerbated the losses that the school had already sustained as a result of Xiamen's "talent attraction program" (chapter 2).

During my first year in Mountain County, the current second-year class, which had been recruited in 2009, had been particularly affected by these events. Administrators considered the whole second year to be especially weak—a "garbage year" of "hick" (*tu*) students. Administrators reacted by performing triage: They created an exclusive "experimental class" of the second year's top-scoring students. This class received "good teacher resources" and other forms of special attention. All other resources were diverted to senior-three and senior-one students. Meanwhile, school leaders worked with county educational officials to staunch the flow of high-scoring students away from Mountain County. To keep good students in Mountain

[199] Not all schools agreed on this point, however. Dragon Gate teachers regularly had me teach senior-three students. As I discuss in the introduction, therefore, the type of access that I enjoyed at schools varied systematically along the central-place hierarchy.

County, administrators and officials employed such methods as early recruitment and the inducement of special new "experimental classes" for incoming top students.[200]

These recruitment efforts were relatively successful. Many students who had planned to go to Ningzhou or Xiamen stayed in Mountain County. As a result of these efforts, administrators felt that the senior-one year contained a relatively promising crop of students. But senior two was a lost cause.

As I gradually gathered through informal conversations, administrators felt it to be a waste of time for me to teach any students in senior two except for the senior-two experimental class. As a concession to fairness, administrators allowed me to continue teaching senior-one classes, including slow classes. However, senior two students were not worth "wasting" my energy on. This reasoning was not publicized. Students were left to guess at why I stopped coming to their classes.

One day in mid-spring, I was eating in the cafeteria again with some students—two senior-two boys. My presence prompted a discussion between them about my role in the school. One boy, Weijun, was studying in one of the higher ranked so-called "middle-fast" classes. His friend, Mingling, belonged to a "slow" class. Normally by this time of year, early March, the whole senior-two year would enter "graduation mode" (*biye zhuangtai*). This expression referred to a period of intensified instruction, including Sunday classes, in preparation for the final examination. In short, entering "graduation mode" enabled the senior-two year to hit the ground running for senior three, during which students worked in ceaseless diligence seven days per week with few holidays for the final run up to the Gaokao.

[200] I was enlisted for these recruitment efforts: I was asked to give a special class for these new recruits, who were promised that they would be housed with me in my dormitory building—a mostly abandoned building that I had hitherto occupied by myself. This housing arrangement existed presumably in part to give these new recruits special access to a foreign English teacher, but also highlighted their relatively sacred position within the school—set apart from ordinary students.

But administrators considered this year's senior-two crop of "student resources" unworthy of this attention. Therefore, graduation mode was delayed. Perhaps in other countries students might not complain about the relatively light workload. But these rural Chinese students began to grumble about what they considered to be unfair deprivation of extra instruction. As some put it, "our test scores are not as good as those of students in other years, it's true. But we are trying hard, and we deserve better." Adding insult to injury, rumor had it that the new principal had referred to senior-two students as his "bastard children"—an apparent reference to how this crop of students was "fathered" by his now-absent predecessor.

Against this background, Weijun and Lingfu discussed why I was teaching all first-year students but only a select few second-year students. Weijun argued her point obliquely. She was one of the top three students in her middle-fast class, she said. However, because top classes were half filled with students with family connections, she could not be promoted to a fast class.

"What does that have to do with Mr. Huo?" Mingling asked, using my Chinese surname.

"A lot. They think sending him to our classes is a waste of resources."

Mingling responded with incredulity. His teacher had told him that I would not be visiting his class anymore because their English level was "not good enough" to benefit from a foreign teacher's instruction. As Weijun pointed out, however, this argument did not account for why I would be teaching the slow classes in senior one but not in senior two. For Weijun, the only reason the top classes in the second year received lessons from me was because they were composed entirely of the important constituencies of "top students" (*jianzi sheng*) and "students with relationships" (*guanxi sheng*). After Mingling left the table, Weijun called him naïve (*danchun*).

As Weijun and many other students and teachers explained, the need to track classes in Mountain County was exacerbated by local guanxi relationships, which play a particularly important role in more peripherally located areas (chapter 2). In a small town where everybody knows everybody, the exigencies of guanxi require that officials, administrators, and teachers accommodate requests to move well-connected but low-scoring students into top classes, contributing to the impression of unfairness that Weijun described.

Geographical Variation in Perceptions of Fairness

In rural areas, therefore, the relative lack of student resources and the relative importance of guanxi give rise to practices that undermine perceptions of fairness. As one moves up the hierarchy, however, to Ningzhou and Xiamen, guanxi relationships—although important—are increasingly pushed to the backstage; meanwhile, an ethos of universalistic fairness is more sincerely performed.

As I describe above, urban areas like Ningzhou and Xiamen generally only have two levels of class hierarchy—"parallel" and "keypoint" classes. In Ningzhou Number One, however, small differences exist between "parallel" classes. But these differences are confined to the backstage—students and teachers are not always aware of them. For example, one newly hired Ningzhou head teacher discovered that her class' average on the high-school entrance examination was 10 points lower than that for the whole year. She voiced suspicion that administrators had loaded her class with under-performing students because of her relative inexperience. If some such "unfair" practices are conducted clandestinely, others form an open secret. For instance, everyone at Ningzhou Number One knows that one class per year is reserved for "guanxi students." This class enjoys favorable conditions, including more

experienced teachers. Unlike their Mountain County Number One counterparts, however, ordinary students at Ningzhou Number One feel secure enough in their "fair" treatment to interpret the existence of such guanxi classes in positive terms. Many Ningzhou students give credulity to the explanation that guanxi classes exist primarily to protect ordinary students from the "arrogance" (*xiaozhang*) of spoiled officials' children.

In Xiamen, by contrast, favoritism and nepotism are confined more carefully to the deep backstage. Classes are normally parallel, students being distributed amongst classes through a lottery system. Although it was common knowledge that some students "spent money"—a euphemism for bribery—to secure places in keypoint classes and at top schools, nepotistic practices in Xiamen were more commonly either hidden from general discussion or clothed in the veneer of respectability.[201]

Brain Drain and the Privatization of Education

Students differ in their awareness of educational realities depending on their place in the score-value and geographical hierarchies, but few except for the sons and daughters of high-ranking officials have any real inkling of the backstage politicking that accompanies these realities.

[201] At Dragon Gate High School, for instance, no one could point out particular guanxi students or guanxi classes as they could do in Ningzhou or Mountain County, although certain students were identifiable by their school uniforms as students from other schools. These students had obtained admission to Dragon Gate in a nominally outlawed practice called "loan study" (*jiedu*) by paying a "loan study fee" (*jiedufei*). Since this practice was in fact outlawed, such students disappeared when inspectors visited the school. As in Ningzhou and the countryside, moreover, other students could openly make up for a shortfall on the high-school admission examination by paying a "school selection fee" (*zexiaofei*).

Another practice existed at Dragon Gate, which perhaps could be labeled as exemplifying a kind of regional favoritism or class discrimination: As I mention above, students without a Xiamen household registration could obtain admission to public high school, but they had to return to their native place to take the Gaokao. In open discrimination, however, such students were not allowed into keypoint classes, admission to which was reserved for Xiamen residents. Thus in my second year at the school, the number three student in the school was not allowed admission to the keypoint class.

As I note above, the first decade of the twenty-first century in my field sites was defined by a flow of student and teacher resources from the countryside into the city. To supply Xiamen's burgeoning need for teachers, the city implemented special tests to attract teachers from surrounding rural areas (chapter 2). Similarly, students could take special "autonomous examinations" (*zizhu kaoshi*) to test into Ningzhou or Xiamen schools, provided that they could afford the relatively high tuition fees that these schools charge. During the same period, the Ningzhou Prefectural Education Ministry began encouraging the limited privatization of education. The city's second-ranking school, the Ningzhou Experimental School, was privatized. Two other private high schools were founded by outside business conglomerates. As I describe in the foregoing, these private schools poached administrators and teachers from surrounding areas, including Mountain County, and drained rural areas of their best students by offering them scholarships. Parents, upon receiving scholarship checks, joked that "raising a child is more lucrative than raising a pig." Around this time, Mr. Jian (chapter 2) founded the first and only private school in Mountain County—a junior high—with the support of prefectural education authorities. His school began funneling top local talent into Ningzhou private schools and top Xiamen public schools.

Publically, Ningzhou prefectural educational authorities rationalized privatization as a method to raise local educational standards by increasing competition. People widely assumed, however, that municipal authorities received generous kickbacks from private schools, which earned sizable profits by charging relatively high tuition to ordinary, low-scoring students. Local teachers and teachers considered Ningzhou prefectural educational authorities to be particularly corrupt, and the local push for privatization to be an index of that corruption.

The privatization of education may be particularly extreme in Ningzhou, but this practice is led by national conglomerates and thus appears to form a widespread trend. From the perspective of parents, private schools might present a relatively attractive educational option for multiple reasons. Whereas "bad" students at public schools like Mountain County Number One receive relatively little attention, private schools are famous for their military discipline. People say that they "run a tight ship" (*zhua de hen yan*). Ordinary students thus sometimes see dramatic score increases upon attending private schools. However, these increases often disappear overnight when students leave the military-style environment.[202]

Thus a considerable market exists for private schools. But the partial privatization of education, along with the outflow of students and teachers into Xiamen, has seriously depleted surrounding rural counties of "student and teacher resources." When I arrived in 2011, Mountain County had thus recently experienced severe brain drain.

Stealing, Hoarding, and Manipulating Student Resources

Summarizing these trends, administrators complain that central places "steal" (*qiang*) or "mine" (*wa*) student resources from peripheral places. When I queried senior Mountain County Number One administrators about this theft of student resources, they frequently responded with the same idiom that Mr. Jian used to describe the inevitability of people's movement up the central-place hierarchy (chapter 2): "There's nothing to be done [*mei banfa*]. People move upwards and water flows downwards."

[202] Another big draw of private schools is the market for students who wish to repeat their senior-three year of high school to retake the examination (*fudu*). In the early 2000s, the practice of public schools' collecting high amounts of tuition from such "senior-four" students was seen to have reached unhealthy proportions. Thus educational authorities outlawed the practice—ostensibly to suppress corruption and to keep public schools focused on their core mission. But this prohibition channeled repeat Gaokao examinees into private schools, where revenues flow directly into private profits and, purportedly, graft.

But Mountain County educational administrators and officials are not as resigned to this reality as these comments would suggest. In actuality, educational bureaucrats work hard to staunch the follow of student and teacher resources out of the county, on the one hand, and to make the most efficient possible use of those that remain, on the other. In short, administrators and officials see themselves as engaged in a perpetual battle for student resources. As I note above, Mountain County Number One's class hierarchy has become an important recruitment tool for keeping high-scoring students in Mountain County. The county's top prospects are recommended by their junior high school teachers for direct admission to Number One, where they are recruited through promises of special treatment in "experimental classes."[203]

However, the battle for student resources is motivated not only by regional protectionism but also by cross-cutting personal interests. Guanxi relationships between administrators and officials sometimes lead to relatively dramatic forms of fabrication—ones that involve the hoarding and movement of large amounts of student resources. For example, the current principal of Mountain County Number One High School was promoted from the same position at Mountain County Number Two. He achieved this promotion by demonstrating improvements in test scores vis-à-vis the better-ranked school. Unbeknownst to many ordinary teachers and students, however, the principal secured these "improvements" by relying on personal connections with the local education ministry, which arranged for his school to receive better student resources in the years prior to his promotion. People familiar with China's local politics say that such arrangements are relatively common.

[203] In explaining why they had their children stay in Mountain County for senior high school, the parents of top-scoring students both cited the expensive tuitions in Ningzhou and Xiamen and employed reasoning similar to that of Chunxiao's friend Shanshan: They stated that it would be better to be big fish in a small pond, or, as the Chinese idiom puts it, "one would rather be the head of the chicken than the tail of the phoenix" (*ning wei ji tou, bu wei fengwei*). Indeed, many "top" students in rural schools receive better instruction than they would in urban schools, where their accomplishments would only qualify them as "ordinary" students (chapter 4).

Students and parents see the Gaokao as a chance to "determine fate." In ways that they little suspect, however, their fates may be influenced by secret backstage negotiations that take place at high levels on the chain of interests.

"Hitting an Edge Ball":

Education-Abroad Classes and the Negotiation of Regional Interests

As the draining of student and teacher resources from the countryside became an ever more serious problem, a backlash resulted in several policy shifts. Reportedly, these shifts reflected in part the intervention of provincial authorities, who have greater concern for ensuring the regional balance of interests than do local educational bureaus. Starting around 2006, Xiamen educational authorities greatly curtailed their recruitment of experienced teachers from the countryside. A couple years later in 2009, authorities prohibited elite urban high schools—top prefectural schools like Ningzhou Number One and Xiamen's triumvirate of elite schools (Foreign Language, Double Ten, and Number One)—from using special "direct admission tests" to recruit high-scoring examinees from the countryside.

Elite high schools, however, were loath to give up their direct admission tests, which had guaranteed a flow of student resources and revenue from the countryside. Many rural parents likewise lamented the suspension of direct admission tests, which had provided them with a channel into elite schools.[204]

[204]The normal high-school admissions system mainly only provides students with access to schools in their locality. Under normal circumstances, for example, the best result to which a Mountain County junior high-school student could aspire was admission to Mountain County Number One, although a few places at top prefectural high schools were reserved for the very highest-scoring rural students. By contrast, these special "direct admission" tests had allowed elite regional high schools to recruit a broader cohort of top students from across Ningzhou prefecture. These "county seat" students, as they were called, paid tuition, but in the case of Ningzhou Number One this tuition was within the reach of ordinary students. One such student was Zeyu, the garbage collector's son that I discuss in the introduction. Zeyu was one of the last students to obtain admission to Ningzhou Number One through the direct admissions test. Becoming the first member of his extended family to go to college, he got accepted to a top-tier

Thus the suspension of direct admissions harmed both elite schools and top-scoring rural students but helped ameliorate educational inequalities on a regional level by keeping "good" students in the countryside. This policy thus helped slow the deterioration of the general standard of education in rural areas. Of course rural authorities campaigned for such policy shifts not purely to advance educational equity but also to protect their own interests, since the prestige and career advancement of teachers, administrators, and educational officials are closely linked to test scores.

Various conflicts of interests, however, routinely undercut such policy goals. Educational authorities, schools, and families continually seek loopholes in the policies to advance their own interests. As mentioned, not only families but also schools were disappointed by the suspension of the direct admissions exams. Urban schools thus contrived to continue the recruitment of rural students by exploiting a loophole in the regulations.

In rapid succession, Xiamen's top schools expanded or opened "education-abroad classes" (*guowai ban*). In this practice, they were closely followed by Ningzhou Number One, which is ever eager to emulate the cutting-edge innovations of its sister schools farther up the score-value hierarchy. As in the discontinued policy of direct admission, admission to such "education-abroad classes" is predicated on students' performance on a special test. As before, therefore, high-scoring rural students can therefore attend Xiamen high-schools as long as their parents can afford the tuition.

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university in 2012. Zeyu's father, who had regretted never going beyond third-grade education, harbored similar ambitions for Zeyu's little brother. With the cancellation of the direct-admissions tests, however, Zeyu's father saw an important channel of mobility closed to his family. He thus moved to Xiamen, where he hoped his son could gain admission to a top Xiamen junior high school through special local admissions tests. In Xiamen, he and his wife scraped together funds for his sons' tuition and school expenses by cleaning and collecting garbage. But Zeyu's parents were ultimately frustrated their attempts to secure access for his son to a good Xiamen public school.

As their name suggests, these education-abroad classes are nominally intended to prepare students for pursuing college education overseas. Indeed, an increasing demand for such programs exists. Moreover, these programs are consonant with the Xiamen municipal government's goal of becoming an international metropolis that can compete on a world stage. In reality, however, only half or fewer of these education-abroad students actually intend to study abroad. Backstage, these classes are divided into "real" education-abroad classes and "fake" education-abroad classes. Students in the latter type of class actually intend to take the Gaokao. In short, education-abroad classes provide top Xiamen schools with a way to flout the ban on recruiting rural students through direct admissions. By the same token, these classes provide students from rural areas with a back door into top Xiamen schools.[205]

In Mountain County, local administrators disparagingly refer to elite schools' use of education-abroad programs to "steal" rural talent as a cynical "guise" or as "advertising dog meat with a lamb's head." A particularly descriptive metaphor for such fabrications consisted of expression borrowed from ping pong—an "edge ball" (*cabianqiu*). An edge ball is one that is legally in bounds but impossible to return. Correspondingly, "edge-ball" policies occupy an intermediary space between the front- and the backstage. The nominal conformance of such measures with official policy makes them difficult to combat. [206]

[205] In practice, however, the high tuition rates that these schools charge for this program prohibited many ordinary students from attending them. One of the top students in Mountain County lamented to me in a private conversation that she had been admitted to an education-abroad class in Xiamen Foreign Language High School but had been prohibited from attending because of tuition fees.

[206] Consider such "edge balls" in contrast to ongoing backstage practices of "stealing students," the clear illegality of which makes them relatively easy to protest. Such practices include the employment of networks of teachers with classmate relationships to "mine" student resources: For a kickback or finder's fee, teachers in rural areas can refer top-scoring rural prospects to classmates in elite urban high schools, who arrange for these students to be transferred to the city.

Cheating

This chapter describes the various efforts of central-state authorities to manufacture and fabricate indeterminacy, on one hand, and of local officials and administrators to hoard and "steal" (*qiang*) student resources on the other. In response to such machinations, ordinary families possess few options but to game this rigged system as best as they can. After they have made an all-out effort to secure every possible advantage, most "numbly" resign themselves to consuming the "poison milk" of counterfeited fairness even as they diligently strive to make the best use of the opportunity that is given to them to "change fate." Lacking insight into the secret negotiations that take place at points high on the chain of interests, ordinary families can comfort themselves in the belief that the Gaokao itself is "relatively fair." But disgruntled students and parents may practice another form of resistance that I have not yet discussed—cheating (*zuobie*).

By all accounts, cheating is widespread in ordinary examinations. Students of widely varying backgrounds admit to cheating on practice exams. The most common form of cheating consists in cribbing a neighboring classmate's answers. By some teacher's estimates, 80 to 90 percent of students sometimes cheat in this way. Thus cheating is relatively pervasive in ordinary educational life.

Some cheaters justify their actions by appealing to the above-described "unfairness" in the distribution of educational resources. Such students see cheating as a kind of resistance—a counter-fabrication. In the view of such students, when fabrication trumps fairness, cheating forms a natural response. One slow-class student in Mountain County described to me how he cheated in hopes of advancing to a higher-ranking class. He justified his cheating efforts in part by calling attention to administrators' backstage practice of giving guanxi students a "free pass" to top classes. As with other students who discussed cheating with me, however, this student felt

conflicted about the practice. His testimony dramatizes how students feel trapped between the pressure to do well and the demands of their own conscience to succeed "based on one's own ability" (*ping ziji de nengli*):

> To compromise one's own moral principles to achieve one's goals, that's not something one should do, but parents and teachers' constant criticisms give us a lot of pressure … the reason I am in class 5 and not class 4 [moreover] is that I had a bad day on an exam … even if I want to do well in class 5, it's hard … there's not really an environment for it; most of the kids in this class don't want to study. The few that do are on their own.

Thus many students felt morally conflicted about cheating. But the ubiquity of cheating presents a kind of prisoner's dilemma: If one does not cheat, one cannot compete with those who do. Thus cheating is even common among top students. Such students say that if they do not cheat, their names will be unfairly pushed down in the class rankings.

The above reflections focus on the relatively widespread efforts of individual students to cheat on relatively inconsequential exams. By contrast, most people consider the Gaokao itself to be relatively free of cheating. As one college professor responded to a friend who asked him how to use guanxi to secure educational advantages for his child, "There are all kinds of things that you can do before the Gaokao, but the Gaokao itself is holy [*shensheng*]." Even on this most sacrosanct of exams, however, cheating occurs.

Efforts to cheat on the Gaokao itself may involve the collaboration of parents, teachers, officials and criminal gangs of Gaokao "sharpshooters" (*qiangshou*), who serve as "examination impersonators" (*tikao*) for a fee. As I detail in my above description of examination grading, moreover, even the Gaokao is occasionally polluted by backstage guanxi.

Every year special investigative reports reveal spectacular forms of cheating on the big exam. Such reports receive a level of public attention analogous to that garnered by reports of high political corruption in West. In recent years, cheating measures and countermeasures have

become increasingly high-tech in a spiraling arms race that evokes the technological imaginary of spy thrillers. Press reports detail the use of invisible transmitter earbuds and pens equipped with miniature scanners. Authorities have reportedly responded with signal-jamming devices, including remote-controlled drones.

Low-tech forms of cheating, however, are much more widespread. For example, many Gaokao veterans report observing examinees cribbing each other's test papers, despite the relatively strict invigilation of the exam.[207] The exam is monitored in class by proctors and remotely by closed-circuit television. But students complain that proctors are relatively timorous. Moreover, as they say, it is impossible for anyone to watch all of the cameras at once. Another effective low-tech form of cheating consists in the above-mentioned practice of hiring a "sharpshooter." Some regions have responded to this practice by instituting biometric identity verification during the big exam.

In a measure of how sacred the Gaokao is considered to be, such efforts to pollute the fairness of the exam have recently been criminalized: Assisting someone to cheat on the Gaokao can now result in a prison sentence. But despite such reports of cheating, the Gaokao is considered relatively incorruptible. Media reports of captured examination criminals probably even reinforce this perception.

In other words, the very prevalence of the discourse on cheating works in part to reinforce the perception of the exam's fairness. For one thing, reports of cheating usually present the practice as a relatively marginal and rare phenomenon. Note also, moreover, that any accusation of cheating actually supposes the examination itself to be relatively fair; otherwise, people would not be "cheating" but rebelling against an unjust authority. Today, even the test's

[207] In 2013 a story circulated in Ningzhou about a student whose examination performance had been ruined by a would-be cheater. The latter asked the former if he could crib answers from his paper. When the student refused, the cheater retaliated by kicking the examinee's table periodically through the examination to ruin his concentration.

greatest detractors rarely go so far as they did at the onset of the Cultural Revolution. At that time, the exam's focus on individual merit was widely deemed to be a manifestation of "bourgeois ideology" and anti-examination ideologues encouraged students take exams in groups or turn in blank examination papers.

But efforts to cheat nevertheless present a little crack in the ideology of meritocracy. As rebellions against the "objectivity" of the test's authority, such cheating efforts contain an implicit critique of the notion that the test score represents a pure measure of individual charismatic merit. Indeed, the same observation might even be made of the great public fascination with cheating, as reflected in the constant media reports on the topic. As Freud points out, by enforcing social prohibitions, such as that on cheating, people derive some of the pleasure that they would have derived by breaking the prohibition (Freud [1919] 2005). The widespread fascination with cheating probably results in part from a widespread suppression of the desire to cheat.

Conclusion: Fullness in Emptiness

In the pursuit of sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting interests, various constituencies of families, teachers, administrators, and officials employ the methods of fabricating, manufacturing, or gaming indeterminacy that I describe. As I argue, therefore, "fairness" and "justice" are always interested: In practice, these universalistic principles are invariably polluted by the politics of guanxi.

Moreover, the various aforedescribed attempts to define, redefine, reinforce, fabricate, or undercut such universalistic principles do not result in a zero-sum game. Those with greater social and cultural capital dominate the competition. Thus the system works in a way that funnels value, as objectified in test scores, up the central-place and social hierarchies. But people must

believe that the test is undetermined to accept its legitimacy. For this reason, knowledge about many of the most egregious distortions of fairness is restricted to actors high on the chain of interests, whom such distortions benefit. In particular, the most ubiquitous and consequential effort to fabricate fairness—namely through the censorship of scores by central-state authorities—works to conceal the effects of social inequality. Such concealment of inequality is a crucial function for a putatively communist government.

Nevertheless, most ordinary people possess much knowledge about the "unfair" distribution of educational resources, even if that knowledge varies greatly along the score-value and geographical hierarchies. Consequently, attitudes toward the "fairness" of the Gaokao are complex. People's reasons for submitting themselves to the Gaokao are multifaceted, reflecting a range of superegoistic effects. This range extends from pangs of conscience and sincere belief, on one hand, to fear of punishment or social ostracization, on the other. Correspondingly, people's judgements of various practices associated with the exam vary contextually from "true" and "real," on the one hand, to "empty" and "false," on the other. In particular, people judge educational fairness to be an "empty" ideal, reflecting widespread cynicism about Chinese education. Everywhere, however, people conceive the Gaokao itself to be "relatively fair," and thus test scores to be "real."

As the philosophical adage goes, however, there is "emptiness in fullness, and fullness in emptiness" (*xu zhong you shi, shi zhong you xu*). Remarking on this tension between the empty and the full, one teacher said "Chinese people live a very split existence" (*huo de hen fenlie*). And as another said, "I feel like I am always pacing back and forth between ideal and reality." The sincere belief in test scores represents an effort to bridge that gap. But as the proverb says, "every medicine contains some poison" (*shi yao san fen du*). The feverish rehearsal of

examination ritual ambivalently props up the legitimacy of a "deserving" elite even as it never quite erases the trace of that elite's historical contingency. Indeed, many Chinese worry that the ascetic, repetitive focus on examinations that they identify as full and real in the Chinese education system renders the system empty and hollow on the whole. Yet from Shanghai and other front-stage places, China broadcasts a picture of educational success to an outside world that is seemingly eager to consume such images.[208]

By contrast, people at my field sites felt deep disillusionment with this overwhelming emphasis on tests and memorization. Without doubt this disillusionment contributes to the great upsurge in Chinese seeking education in the West, where they generally believe schooling to be comparably practical, down-to-earth, and real.[209] Such feelings were given expression by the rural principal, Mr. Jian, who had sent his own daughter to study in the United States. Evoking the specter of a nation growing anemic from the emptiness of its youth, he compared Chinese educational practices to the techniques of profit-hungry farmers who grow chemical-laced produce for consumption in the cities: "Our children are like beansprouts grown with hydroponic techniques and artificial nutrients. They grow very quickly, but are poisonous."

But most ordinary students, who do not have the option of studying abroad, can only hope to grow "numb" about the necessity of consuming another kind of poison—the poison milk of counterfeit fairness. This image serves as a potent metaphor for the great anxiety that many ordinary people feel about the exam. Ordinary parents worry constantly about the enormous outlay of time and money necessary to raise a successful examinee, as well as the role that guanxi plays in securing educational advantages. As I note above, many such parents say that

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[208] This paragraph and the following one are adapted from my forthcoming *Social Analysis* article, "China's Examination Fever and the Fabrication of Fairness." See Loveless (2014) on the recent controversy surrounding Shanghai's internationally publicized performance on the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) examinations.

[209] See my discussion in the introduction of the rising numbers of Chinese students studying abroad.

they are “losing on the starting line.” This expression highlights the arbitrariness with which the examination ritual compresses educational competition into one fateful moment even though families have been competing for examination success since before their children were born. In this way, the expression provides a muted critique of how the Gaokao objectifies social labor into a charismatic measure of individual merit.

As I investigate in the next chapter, an important reason that this objectification can still be largely successful is that people see examination success as evidence of superior moral character accumulated over a lifetime of training. The main prerequisite for such success is conventionally conceived to be “diligence” (*nuli*). In recent years, however, people have begun to pursue an alternative ideal of merit—that of “quality.”

CHAPTER 4

DILIGENCE, QUALITY, AND IDEALS OF MERIT:
"THE WAY OF HEAVEN IS TO REWARD HARD WORK"

The diligence of Chinese students is legendary. The great assiduousness required of examinees forms the object of fascinated commentary about every historical era from Song times (960–1279 CE) to the present (Chaffee 1995; Doolittle [1865] 1966; Elman 2013; Kipnis 2001; Miyazaki 1981; A. H. Smith 1890). My own observations attest to the industriousness of Chinese examinees.

In my rural field site, at Mountain County Number One, I was awakened every day at 5:50 AM along with the school's approximately 1,500 boarding students (about half the school's student population) by music blaring over the dormitory loud speakers. Scholars are roused not by reveille or patriotic songs, as one might expect, but by upbeat Western popular music; during my fieldwork, the country songstress Taylor Swift was especially well liked for this purpose.

Students rise to find some of their most diligent classmates already studying. A preferred method of study consists of "recitation" (*beisong*)—reading textbooks aloud over and over until their contents are committed to memory.[210] Their textbooks stretched out at arm's length in front of them, scholars amble around the school track, back and forth in the halls, or around the courtyard. Walking in small circuits or rocking back and forth, they mumble their textbooks' contents as if in a trance.

[210] Recitation is a time-honored practice in Chinese education, handed down over the centuries from imperial times. The term literally means to "back recite" a text: In imperial times, a student demonstrated mastery by reciting a text from memory with his back turned to it. Teachers generally no longer test students in this way, but to "back" (*bei*) a text still means to memorize it, the term's literal meaning thus preserving a linguistic fossil of the earlier practice.

In the daybreak hour, growing numbers of students join the murmuring throng of recitation. The chanting creates an eerie effect in the early-morning fog, which wraps its misty fingertips around the school grounds and obscures the surrounding mountains. Observers may easily imagine themselves transported to an earlier era, when previous generations of diligent scholars recited the contents of the Four Books and Five Classics.

At 6:00 AM, the canteen opens, where the most diligent students—mostly girls—obtain a coveted seat. Breakfast is not served until 6:50, but these eager examinees greedily consume the time in diligent study just as later throngs of hungry breakfasters scrape down every last drop of rice porridge from their bowls. Most of the boarding students hail from the countryside. Their classmates from town gradually arrive by bicycle, parking their conveyances in neat rows. The new arrivals join the others in the canteen or in the classrooms. According to the official timetable, 6:05 to 6:15 AM is reserved for "morning physical exercise," but the school encourages students to devote this time to their homework, which they continue to pore over throughout "morning study" (*zao zixiu*) from 6:20 to 6:50.

At 7:20 students convene in their classrooms for guided "morning reading" (*zaodu*). Two days per week they recite English or listen to English tapes; two days per week they memorize passages from their Chinese textbooks; Fridays alternate between Chinese and English. Classes last all day from 7:45 to 5:10 pm, divided into seven forty-five minute periods—four in the morning and three in the afternoon.

Two types of synchronized physical exercise are performed by students to aid them in their diligence. For thirty minutes every morning from 9:25 to 9:55, students gather on the sports field for group calisthenics—a practice that is thought to help "bind" (*shufu*) them in coordinated discipline. Then at the beginning of the forth and the sixth periods, students perform "eye health

maintenance" (*yanbaojian*) exercises, which the state instituted in the 1980s to protect students against the alleged ravages of prolonged study, widely thought to include nearsightedness. Once per week on Tuesdays, morning calisthenics gives way to the flag-raising ceremony, on which occasion school leaders and selected students—paragons of diligence—hold forth on students' moral duty of assiduous study in the service of family, school, and country.[211]

Morning and afternoon are separated by a two-hour midday siesta, which gives students living in town the opportunity to return home for lunch. Even during this rest period, however, students can be found studying in the canteen. The period between 5:10 and 5:40 is nominally reserved for "extracurricular activities," but few such activities are organized. Boarders use this time to relax or study, whereas townies may go home early for dinner, which officially starts at 5:40 and lasts for an hour. After dinner, students reconvene in their classrooms for supervised evening study hall from 6:40 to 10:00 pm, which is divided into three periods, each period separated by a ten-minute break.[212] When the final study hall bell rings, town students return home while boarders hurriedly shower or buy some snacks from the school store; then, at 10:30 the dorm lights are turned out. Many, however, continue studying late into the night by the light of small lamps. The saying is widely repeated that if one sleeps four hours per night, one will pass the examination; but if one sleeps five, one will fail (*si dang, wu luo*).[213]

Not all students are uniformly diligent. In the morning, late risers straggle into class late. In the evening, small groups of boys from "slow classes" skip study hall. Sometimes I would see them on my evening jog, chatting in inconspicuous groups on the sports field, where the

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[211] At different schools, the flag-raising ceremony is held on different days of the week. Schools also demonstrate some variation in other aspects of the daily routine, as I indicate in the following. See Kipnis (2001; 2011) for further description of the Chinese school day.

[212] In the countryside students attend supervised study hall, which is nominally voluntary, almost without exception. In Ningzhou and particularly Xiamen, some families opt to send students to privately run study centers, which charge a fee to supervise students' evening study.

[213] This saying is said to be borrowed from the Japanese examination system. See, for example, http://goabroad.sohu.com/20090611/n264479822.shtml (accessed March 22, 2016).

darkness conceals their antics. They say that the teachers do not really care about "bad students" like them. The priests and priestesses of the exam ritual are resigned to abandoning such hopeless charges to the grim fate of their laziness.

Non-boarding students have an edge on the examination because they can study extra hours in the evening in the quiet of their own homes. Dormitories have no desks and are noisy and crowded, eight students to a room. In their senior-three year, those who can afford the luxury rent a room near the school so that they can study more efficiently.

Students rarely take a day off. Fast classes receive instruction six days per week during senior-one and senior-two. As the Gaokao begins to draw nearer in the spring semester of students' senior-two year, the whole senior-two class enters "graduation mode" (*biye zhuangtai*)—six days of instruction per week with tests on Sunday.

Although this schedule may strike readers as ascetic, students and teachers in Mountain County Number One perceive discipline to be relatively lax there. Far more draconian regimens exist in certain private test-prep factories and notorious public "super high schools" (*chaoji zhongxue*). Both types of institution employ a highly "militarized" (*junshihua*) instruction model. In such schools, it is said, every moment is regimented. On the Internet, videos circulate of students at such high schools reciting slogans while jogging in formation during morning physical education, or being organized to recite their textbooks while they stand in line at the canteen.[214]

[214] In the newly opened private schools in neighboring Ningzhou City, for example, administrators are said to "run a relatively tight ship" (chapter 3). Students who have studied in private junior high schools, including some of the above-mentioned undiligent boys, complain that Mountain County Number One teachers do not force students to complete homework. They say that only top students in top classes receive individualized attention. Indeed, many such students are fussed over by their teachers like prize racehorses (chapter 5). By contrast, normal students in slow or "garbage" classes are left to sink and swim on their own.

In general, however, the differing approaches to diligence between normal public schools and private or "super" highs schools represent differences in enforcement of the virtue rather than differences in the evaluation of its importance. Diligence is universally extolled, even if not everyone can be expected to conform to the strictures of the best schools or live up to the models of the hardest-working students. Without exception, every student and teacher agrees that great diligence is required to succeed on the exam. As they often repeat, "twelve years of diligence are all for the Gaokao"—a reference to the twelve years of schooling that leads up to the big test.

One of the first things that a visitor to a rural Chinese high school notices is the ubiquitous valorization of diligence in slogans emblazoned in large red characters on school buildings and classroom walls. Such slogans sing the praise of this virtue by presenting the good consequences of diligent study and the bad consequences of its absence. Consider a sampling of such slogans from Mountain County Number One:

> "For this thing called study, it is not that we lack time but that we lack diligence" (学习这件事，不是缺乏时间，而是缺乏努力). (On the outside wall of the boy's dormitory.)
>
> "The pain of studying is temporary; the suffering of not having learned lasts a lifetime" (学习时的苦痛是暂时的；未学到的痛苦是终生的). (On a school building.)
>
> "If you nap during this moment, in the future you will dream; if you study in this moment, in the future you will fulfill your dreams" (此刻打盹，你将做梦；此刻学习，你将圆梦). (On the wall in front of the teachers' dormitory.)
>
> "It is only by getting up earlier than others, by being harder working than them, being more diligent, that one can taste the sweet flavor of success" (只有比别人更早，更勤奋的，更努力，才能尝到成功的滋味). (On the outside of the girl's dormitory at Mountain Town Number One.)

Hard work, moreover, has no limit or "no bottom" (*mei you di*) as the saying goes: Lack of time is no excuse for lack of diligence. With "strict self-discipline" and "good life habits," as

teachers say, every precious second can be squeezed from the day and dedicated to examination preparation. Studying diligently, in other words, is mastering the body through mastering its habits. Study may be "painful" (*kutong*) or "hard" (*xinku*), but this pain—temporary and bodily in nature—pales in comparison to the suffering (*tongku*) of failure. The latter type of pain "lasts a lifetime" and thus can be conceived as existential in nature. The ultimate objective of diligent self-mastery, moreover, consists in a kind of wish fulfillment: Those who spend their time "napping" (*da dun*) will only dream about a good life in the future; only those who study hard in the present will fulfill their dreams. The struggle to fulfill one's dreams, moreover, involves fierce competition: Not everyone will succeed. Only by exercising supreme self-mastery—only by "getting up earlier" than others, "being more hard-working"—can one achieve the "sweet flavor of success."

Note that significant differences exist between the treatment of these slogans and that of political slogans, which likewise receive prominent display within schools. Because they change with every new leader and political season, political slogans tend to be presented in less durable media, such as posters, banners, scrolling LED message panels, chalk boards, or public announcement boards.[215] By contrast, slogans extolling diligence are painted in gigantic lettering directly onto the sides of buildings and walls. Consider how the varying durability of these media reflects people's opposing attitudes toward these different kinds of slogans: Students and teachers see slogans extolling diligence as relatively "true" and "real" in comparison to political

[215] During my fieldwork, a campaign to "Carry Forward Lei Feng Spirit" was replaced upon the selection of Xi Jinping as president with latter's campaign to embrace the "Chinese dream." Where slogans from past political leaders could still be found, these tended to appear in peeling letters in forgotten corners, providing a stratigraphy of previous political campaigns. At Mountain County Number One, for examples, a faded announcement detailing Jiang Zemin's "Eight honors and Eight Shames" appeared on the side of an abandoned cafeteria. By contrast, pronouncements extolling diligence appeared in permanent stencils in prominent positions where they would have maximum visibility and impact, such as on the side of dormitories or above classroom chalkboards.

slogans, which they deem to be relatively “empty” and false.” In short, diligence is supreme, transcending the ephemerality of political trend and fad.

In the examination life, the prominent display of diligence slogans forms the tip of a discursive iceberg. Leaders and administrators expatiate on the importance of hard work. Student representative selected for their ardor and enthusiasm lead the school in paeans to diligence during school rallies. Head teachers admonish students to greater assiduousness. Students endlessly discuss who “deserves success.”

This lionization of diligence revolves around a common premise. This premise can perhaps be most succinctly summed up as “success reciprocates hard work” (*chenggong huibao nuli*). Above I describe this premise as constituting “orthodox social reciprocity," which I say comprises the fundamental logic of the ideology of meritocracy (chapter 1). This logic receives particularly lucid and explicit expression in the aphorism that forms the subheading of this chapter, which appears above the chalkboard of a Dragon Gate High School senior-three class: “The Way of Heaven is to reward hard work; without toil there is no harvest” (*Tian dao chou qin, bu lao wu huo*).

In addition to spelling out the meritocratic ideal that success repays hard work, this aphorism evokes the agrarian ethos of that ideal: This slogan encourages people to compare study to labor in the fields, and life success to the harvest. As I elaborate below, people conceive diligence to be a characteristically rural virtue, although rural people by no means have a monopoly on its practice: People of various origins broadly understand this reciprocal logic between toil and harvest to apply (in ideal, at least) to all callings. Indeed, I suggest that the Gaokao—to which students devote “twelve years of diligence”—recruits people into a belief in the general applicability of this logic, even as students’ belief in diligence draws vigor from

wider social domains. By the same token, note that the above-mentioned aphorism presents Heaven as the ultimate arbiter of social reciprocity—the ultimate and most transcendental universalistic authority that presides over human destiny and fortune. In this sense, the examination is a proxy for Heaven in adjudicating the reciprocity between diligence and success.

Diligence and "hard work" are widely considered to form a fundamental characteristic of Chinese culture. As the premier arena for the inculcation and expression of diligent self-cultivation, the Gaokao plays a central role in recruiting people into the broader Chinese culture of meritocracy. In concert with the related values of entrepreneurship and thriftiness, diligence underpins such quintessentially Chinese institutions as the Chinese family firm (Tsang 2001). By the same token, attempts to account for diligence point toward the centrality of the family in Chinese economic life (Harrell 1985). In this view, the great importance that individuals ascribe to caring for their family and extending the patriline motivates diligence in other spheres. In other words, the particularistic demands of filiality and guanxi inspire universalistic achievements—that is, accomplishments measured against the common yardstick of "objective," transcendental authorities such as the market or the examination (chapter 1).

Thus the universalistic awards of diligence serve particularistic interests: The end goal of diligent striving is to increase one's ability to treat one's family and friends with favoritism. Paradoxically, however, people see diligence as a weapon of the weak—a technique that those without connections or guanxi can use to battle corruption and nepotism. Thus we encounter in another guise how particular interests always haunt the universal ideal of meritocratic ideology.

On the one hand, therefore, diligence reproduces the contradiction between the universal and particular since people use the fruits of diligent striving to further particularistic relationships. On the other hand, however, diligence also helps people paper over that

contradiction by enabling the socially successful to ascribe their success to diligent striving and the unsuccessful to blame their failure on its lack.

Note how these cultural logics result in certain historical and spatial patterns in the distribution of diligence: As a weapon of the weak, diligence is particularly valorized by the poor but quickly forgotten by the decadent scions of self-made men and women. Consider how the oft-repeated Chinese idiom ascribes the cyclical wax and wane of family fortunes to the hunger for social recognition that attends penury and the complacency that accompanies wealth. As the saying goes "poverty and wealth do not pass beyond three generations" (*fu/qiong bu guo san dai*)—a commentary on economic cyclicity that people extend not only to families but also to companies, places, and even nations. Diligence is thus subject to the type of historical cycles and geographical patterns that I discuss in chapter 2. In particular, I suggest that periods of perceived increases in social inequality, such as the current one, motivate many to respond with increased diligence.

In recent years, this increasing social inequality and the associated rampant political corruption have generated widespread popular resentment. As I describe, teachers and administrators tap into this resentment to motivate students, for example by sanctioning Gaokao slogans with overtly political content. In the following, I attempt to account for how and why such slogans can bypass state censorship boundaries, which normally suppress discussion of social fault lines. To this end, I suggest that the Gaokao constitutes a sublimated form of class conflict.

Consider, however, how this conflict is expressed in an unlikely idiom—self-mastery and self-control. In a world where political power and moral legitimacy are seen to be bifurcated (chapter 1), the Confucian ethic of diligent self-cultivation constitutes a form of internalized

rebellion. Thus this chapter examines how diligent striving in the Gaokao unites social competition with self-overcoming: The Gaokao is a competition for self-mastery, diligent study an agonistic form of self-control. People compete to demonstrate superior merit through ascetic achievements of diligence.

In short, participation in the Gaokao is fueled by rebellious wishes for social recognition and social mobility. Because these wishes are dedicated to the transformation of the social status quo, they possess an aggressive or agonistic dimension. The Gaokao sublimates or internalizes this aggression, thus the exam ordinarily does not result in physical violence. On the contrary, the exam ultimately strengthens the "fair" and "objective" national authority and institutions that arbitrate examination success. Ironically, therefore, these institutions derive political legitimacy from the individual merit that people confer to themselves through this sublimated rebellion. Thus I say that the exam constitutes a state-sanctified form of rebellion. As mentioned, the idiom of this rebellion is the demonstration of self-mastery and control. In short, self-mastery is an aggressive act. Self-overcoming through diligent striving aggresses against the social constraints that relegate individuals to their given place in the division of labor. The Gaokao coopts that aggression into the cultural achievement of the examination score.[216]

[216] In this chapter, I employ "wish" and "desire" as synonyms for motivation, but I also mean to allude to the technical, psychoanalytical usages of the terms. In chapter 1, I investigate how the category of merit evolved out of Chinese philosophical attempts to resolve the contradiction between personal effort and social justice, fate and action. There I suggest that the examination helps people reconcile their given place in the division of labor, on the one hand, with narcissistic desire, on the other. In chapter 2, I analyze how the state uses the Gaokao to harnesses the anarchic potential of desire to the purpose of reproducing conventional arrangements. Here I would add that desire always grows out of the fundamental gap between things as they are (the reality principle) and things as we wish them to be (the pleasure principle)—a gap that psychoanalytical theory says is constitutive of desire. In this chapter, therefore, I draw upon this conception of desire to argue that the Gaokao is fueled by a desire for rebellion or class conflict. But this terminology is misleading insofar as all desire is intrinsically both narcissistic and revolutionary. The trajectory of desire is to transform reality, the constraints of which give birth to desire. In most cases in the following discussion, however, I use desire in a more restrictive sense as a synonym for "wish." "Wishes" are concrete expressions of desire, which, however, may be censored by social strictures and constraints, and thus partly or wholly unconscious.

The quiet rebellion of self-cultivation is directed not only against the state but also against the family. As a paradigmatic form of filial behavior, diligence enables children to establish themselves vis-à-vis their elders: Giving one's parents recognition through filial obedience is asserting one's own worthiness of recognition, thereby stablishing one's potency as a social actor. Both sons and daughters pursue this form of recognition. But the Chinese meritocracy is simultaneously a patriarchy. Therefore, women find themselves resisting not just socioeconomic hierarchy but also gender inequality. As I elaborate, this particularly fraught position of women helps account for their "superior diligence": Deprived of recognition as full persons, women have even more reason to rebel against social arrangements than do men.

Ironically, however, women's superior diligence forms a pretense for their relegation to socioeconomically inferior roles in humanistic pursuits, success in which people say merely requires "hard work," whereas men dominate in scientifically oriented professions because of their supposed "superior logical ability." In short, pursuits seen as feminine are deemed "empty" and "virtual," and thus devalued, whereas pursuits seen as masculine are deemed "real" and "full," and thus valorized. In the following, I suggest that such dichotomies form part of a broader cosmology, which the Gaokao helps to reproduce. This cosmology consists of a series of homologous binary oppositions between, on the one hand, "virtuality," femininity, and humanistic pursuits and, on the other hand, "reality," masculinity, and science.

But diligence is not the only ideal of merit. In recent curriculum reforms, "quality" is increasingly valorized. With this increasing emphasis on "education for quality," however, people widely view the "emptiness" or performativity of the examination system as a whole to have increased. In other words, quality is "empty" whereas "diligence" is "real." People of rural origin, especially, subscribe to this view. They say that the prominence given to "quality"

disadvantages rural students, whereas the "traditional," "down-to-earth" ethic of diligent memorization works to their favor. Underlying these debates about the reform of the curriculum, therefore, are deeper conflicts about ideals of personhood, that is, conflicting notions of what constitutes a good person. Subtending these different ideals of personhood are conflicting social interests. Ultimately, these interests concern access to mobility and power.

In short, "diligence" represents a rural interest, "quality" an urban one. This chapter is devoted to exploring these conflicting notions of personhood and the interests that undergird them. Part I focuses on diligence, whereas Part II focuses on quality. As I elaborate, however, these terms do not contradict each other even if the social interests that they represent do. In short, the social practices associated with these ethics are not antithetical to each other. The cultivation of quality requires great diligence, although access to the conditions for this diligent cultivation of quality are quite unevenly distributed: In rural areas, the diligent cultivation of self through study takes place front stage in the open through memorization and drilling. By contrast, the diligent cultivation of quality in urban areas is largely tucked away backstage within the "cultural environment" of the family, the for-profit shadow education system (for example, "cram schools" or *buxiban*), and the broader social milieu or "cultural environment" (*wenhua huanjing*). In short, "quality" consists largely of implicitly acquired forms of cultural capital. But in both urban and rural places, diligence remains central to the Chinese culture of meritocracy, which is defined by competitive self-cultivation. This cultural centrality of diligence helps account for why "quality"—which was originally conceived in critique of the "creativity-stifling" litany of Chinese examination—is, as I say, "examinationized," that is, incorporated into the examination canon.

Part I: Diligence

As I suggest above, diligent striving represents the sublimated expression of a wish for rebellion. Under ordinary circumstances, however, this wish is censored, that is, tucked away in the unconscious or the institutional backstage. To motivate students to perform in the examination, however, schools tap into such primal wishes. Thus the examination becomes a context where unusually candid observations of social contradiction and inequality evade ordinary censorship mechanisms to enter relatively public settings.

Competing with the "Second-Generation Rich" in the "Era of Comparing Fathers"

The agonistic, competitive aspect of diligence receives clearest expression in examination slogans that explicitly thematize competition between social classes or status groups. Recall that people widely perceive the Gaokao as China's "only relatively fair competition," whereas they see most ordinary social competitions as decided by particularistic connections or guanxi. For this reason, people say that diligent preparation for the Gaokao enables ordinary people to compete with the beneficiaries of inherited privilege. In recent years, motivational slogans have tapped into this popular perception. For instance, one such popular slogan—prominently displayed, among other places, in LED-light bulletin boards at Ningzhou Number One High School—asked students, "Without the Gaokao, can you strive past the second-generation rich?" (*mei you Gaokao, ni neng pin de guo fu'er dai ma*).

In short, therefore, this slogan gives concise expression to the above-described perception that the Gaokao provides ordinary people with a way to compete with the hereditary elite. But fully unpacking this slogan requires a closer examination of the terms "strive" and "second-generation rich."

A difficult-to-translate word, “strive” or *pin* in this phrase means “to go all out” or “to put something on the line.” It is the main component in such compounds as *pinbo* (“to struggle”) and *pindou* (“to fight”). It is also commonly used in such expressions as “to do one’s utmost” (*pinming*) and “to spare no efforts,” (*pinli*). These expressions draw from a related connotation of *pin*, namely “to stake.” The former expression means to “stake” all of one’s “strength” (*li*); the latter literally means to put one’s “life” or existence (*shengming*) on the line. The diligent striving of Gaokao examinees is commonly associated with such expressions: One stakes one’s life through diligent striving to succeed on the exam.

When people hear *pin* in the context of the above-mentioned slogan, however, they think of another popular saying: The question “How can you strive past [*pin de guo*] the second-generation rich?” evokes the widespread characterization of the current age as one in which people gain social advancement not through diligence or hard work but through “staking daddies” *(pin die*) or, as this term is commonly translated, “comparing daddies”—that is, through relying on the power and influence of one’s father to get ahead.

Note that the expression that I have translated as “comparing daddies,” *pin die*, ironically juxtaposes diligence (*pin*) and nepotism (*die*): In other words, this expression achieves a humorous effect by removing “strive” from its normal association with diligent struggle and inserting it into the context of nepotistic privilege. By using the intimate, familiar, informal form of father, “daddy” or *die*, the expression “comparing daddies” calls to mind puerile schoolyard tussles over whose father is richer, smarter, and so on. “Comparing daddies” likewise evokes a series of incidents in recent years that have gone viral on the internet in which the children of

high officials or rich businessman, upon being caught in various acts of wrongdoing, invoke their fathers' names to skate the law.[217]

For many, nepotistic privilege forms the watchword of the last couple decades in China. People commonly consider the post-1990s era of urbanization, booming property prices, and the expansion of higher education to be an "age of comparing daddies" (*pin die shidai*). In the "age of comparing daddies," people say, children are increasingly competing on the basis of their father's "background" (*beijing*), or connections, rather than on the basis of their own strength (*ziji de shili*).[218]

Widening social disparities in the "age of comparing daddies" seems to have increased the intensity of social competition surrounding education. Although the expansion of higher education starting in the early 2000s was partly directed toward expanding educational opportunity, teachers and parents widely report intensifying competition during this era. Consider, for example, the remarks of one Dragon Gate teacher who went to high school in the early 1990s in Longhai (a city between Ningzhou and Xiamen that has now become incorporated into Xiamen): "When I was in school, we had time for ping pong and ball. There were three classes in the afternoon, then we went home. The pressure started later. These days, kids really have no childhood." Other observers similarly report a massive change from the 1990s to the 2000s, remembering the 1990s as a relatively relaxed era (Lou 2010). Of course, these trends are hard to measure on anecdotal evidence alone. Moreover, they are subject not only to historical

[217] Perhaps the most famous such incident is known as the "My Dad Is Li Gang' Incident" (*Wo ba shi Li Gang shijian*), which occurred in October 2010 in Hebei Province. In this incident, the son of the deputy director of a local public security bureau was implicated in a drunk-driving accident that resulted in the death of a university student. Upon being arrested, the boy shouted out the name of his father: "Go ahead, sue me if you dare. My dad is Li Gang!" Captured on video, the incident went viral in social media.

[218] Note, of course, that the equation of "background" with the status of one's father reflects a strong patriarchal bias. In reality, of course, both matrilineal and patrilineal relatives contribute their social capital to children's success. As in many societies, however, the status of women in China tends to be lower than that of men and the labor of women tends to be devalued.

cycles but also to geographical variation. In some provinces with particularly low admission quotas and particularly robust traditions of educational competition—such as Shandong and Jiangxi—the current cycle of intensive educational competition may have started earlier.

By the first decade of the twenty-first century, in any case, competition had intensified to the point that educational authorities saw it necessary to institute widespread educational reforms aimed at "reducing" students' "burdens" (*jianfu*) and "increasing" their "overall quality" (*tigao zonghe suzhi*). As I elaborate below, however, these reforms had the counterintuitive effect of exacerbating both social competition and the "comparison of daddies" rather than ameliorating these trends.

The group that is most commonly associated with success in this "game of comparing fathers" (*pin die youxi*) is the "second-generation rich" (*fu'erdai*). This term refers to the children of China's rising class of parvenu elite whose children are notorious for flaunting their privilege. By suggesting that the Gaokao provides ordinary people with their only means to "strive past the second-generation rich," the above-described slogan creates a rallying call for ordinary students to combat inherited privilege.

Note, however, that "second-generation rich" forms only one of several such terms. The most notable is "second-generation official" (*guan'erdai*), but other popular expressions include "second-generation star" (*ming'erdai*) and "second-generation monopolists" (*long'erdai*). Just as these terms index the heritability of privilege, another such expression—"second-generation poor" (*qiong'erdai*)—does the same for poverty. All such terms express implicit social critiques: In the age of "comparing fathers," people perceive hereditary wealth and poverty to be on the rise.

"Second-generation officials" form a particular object of special resentment and fascination. In fact, many Chinese leaders are second-generation officials. They are also scandalously rich. These realities receive only qualified attention in the media, which people consider to be "empty" as a result of government censorship (chapter 3). But such politically sensitive topics constitute the theme of frequent debate in the relatively uncensored security of backstage contexts that people consider to be "down-to-earth," such as tea with neighbors in alleyways or alcohol-infused dinners with friends.[219] In such conversations, people commonly discuss "collusion between officials and businesspeople" (*guanshang goujie*). They consider such corruption to be the norm in Chinese society. Older people will point toward alternating cycles of corruption and strict adherence to rules. Many recall the Mao era nostalgically as a period of relative uprightness, despite its other depredations. The current age since the late 1990s, by contrast, is seen to be particularly corrupt—a perception that has even garnered much official acknowledgement and reaction.[220]

In this climate of popular resentment, it is perhaps unsurprising that reports have emerged of Gaokao mottoes that explicitly thematize official corruption: In 2013, photos circulated online of smiling students posing with a particularly scathing Gaokao slogan in front of their school gate. Printed on a large red-character banner, the slogan exhorted students to use the Gaokao to "vanquish second-generation officials" (*zhansheng guan'erdai*).

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[219] "Second-generation officials" also form the topic of such cultural products as popular novels and non-fictions books. Having passed Party censors, however, these treatments tend to be relatively tame.

[220] President Hu Jintao famously said that corruption could spell the "demise of the party and the demise of the country." In other chapters, I have alluded to the anti-corruption drive of his follower, Xi Jinping. But many people greet such official efforts with skepticism, seeing them mainly as window dressing and thinly veiled political gambits. The comments of one Ningzhou father expresses sentiments that are shared by many: "It remains to be seen whether or not Xi Jinping is just putting on a show [*zuoxiu*]." Like academic China watchers, ordinary Chinese commonly suggest that the real point of such campaigns consists in providing ascendant political factions with a pretense to purge those whom they oppose.

But note that both of the anti-privilege slogans that I describe—"strive past the second-generation rich" and "vanquish second-generation officials—are published in relatively impermanent media (LED displays, disposable banners) rather than being painted on the side of buildings. The reason for such caution is that these slogans tread dangerously close to censorship boundaries. Unlike more anodyne lionizations of diligence, the acceptability of such slogans changes with political environment and context. It may not always be possible to thematize the social fault line of class conflict in such front-stage settings.

In the following, I address the issue of censorship at greater length. For the present, consider how such slogans cast students in the role of warriors fighting for justice, thus evoking China's popular tradition of chivalric heroism, in which the common people have the right to rise up in rebellion against corrupt officials (Ruhlman 1960). In an era when political power and moral legitimacy are considered to be bifurcated, the cultivation of personal merit through diligence constitutes both a form of ethical action and a partially sublimated rebellion.

China's Imaginary Geography and Ideal-Typical Roles:

The "Tall-Rich-Handsome" versus the "Wingless Cockroaches"

Anti-privilege slogans also focus animus toward another group associated with hereditary privilege—the "tall-rich-handsome" (*gaofushuai*). Slogans urging students to "test past the tall-rich-handsome," sometimes appearing in concert with the above-mentioned exhortations to use the Gaokao to "vanquish second-generation officials." Like "second-generation official" and "second-generation rich," the term "tall-rich-handsome" redounds with class connotations.

In the language of Chinese youth, popularized through the social media and the Internet, the "tall-rich-handsome" forms the stereotypical rich, privileged, male denizen of first-tier

Chinese cities like Xiamen and (particularly) metropolitan districts like Shanghai or Beijing. In the popular imagination, the "tall-rich-handsome" man is inevitably accompanied by his female counterparts—either the "white-rich-beautiful" (*baifumei*) or "sweet-simple-pure" (*tiansuchun*) woman. Note that "white" denotes not ethnicity but rather skin tone, since Chinese widely associate paler skin tones with high status and urban origin.[221] "Sweet-simple-pure," meanwhile, refers to the ideal personality traits of the tall-rich-handsome man's marriage partner, who should embody the feminine virtue of demure chastity.

These social types do not exist in a vacuum. They evoke a whole imaginary geography of ideal-typical roles associated with different positions in China's central-place hierarchy. As I discuss in chapter 2, this geographical hierarchy is simultaneously a hierarchy of value: More centrally located places are associated with greater status. In this status hierarchy, the rural counterparts to the "tall-rich-handsome" include the "poor-failed-short" (*qiongcuo'ai*) man, the "failed man" (*cuonan*), or the "wingless cockroach" (*tubie*) and many other similar types of "country bumpkin" (*caobao*). Women of low-class or rural origin, meanwhile, may be disparagingly referred to as "black tree fungus" (*hei mu'er*). This expression evokes the dark skin tone that is associated with rural origin, but also constitutes a vulgar synecdochic reference to female genitalia—a reference that evokes sexual availability in contradistinction to the chastity of the "sweet-simple-pure" wife. By inference, therefore, the exhortation to "test past the "tall-rich-handsome" casts students in low-status, rural roles—the paradigmatic opposite numbers of these denizens of urban privilege.

[221] White skin tone is ambiguously considered both a hereditary *and* acquired marker of social status. People of rural origin and "low" social class are thought to be born with a "darker" skin tone. But people are also observed to acquire darker skin color through exposure to sunlight while doing manual labor, particularly farm work. Many women and (to a lesser extent) men of both urban and rural origin will go to extreme lengths to avoid exposure. For example, Chinese female tour guides not only carry parasols but can also be seen with their heads swapped in towels like mummies.

Along these lines, the most emblematic term for ordinary strivers of undistinguished background probably consists in the difficult-to-translate expression "*diaosi*." This neologism was formed by tacking on a vulgar expression for the male genitalia, *diao*, to the last syllable of the Chinese transliteration of the English word for "fans," *fensi*. In ordinary internet parlance, "fans" refers to followers on social media. The term generally has a positive connotation: "Fans" are followers who have their own followers. By contrast, "diaosi" serves as a disparaging term for the anonymous masses of ordinary followers who are not widely followed themselves but whose subscriptions to the writings of popular authors establishes the reputation of these authors as being widely read.

Note that the contrast between *diaosi* and "tall-rich-handsome," between followers and followed, implies an extractive or exploitative relationship: The *diaosi's* only value consists in providing recognition to others since he or she has no followers of his own. In everyday slang, therefore, *diaosi* has come to form a jocular reference to ordinary people, often of rural origin, who possess no "background"—that is, no *guanxi*. In short, the *diaosi* is a "loser"—an ordinary person with no great wealth or prospects. But with widening social inequality in the "age of comparing daddies," more and more people self-identify as "losers"—the polar opposite of the "tall-rich-handsome." Under these conditions, people increasingly appropriate the term "loser" as a badge of pride.

The details of this ideal-typical imaginary geography will become important in my discussion of a high-school "mobilization rallies" (*dongyuan da hui*) below. In the present context, note that the slogan admonishing students to "test past the tall-rich-handsome" is essentially identical in spirit to the above-described slogan exhorting students to "beat the second-generation rich" and "vanquish second-generation officials." All these slogans tap into

widespread resentment against inherited privilege, suggesting that the examination provides a way for ordinary rural losers to surpass the beneficiaries of inherited privilege through heroic efforts of diligence. Because this resentment proves effective in motivating students to study harder for the examination, high-school administrators tolerate and in some cases even officially embrace such slogans.

In some respects, therefore, the examination represents, as I argue above, a sublimated form of class conflict. This conflictual or agonistic dimension of the examination likewise receives expression in the myriad of military metaphors that students, teachers, and administrators use to describe the examination experience: For instance, people widely liken students to "soldiers" who are "drilling" for the "final battle." During ordinary tests, students may see their classmates and schoolmates as the enemies in this battle. But the battlefield of the Gaokao is a national one, in which students are appealing to a national authority for redress against the injustices of guanxi, inequality, and nepotism (chapter 1).

In short, the Gaokao sublimates revolutionary desire for social change into a desire with much more conservative social effects—the desire for mobility (chapter 2). Instead of fantasizing about upending the division or labor, students and their families mostly fantasize about rising within it. The manifest objective of their wish fulfillment—"the sweet flavor of success"—consists in occupying the places of those whom they resent rather than upending the social order that produced such inequality. As I have earlier pointed out, moreover, students and their families fantasize about a better life not only for themselves but for succeeding generations. Ironically, therefore, the ultimate end of the logic of diligence appears to consist in producing what people see to be its opposite—the complacency of inherited privilege. As I mentioned,

Chinese from imperial times to the present have long remarked on the generational cycles of oscillation between diligence and complacency within families.

The Broad Appeal of Diligence

The preceding discussion explores how the rhetoric of diligence presents this ethic as a weapon that rural losers wield against a privileged, urban elite. But this formulation reproduces a tendency to think in terms of a sharp distinction between the rural and the urban. Such a sharp distinction reduces the complex realities of the Chinese center–periphery to a simple binary: In reality, most families cannot unproblematically identify themselves as either rural or urban—in short, they are polycentric and dispersed (chapter 2).

Saying that Chinese families are polycentric is not saying that they are equal. Children who attend elite urban high schools have vastly superior chances of succeeding on the examination than do their counterparts who attend low-ranking schools in the city or the countryside. But few people anywhere on the hierarchy like to think of themselves as belonging to a complacent, privileged elite. In my experience, some of the most ardent defenders of the rhetoric of diligence include those who by any standards would be counted as relatively privileged—attendees of elite urban high schools. Many such students bridle at any suggestion that their Gaokao success is not earned. As one such student told me, the daughter of a high-ranking Party official, "We worked damn hard to succeed, and we deserve our success."

And on the face of things she is right: Any student who takes the orthodox route of preparing for the examination (instead, for instance, of preparing to go overseas) must undertake a heroic efforts of drilling and memorization (more on this below).[222] Thus in terms of pure

[222] Note, however, that people of rural origin remark on the relative lackadaisicalness of urban attitudes toward the Gaokao—particularly the attitudes of people from Shanghai and Beijing. Upon meeting some of my friends in

effort required, it is difficult to argue that anyone who scores highly is undeserving of success. The perception of oneself as diligent—as having "eaten bitterness" (*chiku*)—forms a least-common-denominator value of common self-understanding for all successful examinees—a point that I return to in my conclusion.[223]

Thus the appeal of class-animus slogans is actually quite wide. In this sense, the term "class-animus" may be a bit misleading. Such slogans tend to unite everyone who resents nepotism rather than congealing people around well-defined class-interests per se. In other words, the "class" of people who resent nepotism is actually quite broad, uniting disparate social interests. Even in top-ranking schools in metropolitan districts, it is possible to find people who identify themselves as "losers." In other words, the binary distinction between "tall-rich-handsome" and "wingless cockroaches" reproduces the same reductive logic that the rural-urban binary does: However "urban" one is, it is almost always possible to point to someone who is even more "urban." However wealthy or well-connected one is, it is easy to think of someone

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Shanghai, Ms. Liu, a teacher friend from Ningzhou Number One, expressed great surprise that Shanghainese apparently considered the Gaokao to be "no big deal." It is difficult, of course, to know how much of this lackadaisicalness was real and how much was affected. Ms. Li's own top students, particularly boys, made a show of being less hardworking than they actually were, affecting a "laid-back" (*man bu qing xing*) attitude toward study that belied their backstage diligence. As compared to their counterparts elsewhere in China, however, students in Shanghai or Beijing can enter superior universities with inferior test scores (chapter 3). For this reason and others, students in China's two largest cities arguably face much less pressure than their rural counterparts.

[223] Counterintuitively, the use of motivational slogans that explicitly incorporate class animus seems to have constituted a mainly urban phenomenon. In 2011 and 2012, the slogan encouraging students to surpass the second-generation rich was widely seen in urban Fujian schools. The slogans encouraging students to vanquish second-generation officials and outdo the tall-rich-handsome seemed to have been less common but also reportedly constituted largely urban phenomena. By contrast, slogans in Mountain County, which I detail in the introduction to the chapter above, contained themselves within a more traditional, lyrical, and austere register.

There are probably many reasons for this relative restraint of class animus in Mountain County. Many students in Mountain County are farm children. In many cases, their parents either forbid them from processing smart phones or cannot afford them. Thus children of rural parents are less immersed in the internet culture in which class-animus slogans trade. Students in more centrally located places, are more immersed in internet memes. I also surmise that explicit public references to the "second-generation rich" in a rural area would risk alienating the local elite. At this level of the geographical hierarchy, particularistic connections and face-to-face interactions dominate interpersonal relationships (chapter 2). The elite are known by name. In urban areas, by contrast, the relative commonality of students with official connections or rich parents renders them more anonymous.

who is even wealthier or better connected. Nearly every Gaokao examinee thinks of him- or herself as a righteous wielder of diligence.

The Humor in Class Animus

But it is appropriate to employ "class" in the analysis of such slogans insofar as they reveal tension lines in Chinese society—tension lines that normally receive little display in such public, official media. Although class-animus slogans form only one subgenre of motivational slogan, I consider them important for what they bring into view. A clue here lies in the humorous effect that such slogans have. Students find them funny.

According to Freud's ([1919] 1960) theory of humor, laughter represents a release of psychic tension. In ordinary social contexts, people must censor both their unconscious desires (repression) as well as conscious thoughts that are only appropriate to discuss in backstage contexts (suppression). This repression and suppression cause psychic tension.

Jokes and other humorous phenomena circumvent the strictures of such censorship, discharging some of that tension. To get by the censors—either the public censors of social authorities or the private censors of one's conscience or superego—humorous phenomena must bring about what Freud terms "forepleasure." We can think of forepleasure as sort of an aesthetic bribe—for instance a rhyme, pun, or a beautiful turn of phrase. Such forepleasure tricks the censors. Thus people laugh before they know why they are laughing.

Inspired by Freud's theory of humor, I suggest that the humorous effect caused by class-animus slogans derives from the fact that the normal public discourse in schools—the pronouncements of teachers, administrators, and leaders—usually suppresses explicit official mention of public hostility toward nepotism, the elite, and corrupt officialdom. In addition,

students themselves partly repress such aggression. As a result, hostility toward corruption and nepotism is usually carefully confined to the institutional backstage—for instance, private conversations. Under normal circumstances, however, such critiques are too "real" or "down-to-earth" (chapter 3) to receive durable publication in official, front-stage media, such as announcements, speeches, or slogans, where lip service must ordinarily be paid to the official ideology of class harmony and social stability.

What allows class-animus slogans to circumvent such ordinary strictures? Where is the "forepleasure" in such slogans? Recall the structural reversal that the Gaokao effects (chapter 2): During the Gaokao, what is normally considered to be empty, fake, and hypocritical—universalistic or rules-based selection by merit—becomes true, genuine, and real. In the context of the current analysis, I suggest that this structural reversal between the "empty" and "real" establishes the conditions for backstage, normally suppressed realities to come to the fore. Specifically, as the big examination approaches, teachers and administrators are desperate to motivate students to study harder. They know that "empty slogans" will have little effect. By contrast, class-animus slogans are considered to be "genuinely effective" (*you shiji xiaoguo*) because they give voice to "reality" (*xianshi*). In short, the frontstage becomes a backstage for a few weeks around this heightened ritual occassion. But this structural reversal is only partial and largely unconscious. The public display of official institutional slogans retains its penumbra of front-stage authority. Thus the appearance of backstage critique, voiced in the "Web language" (*wangluo yuyan*) of the youth, achieves a humorous effect.

Of course, such class-animus slogans are only one, particularly "real" subgenre of diligence discourse, which includes other types of slogans, backstage admonitions, motivational speeches, and private conversations. A constant theme of such discourse is how the Gaokao

enables ordinary people to fight privilege. As I note above, students and teachers see all such discourse as relatively "real" in comparison to political slogans and educational catchphrases, such as "education for quality," which they judge to be "empty." People doubt if hard work and success can ever "reach a one-to-one ratio" (*cheng zhengbi*), as diligence slogans seem to suggest. In contrast to official pronouncements, however, diligence discourse strikes people as genuine and true. But ordinary diligence-valorizing slogans merely articulate the simple logic of orthodox social reciprocity—"success repays hard work." By contrast, class-animus slogans are more "real" because they give explicit voice to the deeper realities of corruption and nepotism that motivate diligence.

Pep Rallies, Fantasy, and the Revenge of the Losers

To recap, ordinary censorship thresholds lower during the structural reversal of front stage and backstage in the Gaokao, creating the conditions for teachers to use relatively "real" slogans and "true" talk to motivate students. But this lowering of censorship thresholds also creates the conditions for situations that prove embarrassing and even destabilizing to official norms and goals.

I observed a particularly telling incident of this kind at the end of my first year of fieldwork. The setting for the incident consisted in motivational assembly—a kind of pep rally—for the Gaokao. Literally called "rallies to pledge resolution" (*shishi dahui*) or "mobilization rallies" (*dongyuan dahui*), these general assemblies of senior-three students are usually convened twice per year, one-hundred days and thirty days before the examination. The stated goal of such events is to motivate students to do better on the examination by improving their morale.

During the incident in question, students at Ningzhou Number One were gathered inside their auditorium for the thirty-day rally. The high point of the rally was a speech given by the school's top student, Huang Yu, who was widely regarded to have excellent hopes for testing into Qinghua or Beijing University. During his speech, Huang appeared with three high-ranking school leaders (the principal, a vice-principal, and the senior-three section leader), who sat next to his podium on the auditorium stage. A massive painted image of the Chinese national flag, covering the whole back wall of the auditorium, formed the backdrop to this scene. Preceding Huang's speech, each of the three leaders had delivered their own motivational speeches to the assembled students. These speeches had contained orthodox promotions of diligence, encouraging the assembled studentry to study harder, struggle tirelessly, and toughen themselves for the "final battle."

Peppered with revolutionary catchphrases, such speeches constitute a specific genre—one that evokes the orations of Maoist mass-mobilization rallies in the 1950s and 60s. The occasion is formal, but high-volume electric amplification at rock-concert volumes is de rigueur. Students and leaders usually either read their speeches or recite them from memory. Many audience members consider "enthusiasm" (*jiqing*) to be the most important criterion in judging the felicity of these performances. This expression of "enthusiasm" evokes the revolutionary ardor of the above-mentioned Mao-era mass-mobilization meetings. To affect this attitude, the speaker builds up from more measured rhythms and lower volumes into a feverish pace and crescendo until he or she is literally shouting into his microphone in a deafening cacophony of booming, echoing distortion. Leaders tend to be comparatively staid in such expressions, but many students pull out all the stops.

Huang's speech was just such an exemplar of revolutionary ardor. For the general theme of his speech, Huang had drawn inspiration from the above-described class-animus slogans, one of which—"beat the second-generation rich"—his school had prominently displayed. As I describe in the following, however, his speech largely consisted of a highly irreverent, protracted sexual innuendo. But he skillfully concealed this innuendo in a code that only his contemporaries could understand—the slang of online chat programs and instant messaging—so-called "Web language" (*wangluo yuyan*). Speaking in this secret code while the three school leaders beside him looked on with puzzled expressions, Huang intersperesed his oration with official rhetoric to camouflage his irreverence. Thus school leaders as well as most teachers, unused to internet slang, possessed only dim understanding of Huang's discourse. By contrast, the assembled students responded to his speech with riotous endorsement, some moved to tears of hilarity.

This comedic effect derived largely from Huang's giving voice to the hidden fantasies of his classmates in an official front-stage context. As I elaborate, however, these fantasies took a strongly male-centered vantage.

"We have arrived again at the season in which senior-three students take the Gaokao," started Huang. "I think everyone must share a dream: The long-cherished college admission letter. The goddess that you have been yearning for day and night. The azure coasts of America."

Huang proceeded by posing a rhetorical question to the assembly: Did they want to spend the rest of their lives as pathetic "losers" (*diaosi*) masturbating in isolation, or did they want to have sexual intercourse with beautiful girls from the big city all day long like the tall-rich-handsome? Within this explosive rhetoric in coded internet slang, Huang cleverly inserted some of the traditional formal catchphrases of the genre in formal Chinese, such as "in your restless

youth, steel yourself to achieve your dream" and "if you now do not surge forth, then what future moment awaits you?"

The speech proceeded to a rousing finale: Huang referred to an onomatopoetic expression that he had employed to simulate sexual intercourse as "the battle rhythm of the losers." He urged the audience to great exploits in high-flying poetic rhetoric: "Strive, you restless youth!" In conclusion, he assured everyone that a college admissions letter, many beautiful girls, and a successful counterattack against the fortress of the tall-handsome rich would all be theirs—they need merely toughen themselves to face the final battle with courage, diligence, and composure.

The speech caused the auditorium to erupt in cheers and laughter. Thus Huang's oratory was deemed by the mostly uncomprehending leaders to be a big success. Unfortunately, however, a student used his cellphone to record the speech, which then went viral on the internet. Within a week, the provincial education department had contacted the local education bureau, which in turn censured school leaders for letting the situation get out of control. The student, however, was not punished. With the exam quickly approaching, he was sacrosanct, insulated like a prize racehorse from any outside disturbance that would negatively affect his examination performance.

This incident lends support to Freud's ([1908] 2003) observation that fantasies of wish fulfillment generally fall into two categories—the ambitious or the erotic; moreover, as Freud suggests, these two types of fantasies often combine. Performed on a public stage next to school leaders in front of the Chinese flag, Huang's speech achieved such a resoundingly humorous effect because it brought many normally suppressed backstage realities or censored private fantasies to the public light in a formal ceremonial context—that is, quite literally to the front stage.

Note, for example, that Huang suggested everyone was dreaming of the "azure coasts of America." The publicly declared mission of schools consists in producing a youthful vanguard that can contribute to the "construction of socialist modernity" in China, but privately many students dreamed of going abroad. "Abroad" (*guowai*) (literally, "outside the country" or "out-country")—in particular, America—forms a particular nexus of desire since it symbolizes transcendence of ordinary Chinese reality (chapter 2). An elite school, Ningzhou Number One had many students who in fact intended to study overseas upon graduation. Many more, given the opportunity, will pursue graduate studies abroad. School leaders of course recognize and actually encourage this trend, for example by forming partnerships with foreign high schools and universities and by giving prominent display in street-side exhibitions to the names of students who successfully gain admission to foreign colleges. Association with foreign countries increases the institution's charisma. But publicly airing the probably widespread private fantasy of pursuing a life abroad in such a formal setting contradicted the lip service that the institution ordinarily pays in such contexts to official nationalist ideology.

Combined with the public revelation of this widespread private ambition, of course, were Huang's quite explicit sexual innuendos. These sexual innuendos, moreover, drew upon the aforedescribed imaginary geography of class positions to craft an incendiary narrative of the usurpation of elite privilege. The losers would rise up against the tall-rich-handsome, by counterattacking their "bunker" through diligence ("strive, you restless youth). The reward of this counterattack would consist in the assumption of the "tall-rich-handsome's" alleged sexual privileges. Note how the rhetoric of this narrative ironically interweaves anti-capitalist rhetoric of the Maoist era—"counterattack" and "bunker"—with irreverent sexual fantasy.

Only able to understand the traditional parts of the rhetoric, school leaders and most teachers looked on without understanding. This situation reversed the normal power relations between leaders and students: The front stage had become the backstage. The students had become the possessors of secret knowledge and the leaders, playing unknowing straight men to this comedy, had become the excolluded. In other words, the comedic effect was heightened because this irreverence took place right under the noses of those who would normally be entrusted to censor such shenanigans—the school leaders. Internet slang, therefore, served as a kind of secret or restricted code that allowed Huang's humor to slip past institutional censors.

On one level, Huang's speech constitutes a type of parodic performance. Such performances achieve an important critical effect by ironizing the symbols of power (Butler 1990; Goffman 1959).[224] But this attention to the purely formal, linguistic aspects of parodic performance underplays the significance of the unconscious: Parodies make us laugh because they reveal a suppressed reality—the contingency (humanly produced quality) and ultimate incoherence of social arrangements. For Freud ([1919] 1960), therefore, the most basic form of humor consists of children's "nonsense language," which draws attention to the most fundamental form of contingency—the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign itself. On another level, therefore, skillful parody forms another kind of aesthetic bribe— "forepleasure"—that enables censored realities to percolate up to the front stage with social-critical effects. For example, various kinds of parodic gender performance—such as burlesque drag—call attention to the normally suppressed reality of the arbitrariness of gender norms (Butler 1990). Similarly, Huang's speech called attention to the normally suppressed and partly repressed rebellious urges

[224] Note, for instance, the similarity between Huang's performance and late-Soviet *stiob*, a the genre of parody that is analyzed by Boyer and Yurchak (2010). However, whereas *stiob* consists mainly in a deadpan replication of official discourse, Huang's approach revolved around using official discourse to camouflage irreverence. Nevertheless, parody formed an important part of his comedy.

that energize the ascetic quest for self-mastery through examination—sexual promiscuity, aggression, and narcissistic self-aggrandizement.

A Female Counterpart to the Revenge of the Losers

Huang's narrative was male-centered. Under China's patriarchal social arrangements, the male perspective forms the unmarked or default experience. But girls also fantasize about the future, begging the question of what would constitute a female version of Huang's fantasy.

As I discuss elsewhere, many parents see the examination as providing an opportunity for their children to gain access to more desirable marriage partners: Good test scores enable one's children to attend college in a centrally located urban place, where they are expected to encounter "better" marriage prospects (chapter 2). Under China's patriarchal arrangements, this expectation of hypergamy or "marrying up" applies to girls more than it does to boys.[225]

Chinese now largely practice neolocal residency upon marriage—that is, young couples move into their own house or apartment. Nevertheless, women are perceived to "belong" to their affinal household. Insofar as such patriarchal attitudes remain dominant in China, women are seen (and often see themselves) as commodities to be bartered for economic security and social status. In short, women and their natal households understand themselves as benefiting economically and socially from hypergamous marriage. Note, for instance, how a "good husband" will often provide a woman's natal household with substantial gifts, such as a house.

Girls often joke about these arrangements. For instance, one girl at Mountain County Number One, Lanyan, described to me how a classmate of hers, Xiaohong, reduced a group of

[225] The male equivalent of a bride marrying into a "good" family is the "live-in son-in-law" (*shangmen nüxu*). Variations of such arrangements are more common than is perhaps widely understood. For example, well-established and ambitious women sometimes prefer to marry a lower-status man, since such men may have little power to "control" their wives. However, men of this type are widely mocked and despised, whereas women who "marry up" are usually admired.

her friends to hilarious laughter by describing the "ideal career path" of a young woman from the countryside: First, she should study diligently to get into the best university possible; then she should date a boy from a small town "for practice" during her first and second years of college; afterwards, she should "dump him" (*shuai ta*) in her junior year in preparation for "true love" (*zhen ai*); finally, in her last year of college she should replace her unfortunate erstwhile small-town beau with a "tall-rich-handsome" from the city, whom she can consider marrying.

Xiaohong's narrative achieved a humorous effect because her "ideal career path" contradicts in numerous ways the publicly upheld social ideals of parents and society. The social ideal is that women will marry their first boyfriend and remain virgins until marriage. Xiaohong's narrative contravened these standards of feminine chastity, in particular because her "career path" implied the possibility of premarital sex—a topic that strikes girls as especially hilarious. Additionally, however, Xiaohong contradicted another ideal—that of love for love's sake. It may be strange that the ideal of romantic love exists side-by-side with that of hypergamy, but the two are not necessarily contradictory: Many girls fantasize about meeting a husband who is both rich *and* worthy of romantic love. But romantic ideals are widely considered to be "empty." The cold, hard "reality" consists in the importance of material security. Finally, Xiaohong's narrative flouted the principle of feminine equality—the idea that girls should study for study's sake, competing with boys on an equal footing; instead, Xiaohong portrays study as something that increases girls value as commodities. In short, Xiaohong's story emphasizes backstage realities that usually receive little public emphasis, especially when girls are still in high school.

As the Gaokao approaches, however, teachers begin to remind girls of the importance of finding a good husband. For example, head teachers may admonish girls to raise their test scores

so that they "can find a worthy match" and "take care of their families" (chapter 5). Parents also begin to have earnest conversations with girls about marriage. The topic of marriage is urgent, since by the age of twenty-six or so, unmarried females will be considered "leftover women" (*shengnü*) (Fincher 2014; To 2013). Consider, for example, how Lanyan described the shift of her parents' priorities right after the Gaokao: "All throughout high school, my parents warned me against having a boyfriend too early [*zaolian*]. But as soon as I got into Xiamen University, my mother starting going on all the time marriage. Now suddenly she can't stop talking about me finding a boyfriend—it's like she has a one-track mind!" As soon as she completed the big test, Lanyan's mother compelled her to start dieting, hoping to increase the girl's attractiveness to potential suitors in the city.

In sum, marriage is considered by many girls and their families to be an important route to social mobility. As a result of the patriarchal culture of "valuing boys and scorning girls," many families, particularly in the countryside, do not consider educating girls to be a good use of family resources (chapter 2). But those that do frequently rationalize this expenditure by pointing out how education may improve women's marriage prospects. As teachers sometimes say, therefore, "for girls, marriage is the second big chance to change one's destiny after the Gaokao [*di'er gaibian ming de jihui*]." This formulation suggests that marriage, too, constitutes a fateful event. Indeed, securing a good marriage partner is sometimes described metaphorically in terms of another genre of fateful action, fishing: Finding a good husband is "hooking a big fish" (*diao dao da yu*). Thus "marrying up" forms one motivation for diligent study: Just as class-animus slogans motivate students by tapping into a masculine-tinged fantasy of usurping the privileges

of the "tall-rich-handsome," teachers and parents remind girls that an important reason to achieve a high test scores lies in being able to marry one.[226]

The Peculiar Diligence of Girls

Xiaohong and Huang made people laugh by publicly airing fantasies that are widely shared but ordinarily receive little front-stage attention. Note, therefore, that even people's private wishes largely conform to strongly gendered shared social norms.[227] For both men and women, however, living up to these norms is considered to require great diligence. Moreover, parents and teachers now widely hold girls to be superior in diligence to boys. In general, girls get up earlier, study harder, and work later than boys. At 6 AM in the morning in Mountain County Number One, all of the students in the cafeteria studying are girls.

In times past, social advancement through scholarly diligence was considered the special province of men. In the imperial era, women were barred from taking the civil examinations and from serving as officials, although high-status women sometimes achieved high levels of literacy and education (Ko 1994). In recent times, by contrast, women have been allowed to compete in the examination, and traditional male dominance in higher education has gradually been eroded. This attenuation of traditional male dominance has gained momentum in the wake of the one-child policy, which has encouraged parents to invest more resources in girls (chapter 2). Women now exceed men in college enrollment. But literacy and education are nevertheless still

[226] Of course, both Huang's and Xiaohong's narratives describe highly heteronormative fantasies. I did not encounter any public discussion of homosexual fantasy during my fieldwork. Homosexuality is a highly taboo subject in China—much more so than heteronormative sexuality.

[227] I suggest that this humorous reaction derives partly from the uncanny quality of these fantasies: They remind people that their "private thoughts" (*siren sixiang*) may not be as private as they think, releasing some of the tension associated with upholding the ideal of unique, sovereign individuality. As I note above (chapter 1), I do not believe the ideology of individualism to be a uniquely "Western" or "modern" invention. Moreover, that ideology, where it occurs, may demonstrate great cross-cultural variation. Finally, as I also argue above, I think it is important to disaggregate the ideology of individualism with such humanly common realities as (individual) mortality and personhood.

perceived as a masculine domain. Examination prowess is considered a stereotypically male virtue—part of an educational machismo that scholars term "literary masculinity" (Kipnis 2011; Louie 2009). Thus the "superior diligence" of girls begs explanation.

Analyzing diligent self-cultivation as a form of sublimated rebellion helps account for women's superior diligence. Women themselves understand diligence in these terms. Consider how one female student at Mountain County Number One responded to my question of why girls work harder than boys: "I think it's a kind disobedient attitude [*bufu xinli*]. China is a patriarchal society [*nanquan zhuyi shehui*], so women want to prove their ability." Querying other girls about such sentiments, I found them to be widely shared.

Consider, moreover, how girls see themselves as having to practice both scholarly diligence and other forms of self-ascetic cultivation: The "hooking of a big fish" necessitates the cultivation of beauty, which requires great efforts of diligence, as Lanyan learned when her mother placed her on a diet the day after she completed the Gaokao. Anyone who has witnessed the austere body rituals necessary to cultivate beauty—including the use of make up, the extreme asceticism of slimming regimes, the avoidance of sun to maintain white skin—will agree that such rituals involve great efforts of "eating bitterness." In particular, note how the central practice of beauty cultivation—dieting—is described as requiring many of the same virtues that examination preparation does—"diligence," "persistence," "self-discipline" and "composure."

Diligence is not the only traditionally male virtue in which girls surpass boys. Scholars note that girls in the reform era also widely demonstrate superior filiality (Fong 2006; T. Zheng 2009). As an important idiom in which filiality is expressed, diligent study forms a cornerstone of filial devotion. But consider how filial behavior also contains a demand for recognition. Filiality ostensibly centers on recognizing the authority of the patriarch. Through filial obeisance,

however, sons and daughters produce themselves as potent actors who are themselves worthy of social recognition (Sangren 2000).

Such explanations may have comparative relevance. Educational research widely reports that women work harder than men in many cultural contexts (Buchmann and DiPrete 2006). As in other places, however, perceptions of girls' superior diligence are attached to other cultural perceptions that are less flattering. In the same conversation, the above-mentioned two friends suggested that boys possess "superior logical reasoning" (*luoji siwei*), a perception that I further investigate in my discussion of the gendering of the curriculum below.

The Fine Line between "Truth" and Irreverence: The Rhetorical Uses of Reality

To recapitulate the foregoing discussion, class-animus slogans, Huang's speech, and Xiaohong's joke make people laugh by bringing backstage "realities" (*xianshi*) and private fantasies to the front stage of public discourse. In short, "truth" and "reality" consist of desires or thoughts that are ordinarily suppressed from public life or even from normal waking consciousness, relegated to the institutional backstage or private fantasy. By tapping into such hidden desires and fantasies, irreverent humor has motivational power. But the calculated irreverence of "reality" or "truth" attains this power by giving the lie to publically upheld institutional ideals, like gender equality and "education for quality." Everyone pays public lip service to such ideals but privately believes them to be "empty" or "fake." By contrast, people consider the "real mission" of educational institutions to lie in achieving high test scores (chapter 3).

Used in moderation, the practice of bringing "real talk" or truth (*shihua*) to the front stage can be rhetorically effective: Front-stage "real talk" increases the credibility of speakers and the institution that they represent. It achieves this increase in credibility by revealing the true

alignment of the interests of the institution with those of the family. If pushed too far, however, "real talk" can undermine the institution's goals by exposing the incoherence of these underlying, backstage ideals. Thus in addition to providing a potent source of motivation to pursue the institution's "real" goals, these uses of "truth" can sometimes undermine institutional authority. Using "reality" to motivate people can be a dangerous game.

In Huang's case, his speech built upon a class-animus slogan ("use the Gaokao to test past the tall-rich-handsome")—a slogan that is already relatively "real." Huang's elaboration on this slogan produced the most "down-to-earth" (*shizai*) motivational speech that any of his classmates had ever heard. Yet his underlying goal probably lay less in motivating his classmates than in entertaining them and achieving notoriety. His irreverent emphasis on "shallow" materialistic aims of self-aggrandizement and sexual promiscuity threatened to expose not only the hypocrisy of the institution. Belying vaunted educational ideals of high schools to encourage "socialist modernization," Huang's speech revealed the role of the institution in reproducing widely critiqued social trends in Chinese society—consumerism, materialism, and self-interest.

In Xiaohong's case, her "down-to-earth" emphasis on marriage plans, although irreverent, encouraged girls to diligent study, which her comedy frames as a vehicle to obtaining superior marriage partners. But if carried too far, her joke could easily tip the other way, undermining the institution's backstage emphasis on test scores. As some girls joke, "It is better to find a good man than to be diligent" (*nuli hai bu ru zhao yi ge hao laogong*). In this view, the cultivation of beauty, which one can use to hook a good husband, is more important than diligent study. As I suggest above, however, the cultivation of beauty itself requires great diligence.

Mobilization and Memorization: Traditions of Diligence

Huang's speech was exceptional. Most mobilization rallies tend to be relatively predictable and staged affairs. As befitting the public nature of these occasions, speeches normally stay within the bounds of the rhetoric associated with the genre; invariably, however, such occasions center around the demonstration of "enthusiasm." At Mountain County Number One, students shout slogans emphasizing individual achievement and solidarity with classmates: "Fight with all your effort!" (*fenli pinbo*), "Advance together hand-in-hand!" (*xieshou bingjin*), "Achieve glory together!" (*gongchuang huihuang*), "Seize first place! (*yongduo diyi*), and "If I can't do it, who can?" (*she wo qi shei*). Other slogans emphasize filiality ("For dad, for mom, for myself, go all out!" (*wei le die, niang, wei le ziji, pinle!*) or present the Gaokao as an enemy to be vanquished "Battle the Gaokao with all your strength!" (*quanli yi fu zhan Gaokao*).[228]

This "enthusiastic" display of revolutionary-style ardor recalls the aesthetics of mass-mobilization during the Maoist era as well the performance of total engrossment in institutional ideals—"Party spirit" or *Dangxing*—demanded of Party cadres today. The rhetoric of enthusiasm wraps scholarly diligence in the military metaphors of individual herorism and mass struggle.

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[228] Mountain County Number One's annual mobilization rallies constitute a fairly typical example of such assemblies. Students line up by class on the sports field in front of a stage, where school leaders sit at a velvet-draped table. Behind this table appears a gigantic red banner with the words, "The Final 100-Day Sprint to the 2012 Gaokao – Rally to Pledge Resolution."

Following speeches by school leaders, a representative of each class—usually the class's elected leader, the class monitors (*banzhang*)—proceed to the podium in order of class hierarchy to read their classes' respective speeches. Each class prepares a speech, which is read by the class monitor over a megaphone in the genre of exaggerated enthusiasm that I describe above. Students cap each speech with rousing slogans shouted through the booming PA system. After the rally, the best calligraphists in each class transfer their class speech onto large red posters, which the administration hangs in a prominent position under the building where senior three holds its classes.

Experienced teachers report that Mountain County's mobilization rally is fairly typical, but other types of rally also exist, particularly in the cities. In 2011, for example, Dragon Gate High School in Xiamen started holding assemblies led by the school's psychological counselor in lieu of ordinary mobilization rallies (chapter 5). During these motivational assemblies, the counselor, Ms. Zhang, discussed methods of coping with nervousness and stress and highlighted the importance of "attitude" (*xintai*)—topics on which I elaborate in the next chapter. As I describe there, however, expression of "enthusiasm" remained extremely important even in the Dragon Gate rally. See also Hansen's (2015) account of a corporate-style motivational training in the countryside.

The adaptability of this rhetoric to the purpose of diligent study underscores two areas of commonality between Maoist mobilization and the above-mentioned literary masculinity: On the one hand, as suggested, the desire to participate in the Gaokao is energized by a deep dissatisfaction with the status quo of political corruption and social inequality. For many students, therefore, such expressions of "enthusiasm," although highly stylized, contain sincere emotion. On the other hand, consider how the values of diligence and self-sacrifice represent a continuity with the Maoist era. During the Cultural Revolution, for example, people were (in ideal, at least) selected for the honors of admission to college or membership in the Party based on displays of total devotion to the revolutionary calling, which was demonstrated through hard work and self-sacrifice (Andreas 2004). In other words, even if the trials of merit that defined the Maoist era share at first glance little with the "bourgeois" ritual of examination, Maoist politics revolved around many of the same core virtues demonstrated by both Gaokao and imperial-era examinees—diligence, persistence, and self-discipline. The prominence given to hard work and ascetic self-cultivation in conceptions of the moral good represent an important continuity between the imperial era from at least Song times onward through to the present (chapter 1).

Disciplinary Divides and the Common Denominator of Diligence

During the imperial era, even low levels of examination success required heroic demonstration of diligence. Various observers report the extreme efforts that were required of imperial examinees to memorize, or "back" their texts (Miyazaki 1981; A. H. Smith 1890).[229] In the Ming and Qing

[229] They further note that scholarly efforts were not infrequently encouraged through corporeal punishment, the meting out of which apparently formed one of the teacher's principle duties (see also note 75 above). In the contemporary era, corporeal punishment is uncommon in senior high schools. I saw no evidence of corporeal punishment at the senior high-school level, although teachers sometimes jokingly threaten to hit students. But students report that corporeal punishment takes place with relative frequency in the lower levels of school, particularly in rural areas.

periods, a prerequisite for any significant examination success consisted of the memorization of the Four Books and Five Classics (*Sishu wujing*)—a total of 431,286 characters (Miyazaki 1981). A reasonably diligent child could be expected to achieve this prodigious feat of memory by the age of 15. Until this time, however, he generally possessed only a vague understanding of what the texts actually meant, which he first begin to appreciate when learning to compose essays during the advanced stages of his studies.[230]

"Backing" texts continues to be an important method of study, but exists alongside newer approaches that are designed to tackle modern examination questions. In particular, the Gaokao divides knowledge into two broad domains—the "sciences" (*like*) and the "humanities" (*wenke*)—each of which is conceived to require different approaches. These approaches innovate in some ways on the time-honored method of memorization, but also possess striking commonalities with it. In particular, diligence is considered essential to the study of both sciences and humanities, although, as I note below, this virtue is felt to be even more central to the mastery of the humanities.

The sciences consist of chemistry, biology, physics, and math; the humanities of history, geography, politics, Chinese literature, and foreign languages. The Gaokao tests all students on math, Chinese, and a foreign language (almost without exception English).[231] Other subjects are to some degree elective: During my fieldwork, high-school students in most provinces, including Fujian, were streamed after their first year into sciences or humanities tracks—a choice in which

[230] Countless novels, poems, stories, and idioms give testimony to these arrangements. Consider how one idiom—"ten years under a cold window" (*shi nian chuang xia*)—poignantly summarizes the assiduousness that was required of imperial examinees. This idiom refers to the ten years of diligent study that constituted the basic prerequisite for competing on the exam—ten years that were spent behind a window looking out into the world instead of entering into it. Students today continue to use this idiom to describe the monotonous focus on diligent study that defines their existence (although, as they point out, they study twelve years instead of ten).

[231] Foreign languages other than English are only available in some high-ranking schools. Especially the elite foreign languages schools (*Waiguoyu xuexiao*), founded in the Maoist era to train future diplomats, excel in the teaching of foreign languages.

they usually had some say.[232] Humanities students were tested in the Gaokao on geography, politics, and Chinese literature in a final "comprehensive humanities" (*wenzong*) examination; sciences students on biology, physics, and math in a final "comprehensive sciences" (*lizong*) examination. Current Gaokao reforms eliminate the streaming of students into humanities and sciences, giving students significant elective choice over their subjects of examination. Despite these reforms, however, this disciplinary divide between sciences and humanities continues to exercise profound influence on education.[233]

As I suggest above, sciences and humanities are conceived by students and teachers as demanding differing abilities and approaches: Both sciences and humanities require diligence, but sciences additionally requires "logical thinking" (*luoji siwei*). By contrast, people say that success can be achieved in the humanities through mere "rote memorization" (*siji yingbei*). As I elaborate below, this division is gendered: Boys, who are said to possess "superior logical thinking," are considered better suited for the sciences. Due to their superior diligence, by contrast, girls are considered more suited to humanities.

Science examinations are said to consist entirely of "objective questions" (*keguanti*), such as multiple-choice questions, which are defined as having "only one right answer." By contrast, humanities examinations contain many "subjective questions" (*zhuguanti*), for example essay questions.[234] Since the possible responses to such questions are theoretically limitless, grading

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[232] As I note below, however, humanities students are usually considered failed sciences students and girls are considered more suited to the study of humanities than to the study of sciences.

[233] This reform promises to give students more choice or agency. But note that this reform does nothing to change the fundamental disciplinary boundaries that I describe in this section. Indeed, such boundaries possess deep roots in cultural logics that probably transcend conscious control. In short, it is unlikely that the Gaokao reform will bring any fundamental change to the gendering of the curriculum that I describe in this section. Now as before, I suspect that girls will continue to be pushed toward the humanities, boys toward the sciences.

[234] The Chinese language section of examination contains perhaps the most subjective question of all—an extended essay question with a relatively open-ended topic. In recent years, the topic has been designed to foil the memorization of model answers and gauge student's genuine "creativity." The topics of the essay exam form the object of extended post-examination discussion in the public and the media—an annual national ritual.

them requires “subjective judgment” (chapter 3). Of course, humanities exams also have “objective” questions. Unlike objective science questions, however, people deem the answers to humanities objective questions to be “relatively subjective.” In the humanities, people say, the test designers are the ultimate arbiters of right and wrong. By contrast, “nature” (*daziran*), the “objective world” (*keguan shijie*), or transcendental beings such as “God” or “Heaven” are the arbiters of right or wrong in the sciences. Science questions “really” have only one right answer. For these reasons, sciences are considered “full,” “practical,” and “real,” whereas humanities are considered “empty,” “simulated,” and “false.”

Consider how these disciplinary differences manifest themselves in different study approaches: Preparation for science exams requires students to “do problems” (*zuo ti*). Students literally do thousands upon thousands of problems in an attempt to familiarize themselves with every type of question that they might encounter on the Gaokao. This approach is termed “immersing oneself in the sea of problems” (*xia tihai*).

By contrast, people consider study for the humanities to consist mostly in “rote memorization” (*siji yingbei*) of multiple choice problems or “recitation” of whole textbook passages. To answer some questions, students must actually be able to regurgitate whole passages from classical texts. Like the civil-exam of old, the Gaokao contains questions that ask students to supply missing parts of passages from memory. But memorization is likewise considered an indispensable strategy in tackling “subjective” questions, principally the Chinese and English essay sections of the exam. To simulate linguistic competency and “right thinking,” students memorize formulas and even whole passages from their textbooks as well as from books of “model answers.” Note, therefore, another striking continuity between the Gaokao and the imperial-era exam: Examinees in imperial times also studied such books of “model answers.”

Now as then, authorities discourage this practice but are unable to stamp it out. In other words, despite the ostensibly "subjective" nature of essay questions, students and teachers consider recitation of textbook passages and model essays to constitute an effective preparation method.

Despite these differences between the sciences and humanities, preparation for both types of question demonstrate important commonalties. Both humanities and sciences students spend most of their time reviewing endless multiple choice questions, especially during the all-important senior-three year before the exam. Students say that preparation for sciences requires more "technique" (*jiqiao*), "cleverness" (*congming*), and "quickness of mind" (*naozi linghuo*). But the two spheres of knowledge broadly share an ethos of study that emphasizes learning through the diligent repetition of models—the same general ethos that defined imperial-era examination preparation. Indeed, this practice of modeling examples through diligent repetition constitutes the literal definition of the Chinese word for study, *xuexi* (Bakken 2000).

"Official" and "Popular" Explanations: Patriotic Education and "Socialist Brainwashing"

To recapitulate, humanities are conceived to be "unpractical," "virtual," and "empty" whereas sciences are felt to be "down-to-earth," "true," and "full." Recall that this distinction concerns the attribution of authority for these different kinds of knowledge: People understand science questions to possess an objectively correct right answer, which they attribute to the authority of "objective reality," "nature," or even "Heaven" or "God." By contrast, people understand humanities questions to have no objectively correct right answer: In the humanities, the ultimate arbiter of correctness is not "objective reality" or transcendental beings but rather subjective, fallible human beings—the designers of the test. People therefore perceive knowledge in the

sciences to be free of ideology. By contrast, they say that the humanities are distorted by Party orthodoxy.

Not all parts of the humanities curriculum, however, are perceived as equally ideological. Consider, for example, the Western-impact view of history that dominates the humanities curriculum (chapter 2): Students learn that the Western domination of China during the "semi-colonial era" of the nineteenth century has created a burning necessity for Chinese to study science and technology so that China can "catch up with the West." Few Chinese would challenge this view of history, which is widely held to be relatively "true." But I suggest that people perceive this view to be true not because of what they learn in school, per se, but because what they learn in school is reinforced backstage through primary socialization in the family. As one politics teacher put it, where "official explanations" (*guanfang shuofa*) and "popular explanations" (*minjian shuofa*) coincide, people will perceive the official explanations to be relatively "real."

By contrst, many areas of the humanities are treated with great skepticism. For example, students must memorize that China possesses a "socialist market economy" (*shehuizhuyi shichang jingji*) whereas Germany possesses a "social market economy" (*shehui jingji*). Textbooks present such tortuous distinctions as objective facts, but most people see them as "empty" niceities. Often such "official explanations" clash with common sense. According to official explanations, for example, China is a "people's democratic dictatorship" (*renmin minzhu zhuanzheng*) in which the Party "strengthens the spirit of the rule of law" (*zengqiang fazhi jingshen*). But this explanation clashes with the popular perception of widespread "collusion between officials and business people" (*guanshang goujie*). In such cases of conflict between popular explanation and official explanation, people judge the official explanation to be

"hypocritical" (*xuwei*). As one Mountain County Number One boy whispered to me with a wry smile after receiving back a politics quiz that he failed, "It's all socialist brainwashing" (*shehui zhuyi de xinao*).

Note that such cynicism extends even to parts of the curriculum widely assumed by outsiders to be relatively sacrosanct. Consider, for example, "patriotic education" (*aiguo zhuyi jiaoyu*), which consists of various programs and activities that have the stated goal of inculcating students with love for country. Students, teachers, and administrators widely judge such official attempts to instill nationalism as "empty lip service." Note, for instance, how a Dragon Gate High vice principal reacted as he walked by me while I was studying a display of patriotic artwork produced by junior-high students. This display consisted of a variety of colorful paintings with the theme of "I love my mother country." "It's all very empty," the vice principal remarked. "Our patriotic education doesn't get into here," he added, pointing at his head. "It is not like [patriotic education] in foreign countries, for example, in your America, where these things are real." This is not to say that Chinese students lack nationalist sentiment but that such sentiments, where they exist, owe more to reinforcement in primary socialization than they do to official pronouncements.[235]

To pass examinations, however, students must clearly differentiate between the "real" popular explanation and the "empty" official one. Some teachers remark that this distinction comes naturally to high-scoring students in high-ranking schools, but must be laboriously learned by low-scoring students in low-ranking schools. Consider the testimony of the above-

[235] Stafford (1995) observes similar skepticism toward officially promoted nationalism in Taiwanese education. Thus ordinary Chinese distinguish between "real" nationalist sentiment and "fake" nationalist sentiment. For this reason, nationalism can be a double-edged sword for Party rulers, who have come to fear some popular expressions of nationalism. When protests are draped in the national flag, they can be particularly challenging for authorities to suppress (Y. Guo 2004; Gries 2004). In recent years, the Party has begun cracking down on many nationalist protests (Weiss 2014).

mentioned politics teacher, who had moved to Dragon Gate from a high-ranking rural school: "With these [low-scoring] students, the difference between the official explanation and popular explanation often comes up in class. I have to draw this distinction for these students explicitly; otherwise, they will be confused. One doesn't want students thinking that the popular explanation is something that the teacher said. That kind of confusion was never a problem in [the higher-ranking school]."

The Gendering of the Curriculum

Consequently, students approach humanities with an attitude of feigned engrossment (chapter 3): They feign belief in political ideology but privately consider it to be "empty" and "false." In theory, at least, some humanities knowledge possesses a comparatively high degree of ideological neutrality and practical utility, such as Chinese or English. But skeptics disagree, pointing out that examination success even in such "practical" domains requires not so much competency as the memorization of formulas. Moreover, students and teachers say that even in such "ideologically neutral" subjects, getting a high score is predicated on demonstrating a politically correct attitude.

Consider, for example, the experience of Zhiwei—the same student who declared the Gaokao to consist of a "chain of interests" (chapter 3). In our many conversations, Zhiwei described how he ran afoul of his Chinese teacher. A budding senior-one scholar when I met him, Zhiwei was considered a "top student" (*jianzi sheng*). The son of a low-level Party functionary, he had the fifth-highest test score on the high-school entrance exam in the whole county. His Chinese essays were considered to be the best in the senior-one year. His teacher even invited him to give a guest lecture on Mencius, a rare honor for any student. Gaining in

confidence, he started to write socially critical essays. For example, he wrote an essay critiquing Confucianism—a vast current of Chinese thought with which the Party has declared itself broadly aligned. In private conversations, Zhiwei expressed scathing views. As he told me, "[Chinese] Socialism is the crystallized essence [*jinghua*] of the feudal society that came before it." His school essays were much less direct, but the critical intention was clear. His teacher warned him off this new tack, giving him a zero mark on one of his papers. Following this conflict, Zhiwei decided to join the sciences track, despite his interest in history and politics. As Zhiwei put it, "To succeed in composition for the examination, you need to perform a positive attitude. No one wants to read real social critique. That will fail you every time."

In short, humanistic knowledge assumes a strongly performative role in society (chapter 3). In other words, the humanities reproduce "empty ideology" rather than saying anything "true" about the world. By contrast, people widely consider scientific knowledge to possess constative basis—that is, to say real things about objective reality.

Many Chinese educators worry about these perceptions. Curriculum reformers fret about how to improve "critical thinking" and "creativity" in the humanities. Such critics also worry about the sciences, saying that Chinese science education is overly focused on finding "the right answer." A broad current of critical thought about the Gaokao blames China's lack of Nobel prizes on the examination's rigidity. In centrally located elite schools, reformers are attempting to address such problems.[236] But in ordinary schools, people say that "if it is not tested, it is not taught" (*bu kao bu jiao*).

[236] In higher-ranking schools in more centrally located places, teachers experiment with a more open approach to the study of sciences. In Xiamen Foreign Language School, for example, a mathematics teacher said that he taught students proofs and mathematical thinking during the first two years of high school, spending only the third year on preparing students for the exam. In the best high schools in large cities—especially Shanghai and Beijing—students even engage in scientific research during high school. Students in centrally located places are therefore more likely take the attitude of knowledge creators toward science, perceiving it as something that can be produced rather than merely memorized. But farther down the score-value hierarchy, students learn only that there is "one right

In all places, moreover, people consider the study of sciences to be vastly superior to the study of humanities. The choice of focusing on the humanities or sciences in high school constrains selection of college major, which in turn has profound effects on later career options. People say that science gives students more choices. As the saying goes, "study math, physics, and chemistry; go anywhere under Heaven" (*xue wu li hua, zou Tianxia*). Indeed, China's leaders of politics and industry are drawn almost exclusively from STEM fields, that is, from the ranks of scientists, engineers, and other technocrats—people who "solve real problems." By contrast, humanities restrict one's choice of profession to a few narrow options in culture work—communications, tourism, teaching, human resources, public relations, propaganda, translation, journalism, and so on. Note, moreover, how all of these jobs focus largely on impression management, that is, on maintaining and prettifying the image or front of people and institutions. Given China's censorship of public media, even journalism is mainly considered a form of public relations.

These arrangements beg the question of why anyone would prefer humanities over the sciences. In fact, most humanities students are failed science students. Moreover, although the gender distribution between sciences and humanities has balanced somewhat in recent years, boys still outnumber girls in sciences (C. Guo, Tsang, and Ding 2010). To account for domination of boys in sciences, people widely cite their superior "logical thinking" and "abstract reasoning," for which girls can only "partially compensate through exemplary diligence." When pressed, even most girls will cite such deficiencies as their reason for studying humanities. As one girl said, "The heart is willing but the flesh is weak [*xin you yu, li bu zu*]. I would love to

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answer"—an attitude that critics of the examination blame for stifling creativity and innovation. As Zhiwei said of Mountain County teachers, "They do not want to spend their time talking about fundamental questions… They consider such questions a challenge to their authority."

study sciences, but boys just have better abstract reasoning." Ironically, moreover, this statement came from the same girl who identified diligence as a form of resistance to patriarchy.

Occupational sex segregation and gender inequality constitute problems not only in China but in most, if not all, places worldwide; moreover, beliefs in the "biological inferiority" of women are widespread (Bourdieu 2001; Charles 2011; Charles and Grusky 2004). In fact, China may be performing better than many other countries in educating female scientists and engineers (Charles and Bradley 2009). But even though the representation of women in STEM fields is improving in China, female STEM majors lag behind males ones in employment and income (C. Guo, Tsang, and Ding 2010). Moreover, gender inequality as a whole has increased during the post-Mao era (Cai and Wu 2006).

The widespread cultural belief that boys possess "superior logical ability" helps account for the tenacity of occupational gender segregation China. The influence that such beliefs exert in the classroom deserve greater attention in studies of Chinese education.[237] Here, however, I would like to use an anthropological lens to focus on another little appreciated aspect of biological reductionism—namely, the way in which this reductionism forms part of a broader cosmology that is reinforced in how Chinese prepare for examinations. This cosmology largely consists of certain assumptions about how gender relates to the division between "culture" and "nature."

Consider how the above-described notions of women's unsuitability for science build on a series of congruencies between gender roles, educational disciplines, the structure of social life,

[237] N. Liu and Neuhaus's (2013) innovative study is unusual for attempting to analyze the effects of such cultural attitudes in the classroom. This study points out that different sub-fields within the sciences are gendered differently; for example, biology is considered to be a relatively "feminine" science; thus, women perform better in biology than they do in other sciences. Broader useful studies of gender inequality in the context of rural/urban difference and patriarchal cultural attitudes include Bauer et. al (1992), Cai and Wu (2006), Hannum and Adams (2007), and Li (2004).

and understandings of reality: According to prevailing gender attitudes, women's superiority in the humanities derives from their relative superiority in the "empty" arts of performativity—diligent memorization, false engrossment, face-giving prevarication, and simulation. This purported superiority in performance relegates women to front-stage social roles where they mainly work to help their (mostly male) bosses maintain a good front through overseeing various kinds of impression management. In Chinese society, the roles of secretaries, low-level speechwriters, bank tellers, and receptionists are overwhelmingly filled by women, whereas their managers and leaders are overwhelmingly made up of men. Ironically, therefore, women's rebellion through superior diligence forms part of a cultural pattern that results in their relegation to relatively inferior social roles.[238]

This gendered logic is congruent with men's domination not only of the backstage work of management and administration but also with the backstage production of connections or guanxi that this work entails: As I note in chapter 3, people widely understand the true work of "real" communication to take place not in the front-stage contexts of board meetings and public presentations but in the backstage, alcohol-lubricated realms of private dinners and trips to bars and nightclubs—places where men generally dominate the discourse. The purported basis of such divisions in biological fact only serves to effect deeper concealment of their social origins.

These arrangements, however, present an irony. Although men purportedly possess a clearer insight into the workings of nature ("better abstract reasoning"), women appear to be

[238] As I mention above, occupational gender imbalance is as acute in Chinese high schools as it is in other institutions: Women form the majority of ordinary teachers, whereas leaders are usually (and, in rural areas, almost without exception) men. Women contribute to this dynamic themselves by voting for men to be promoted: As many ordinary female teachers report, a widespread desire exists among leaders and ordinary female teachers to "care for" (*zhaogu*) men who occupy "lowly" ordinary pedagogical positions. Such men form the object of widespread pity. Assuming the role of an ordinary teacher is not considered a dignified occupation for a man, and female teachers who "only" marry other teachers are likewise pitied. In addition, women report that they do not tend to see men as objects of competition, thus women are generally inclined to support men's promotion. By contrast, many women say that they are more inclined to negatively assess the performance of female colleagues.

more deeply dominated by its polluting influences, as evidenced by taboos surrounding menstrual blood and childbirth. Thus perceptions of women's inferiority derive both from their purported proximity to nature and their relative weakness in perceiving its secrets.

In sum, then, the foregoing analysis represents an attempt to refocus our attention away from the manifest content of the curriculum toward its latent cosmological dimension—that is, how the curriculum structures experiences of the world. This approach follows calls to appreciate not only what children learn but also how they evaluate and unconsciously personify that knowledge in real-life contexts (Bourdieu 1977b).

Part II: "Quality"

Education for Quality

Since at least the late 1990s, wide sections of Chinese society have perceived Chinese education to be in a state of crisis. Reformers argue that China's "traditional" focus on diligent exam preparation prevents students from acquiring the prerequisites for success in today's globalizing economy—creativity, innovation, adaptiveness, and practical competency. Students who are good at examinations but little else are jocularly referred to as "high-scoring, low-ability" (*gaofen dineng)*. The production of such students is considered a marker of China's backwardness. To combat this "lack of quality," educational authorities have implemented a raft of "education-for-quality reforms" (*suzhi jiaoyu gaige*). The stated goal of such reforms lies in increasing the "comprehensive quality" (*zonghe suzhi*) of China's human capital, thereby improving both individual and national fortunes.[239]

[239] The literature on education-for-quality reforms is vast, but Kipnis (2011) gives a good overview. Woronov (2008) provides a useful discussion of education for quality in general and efforts to raise "creativity" in particular. Lin Yi (2011) analyzes the relationship between "education for quality" and urbanization in an ethnographic context that overlaps with my own field sites (see also chapter 2). For good general discussions of "quality" discourse, see also

Although they share the same keyword, "quality," these reforms have proven widely divergent in their approaches, contents, and even goals (Kipnis 2006). A summary of the most notable pedagogical initiatives included under this rubric would include at least the following:

(1) the introduction of communicative methods in language-learning classrooms (that is, a focus on small-group work and communication instead of drilling and memorization);
(2) various programs and pedagogical techniques to foster nationalism, or patriotic education (*aiguo jiaoyu*, already discussed above);
(3) the introduction of extracurricular activities, such as foreign-language clubs, sport competitions, or debate clubs;
(4) programs to introduce students to various forms of menial work so that they can practice "life skills";
(5) expanded emphasis on physical education;
(6) various approaches to fostering innovation and creativity, such as participation in robotics competitions or even opportunities to participate in scientific research;
(7) education to cultivate morality ("moral quality," *daode suzhi*);
(8) a de-emphasis on ranking and emphasis on the "whole person";
(9) attempts to foster "good attitude" (*xintai*) and "psychological quality" (*xinli suzhi*)—a term that I also translate as "composure" and that will become important to my analysis of "attitude" in the next chapter;
(10) the cultivation of "special abilities" (*techang*), such as mastery of musical instruments, martial arts, or artistic techniques (which will form the topic of a substantial part of my analysis below).

As can be seen from this list, "education for quality" (*suzhi jiaoyu*) is a wide-ranging and multifarious concept. Quality, in short, means different things to different people. But some clear patterns exist. In particular, "quality" is strongly associated with urban areas: The higher people are located on the hierarchy of central places, the more quality they are generally construed to possess; moreover, "the West" is deemed to be a particular locus of quality and education for quality—a perception that contributes to the desire of many Chinese to send their children abroad

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Kipnis (2006) and Murphy (2004). Anagnost (2004), Hairong Yan (2003), and Greenhalgh (2010) discuss quality in the contexts of "neoliberalism," "governmentality," and "biopolitics." Kipnis (2007) provides a balanced critical evaluation of the application of such "tropes of neoliberalism" to China. See also Kipnis (2001; 2011) for discussions of rural resistance to quality reforms and, in particular, "study reduction" (*jianfu*), which forms a main topic of analysis in this section of the chapter.

to be educated (chapter 2).[240] In general, therefore, Chinese associate quality with urbanity, modernity, and development.[241] But many complain that education-for-quality reforms work to the advantage of urban students and the disadvantage of rural ones.

Replacing Diligence with Quality

People of rural origin consider the examination's "traditional" focus on diligent memorization to be advantageous to them. They say that rural people excel in diligence. The ethic of diligence is conceived to have roots in an agrarian ethos of toil on the land, celebrated in the classic texts of Confucianism.[242] To this day, therefore, people from the countryside typically express great pride in their capacity for diligence.[243]

Many well-known narratives—immortalized in idioms, novels, stories, historical records, and verse—lionize great feats of assiduousness that transform the sons of ordinary farmers into

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[240] Throughout my fieldwork, my presence as a foreigner in Chinese high schools invariably elicited a constant refrain of national self-critique: "In China, all education is focused on examinations, whereas education abroad is focused on quality."

[241] Of course, no one likes to be labeled low quality. People of rural backgrounds either consider themselves to be relatively high quality in relation to people more peripherally located than themselves, or they appropriate quality discourse to their own ends: Many people of rural origin will argue that "city people" and "educated people" are the real people of low quality, complaining that these groups lack "morality" (*daode*) and common decency or "human feeling" (*renqing*).

[242] Confucius famously compared farming to studying and his disciple Mencius valorized physical labor. Indeed, among the four classic divisions of occupational status group—scholars, farmers, artisans, and soldiers—only scholars were considered superior to farmers. Of course, the scholar gentry of imperial times were vastly superior in status to common farmers, but many scholar-gentry families played up their rural roots. The scholar gentry commonly maintained a polycentric existence with a rural base (chapter 2). They valorized the nostalgic experience of rusticity even if their official and professional life required perches or lengthy sojourns in urban areas.

[243] Consider the example of a Xiamen University professor of rural origins, Professor Wei. His colleagues jokingly referred to him as "the farmer professor" (*nongmin jiaoshou*) because of his "hick" (*tu*) appearance, which I suspect he intentionally cultivated. Wei, who himself attended Xiamen University as an undergraduate, was fond of saying that graduates of Qinghua or Beijing University "were nothing" (*mei you shenme*): Most of them, he said, came from the city. If they had, like him, started in the countryside, then their inferior diligence would not even allow them to make it to the prefectural capital. Wei suggested that an appreciation of the significance of examinations to rural families requires an understanding of China's "traditional culture of plowing and reading" (*chuantong gengdu de wenhua*). The term "plowing and reading" usually refers to a dissenting tradition within Confucianism that sees the essence of that philosophy to consist not in the accolades of public life but in combining the lives of a farmer and scholar. My interlocutor used the term with a slightly different connotation. For him, "plowing and reading" signified the superior diligence of scholars who had grown up "tasting the bitterness" of toil in the fields.

high officials. Such stories are largely apocryphal: In imperial times as in the present, social mobility due to examination performance has been much more limited than it is popularly seen to be (chapter 1). But people of rural origin nevertheless perceive diligence to possess destiny-transforming power.

Although mobility is overstated, there is much objective basis to the belief that memorization-oriented exams are relatively advantageous to people of rural origin. This advantageousness can be explained in terms of rural people's relative lack of cultural capital: This term refers to knowledge that is implicitly or tacitly transmitted, usually within the home (Bourdieu 1977b; Guillory 1993). Cultural capital may be of many types, but in the context of state-organized education it refers to the knowledge that is required for orthodox scholastic and professional success. In China, both types of success are largely synonymous with examination success. To the degree that the knowledge required for such success is learned *explicitly* or consciously in school, the relative importance of cultural capital—knowledge that is learned *implicitly* or unconsciously at home or elsewhere—decreases. Education theorists generally think about such implicitly acquired knowledge as the inheritance of a family's cultural capital. This inheritance occurs during a child's *primary socialization* in the natal family, in short, through immersion. By contrast, the explicit, conscious acquisition of knowledge is associated with *secondary socialization* in school or society. But schools and other institutions implicitly transfer much knowledge to people, just as parents and other relatives explicitly impart knowledge upon children.[244]

[244] Of course, no form of knowledge is either completely explicitly taught or implicitly learned; as I have suggested, moreover, one will search in vain for any sharp divisions between learning in the family (primary socialization) and learning in society or school (secondary socialization). These distinctions constitute at best heuristic ones, as the discussion below makes clear. The interfaces between family and school, which further muddle such distinctions, form an object of investigation in chapter 5.

Education reformers and theorists starting at least as early as Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) have argued that children of all backgrounds should be explicitly taught in school the knowledge that they need to be successful in life (Gramsci 1971). According to this view, if children's success is predicated on parents' cultural capital, then education will simply serve to reproduce class differences. By extension, educational credentials merely serve to provide those class differences with the imprimatur of "objective" authority (chapter 1). From this perspective, the "traditional" focus on memorization in Chinese examinations is relatively progressive: In a test that is based on knowledge memorized in school, any diligent student has an opportunity to succeed.

Chinese teachers are well aware of these dynamics, although they may not describe them in terms of "cultural capital." For example, teachers note that students of rural origin do much better on "objective" questions than they do on "subjective" questions. Recall that objective questions have only one right answer. Moreover, the method for arriving at that answer can be learned through diligent study. By contrast, subjective questions require linguistic competency in English or Chinese, which must, as Chinese say, be acquired from one's "cultural environment" (*wenhua huanjing*) through "cultivation" (*xuntao*). Thus, teachers consider the English and Chinese sections of the examination to be easier for urban children, who are exposed to a "better cultural environment" from a young age. One component of this "better environment" consists in superior public-school instruction. For instance, children in the city generally start English instruction at a younger age and focus more on communicative competency. But the "better cultural environment" of urban children largely consists in advantages that can be summarized under the rubric of domestic cultural capital.[245]

[245] Because of the disconnect between examination preparation and linguistic competency, many if not most English teachers in rural China actually possess little fluency in spoken English—their competency is entirely focused on the

Consider, for example, the feelings of shock that an English teacher of rural origin, Ms. Liu, reported upon visiting a large city for the first time: The city had English newspapers, English advertisements, even English TV channels. Foreigners, who she had never before seen in large numbers, were present in abundance. She also noted that urban areas have a well-developed shadow-education industry of private "cram schools" (*buxiban*), which hardly exist in the countryside. Thus urban families with the means can easily transform economic into cultural capital. In addition, many other such methods exist for using money to give children a better "cultural environment." In Xiamen, for example, it has become fashionable for well-off parents to hire Filipina maids, who speak to children in English. Moreover, many urban children take part in expensive English summer camps—sometimes overseas.

These phenomena are widely discussed in China, if not precisely in the terms of economic and cultural capital. Note how a Mountain Town Number One student responded to my question about why children in the city have higher test scores if children in the countryside are more diligent: "To put it simply, kids in the city can afford to hire private tutors [*qing de qi jia jiao*]. Their play time is all spent studying. Rural kids, on the other hand, cannot afford private tutors, and are more reliant on their own initiative to study [*geng duo zai yu zizhu xuexi*]." Citing such differences between the city and the countryside, people of rural origin say that rural children are more diligent than urban children because the diligence of rural children "comes from within" through a conscious effort of character whereas the diligence of urban children is

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examination, and thus is sometimes referred to as "test English" (*kaoshi yingyu*). The disconnect between memorization as a method and competency as a goal, however, only becomes visible in the subjective portions of the examination since, as mentioned, the objective forms of examination question are better served by traditional study methods. In fact, many English teachers—especially those teaching in rural places—purport to be able to teach students memorizable formula for guessing the correct answer in English multiple-choice questions without actually having understood the question. Such formula, which especially appeal to science students since they transform a problem of rote memorization into one of "doing a question," give an ironic twist to John Searle's famous parable of the Chinese Room: Students can successfully simulate understanding of the text without actually having understood a thing.

imposed from without by the cultural environment. Thus the diligence of rural children is "authentic" whereas the diligence of urban children is more "simulated."

Consequently, recent reforms to deemphasize memorization on the examination and increase its purported ability to test "quality" are widely viewed to put rural students at a disadvantage. As part of these education-for-quality reforms, for example, test designers have steadily increased the proportion of subjective questions on the examination. Reformers argue that such questions measure "practical competencies" that cannot be easily simulated through "rote memorization." But people of rural origin have reacted to the expansion of subjective questions with ambivalence and even frustration. Now as before, teachers attempt to instruct students in various "shortcuts" and "tricks" for coping with subjective questions, but such methods have only limited effectiveness.

The "Examinization" of Quality and the Cultivation of "Special Abilities"

The increase of subjective questions on the examination forms part of what I term the *examinization of quality*. This term refers to how the concern with raising quality, which starts its life as resistance to "exam-oriented education," eventually becomes transformed into what the proponents of education for quality purport to critique—an overweening focus on regimentation and examination.

A central reason for this examinization of quality lies close at hand: Examinations legitimate cultural, social, and economic capital by transforming these forms of capital into a measure of individual charismatic merit (chapter 1). Whether people construe merit as residing in diligence or quality, moreover, they desire the legitimization of merit that examinations confer. Recall, however, that quality is an urban ideal whereas diligence has roots in a rural, agrarian

ethic. As I argue in the following, therefore, such debates about the relative merits of "education for quality" versus "examination-oriented education" concern not merely ideal conceptions of personhood but also the material interests of the various groups that subscribe to these conceptions. In short, the examinization of quality represents a shift of competitive advantage, which was already skewed toward people in the cities, further up the center–periphery hierarchy toward metropolitan central places.

The above-mentioned increase in subjective questions represents a relatively direct and apparent way in which quality is examinationized. Other ways are less direct. Consider, for example, the fad in recent years for "cultivating special abilities" (*techang peiyang*). This term refers to fostering the acquisition of skills in various domains that are not ordinarily not emphasized in Chinese schools, such as how as art, music, and sport. In theory, such forms of "quality"-oriented knowledge share the characteristic that they cannot be learned through exam-oriented education. In actuality, however, many families take a highly regimented approach toward special-ability cultivation. For instance, children who learn to play a musical instrument are frequently tested, advancing through a graded hierarchy of "ability levels."

At first glance, such demonstrations of quality would seem to be of little consequence for college admissions, which depend overwhelmingly on Gaokao scores (chapter 3). As critics point out, however, "special abilities" exert a strong, albeit mostly subterranean influence on college admissions.

As part of education-for-quality reforms, educational authorities banned schools from using examinations to screen and select students during compulsory primary education (elementary school and junior high school). Only some special schools—such as foreign language schools—retained official permission to examine potential candidates. As before,

however, the success of students, teachers, schools, and regions was judged by examination scores. Thus schools and officials began casting around for suitable guises under which to circumvent the ban on using tests to screen students. In the absence of examinations, schools began using various indexes of "quality"—such as the cultivation of special abilities—to recruit "talented," high-scoring students (and, by consequence, exclude many poor or low-class students) without directly and openly flouting the regulations: Students with highly cultivated special abilities tend to come from families that have the resources and ability to place a special premium on education and thus tend to produce high-scoring children. The above-described regimentation of special abilities into graded examinations provides schools with "objective" verification of students' talents. By emphasizing special abilities, administrators and officials can have their cake and eat it too: They pay lip service to education for quality while recruiting "top" students.[246]

Many parents and teachers, therefore, consider the fad for special abilities to be very "empty." Such critics say that poor people and people of rural do not possess the "cultural environment" or money necessary for the "cultivation of special abilities." As one such critic said, "If the time came when raising pigs is considered to be a special ability, we would see more children of rural origin in college."

Many other methods exist for circumventing the ban on using examinations to screen elementary or junior-high school students. One such prominent and influential method, which recent reforms have curtailed, consists of participation in the International Mathematics Olympiad.[247] Another is to hold examinations under the guise of "quality assessments."[248] In all

[246] As a consequence of this trend of using "special abilities" in school admissions, some urban primary schools actually now require students to cultivate a "special ability."

[247] The Olympiad is an international competition for pre-collegiate students that started in 1959. Countries send teams to the competition, held in a different city each year. China dominates the competition. Since 1989 the

cases, however, such recruitment mechanisms give an advantage to the wealthy, urban, and highly educated. The "best" elementary and junior-high schools recruit the "highest-quality" students, who go on to the best senior high schools. In sum, the focus on education for quality provides well-heeled urban parents with an additional advantage in the competition for scarce educational resources—a means of gaming the system (chapter 3). As forms of cultural capital or distinction, therefore, such special talents or abilities become an index for overall quality—a general habitus (chapter 3)—which includes the ability to perform well on examinations. In this way, schools and parents square the circle of both increasing student quality and maintaining high examination scores.

Quality in Diligence and Diligence in Quality

The acquisition of special abilities and other markers of quality requires great cultural and economic capital. But the achievement of high quality is also frequently construed to necessitate great diligence. In short, "quality" and "diligence" are not antithetical to each other. These arrangements present an apparent paradox: "Quality" requires diligence, but provides its

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Chinese team has won 19 times; since 2000, in every year but 2003 and 2012. Different countries use different methods to select competitors for Olympiad teams. In China, competitors are selected by advancing through a regimented series of local, municipal, provincial, and national competitions. As with examinations (chapters 1 and 3), note that each level of advancing competition corresponds with a more centrally located place on the core–periphery hierarchy; thus each level of advancing competition hypostasizes the charismatic recognition of progressively more abstract, inclusive, and transcendental communities. Members of the national team are selected from the winners of the national competition. Originally, of course, the Mathematical Olympiad was geared toward children of superior mathematical ability—a conception of merit that falls under the rubric of "quality" rather than that of diligence. In reality, however, the usage of the Olympiad as an unofficial selection mechanism for top junior high schools spawned a massive industry of after-school tuition providers that drilled students in Olympiad-style questions. Even some primary schools in large cities created special after-school and weekend classes to prepare students for such unofficial admissions examinations, for which parents paid significant sums.

[248] This approach was followed, for example, by Mr. Jian, owner of the Mountain County private junior high school that I discuss in chapter 2. In urban areas, by contrast, regulations are more strictly enforced (chapter 2). Circumventing the regulations in urban areas, therefore, usually requires a more circuitous approach, which accounts in part for the urban emphasis on "special abilities."

possessors with a mark of distinction that they say distinguishes them from people who “merely” exhibit diligence.

The association of quality with the home rather than with the school—with primary socialization rather than with secondary socialization—helps elucidate this paradox. Although cultivation of quality requires great diligence and explicit instruction, this cultivation takes place outside the formal framework of the school—in extracurricular activities, after-school classes, and at-home practice. From the perspective of the school, therefore, quality appears to be the product of a “good environment” and “good families.” Teachers acknowledge that the cultivation of quality requires hard work, but they simultaneously perceive quality as something that “comes naturally” to children of “good family background.” By contrast, the children of farmers “only know how to be diligent.”

Under these conditions, quality appears not so much to provide an alternative to diligence as a supplement to diligence: Recall that test scores, which are charismatic measures of “individual merit,” alienate or objectify the social labor that produces them (chapter 1). As a “natural” product of the “home environment,” quality further mystifies test scores, adding luster to their charisma.

Consider, for example, how a psychological counselor at Dragon Gate High School, a low-ranking urban high school, reacted after visiting a student-organized “World Cultures Fair” at Xiamen Foreign Languages High School, one of the most prestigious high schools in the city: “The students have quality to die for!” she exclaimed. Soon after, the same counselor led a motivational assembly one-hundred days before the Gaokao. In this assembly, she encouraged Dragon Gate students, many of whom came from poor migrant families, to cultivate special abilities. She rationalized this advice by noting how top students at Xiamen Foreign Languages

High School and other top high schools constantly emphasize the importance of "balance" between study and hobbies. This balance, she said, forms a secret of their examination success.

Of course, "balance" may indeed help some students study. But emphasizing the importance of extracurricular activities to students in a low-ranking school three months before the final examination, as this counselor did, is mystifying the examination system by putting the cart of quality before the horse of test performance: Without doubt maintaining a "good attitude" is important to test performance (chapter 5); however, top-scoring students in top high schools do not achieve superior test results merely as a result of their "high-quality" hobbies but rather because the cultivation of quality from a very young age indexes a "good" home environment and facilitates access to the very best schools.

However, such mystification with regard to quality is mainly an urban phenomenon. In rural schools, "education for quality" is widely deemed to be a waste of time—a distraction from the serious business of preparing students for success in the examination.

Spatial Variation in Attitudes toward Education for Quality

People of all backgrounds tend to feel genuine admiration toward accomplishments and characteristics that they associate with high quality even as they consider education for quality to be relatively "empty." But such attitudes also exhibit distinct patterns of variation along the core–periphery hierarchy.[249]

The more peripheral an institution lies in the regional hierarchy, the emptier or more fabricated the institution's compliance with centrally dictated policies or norms is likely to be (chapter 2). My data suggest a corollary to this hypothesis, namely, that actors who are more

[249] The discussion in this section builds on data that I present in my forthcoming *Social Analysis* article, "China's Examination Fever and the Fabrication of Fairness."

centrally situated in the regional hierarchy are more likely to embrace the ideals that such policies embody, while those lower on the hierarchy tend to have a more cynical attitude toward them. To some degree, moreover, central-place and school-ranking hierarchies are interchangeable in their exhibition of these tendencies: In many respects, for example, the highest-ranking school in my intermediary field site—the backwater prefectural capital of Ningzhou—resembles schools in Xiamen, while lower-ranking schools in Ningzhou resemble rural schools.

Some representative variations among my three field sites can be adumbrated in support of these observations. In particular, I examine variations in pedagogical techniques, extracurricular activities, and policies to "reduce the study burden" of students—three central planks of the education-for-quality reforms.

My data suggests that administrators and teachers in top-ranking, centrally located schools are more likely to be described as "throwing themselves into" (*hen touru*) education for quality; that is, they are more likely to feel a sincere commitment to education-for-quality reform. In urban areas, even critics of the reforms tend to see education for quality as constituting a worthwhile if perhaps futile mission. People lower on the central-place hierarchy, by contrast, are inclined see education for quality as a lamentable distraction from exam-oriented education. In their view, education for quality merely constitutes an empty slogan, but one to which lip service must be paid to give face to leaders.

Consider some specific examples that elucidate these trends. In both low-scoring and high-scoring Xiamen high schools, English-language teachers generally emphasize quality-oriented educational methods for the first two years of high-school instruction, turning only to focus full-time on drilling for the final examination in students' final third year of instruction

before the examination. In the first two years of high-school instruction, for instance, English teachers at Dragon Gate prefer "communicative" pedagogical methods. They attempt to speak to students only in English and conduct group activities in which students speak to another in English. Such methods receive much official endorsement from school leaders and inspecting officials. Indeed, in using communicative methods, teachers are complying with the official curriculum requirements issued by educational authorities in the wake of education-for-quality reforms in the early 2000s ("new curriculum reform" or *xinkegai*). But these teachers—most of whom hail from high-ranking rural schools (chapter 2) where "traditional" methods are preferred—profess feelings of helplessness with regard to the "disconnect" (*tuojie*) between "Western" language pedagogy and the Gaokao. In students' all-important last year of high school before the examination, therefore, these teachers, return to the familiar methods of drilling and memorization. Privately, they express skepticism with regard to the effectiveness of such communicative methods in preparing students for the exam. Indeed, I speculate that this urban emphasis on quality poorly serves Dragon Gate students in the examination—an assessment with which Dragon Gate teachers usually agreed. In contrast to students from higher-ranking schools, students from Dragon Gate rarely come from social backgrounds in which it would be typical for them to be exposed in English at home or to be enrolled in after-school English classes from a young age. Yet their school's focus on quality deemphasizes to some degree the rote-memorization strategies that students of rural backgrounds employ to compensate for their lack of cultural capital. As Bourdieu (1977b) suggests, when schools do not explicitly instruct students in the knowledge required to succeed in the education system, it is those without access to other venues for acquiring this cultural capital who suffer most.

In Ningzhou's highest ranking school, by contrast, quality-oriented English education methods mainly only find service in rare special "public demonstration lessons." These exercises ostensibly give teachers a forum in which to showcase advanced pedagogical methods for their colleagues from other schools. Demonstration lessons therefore constitute highly performative, front-stage affairs. Students play along with these lessons to give teachers face, but privately assess such occasions to be very "empty." Privately, teachers suggest that such demonstration lessons mainly only serve to give recognition or "face" to school leaders and municipal educational authorities by demonstrating that schools perform adequate lip service to education for quality. Few Ningzhou teachers would dream, however, of employing such methods in the serious backstage endeavor of preparing students for the examination. Privately, Ningzhou teachers complain that such methods do not suite China's "national circumstances."[250]

In Mountain County, by contrast, no demonstration lessons exist. The few high schools in Mountain County are too far apart from each other to create convenient opportunities for intercommunication. Schools focus solely on examination preparation. Pedagogical methods consist almost entirely in the time-tested methods of drilling. Teachers who provide students with opportunities to develop their all-around quality often do so in secret. For example, a teacher of Chinese who allowed a low-ranking student, the daughter of farmers, to organize and lead an end-of-the-year classroom party pledged me to secrecy: "Don't tell the section leader," he said. "School leaders don't want me to do anything that is not for the examination. But, you know, sometimes these types of activities can be a breakthrough [*tupo dian*] for farm children.

[250] A foreign teacher at Ningzhou Number One made the following complaint: Every time her Chinese colleagues had to give a demonstration lesson using communicative methods, they solicited her advice; otherwise, they ignored her. In Xiamen, where quality-oriented pedagogical methods actually percolate to some degree into the classroom, teachers can argue that demonstration lessons possessed some utility, but there too students saw such lessons overwhelmingly to be highly performative, "empty" occasions.

Unlike kids from the city, when [rural children] get up to speak in front of other people, their whole bodies shake. … I am just trying to give them experience that will be useful later in life."

Thus the rural aversion to education for quality probably reinforces modes of socialization that brand rural students as "simple" and "shy"—labels that create a distinct disadvantage for them on the post-college job market. As I discuss above, however, the rural skepticism with regard to quality also has good reason: Rural teachers and administrators justifiably consider education for quality to be a distraction from the examination, for which they say only diligent study can prepare students. Moreover, examination success forms the main criterion of social advancement for students, teachers, administrators, and officials (chapter 3). Examination scores are important at all levels of the central-place hierarchy, but particularly so in rural areas.

In rural areas, furthermore, administrators and officials have close interpersonal connections and schools are few; thus, little ethos of inter-organizational competition exists (chapter 2). As a result, adherence to education for quality must be demonstrated only to outsiders—inspecting municipal and provincial authorities. In 2009, for example, Mountain County Number One instituted extracurricular activities and elective courses to qualify for accreditation as a "first-tier high school" (*yiji dabiao xuexiao*), an important index of the school's "modernization"; however, shortly after provincial inspectors had approved this accreditation, these quality-oriented educational opportunities were summarily withdrawn.[251]

[251] Thus attitudes toward extracurricular activities and elective courses also follows the geographical pattern that I describe above: In contrast to the cynical attitude toward such innovations in Mountain County and, to a lesser extent, in Ningzhou city, students in high-ranking schools in Xiamen could choose from a wide range of extracurricular activities and opportunities to show-off their "special abilities," such as the above-mentioned World Cultures Fair. Note, for example, how students from the top high school in Ningzhou joined their counterparts from top high schools in Xiamen in a model UN simulation. But Ningzhou teachers privately professed awe at the relatively "high" quality of Xiamen teachers and students, who, for example, they said spoke "fluent" English.

As a final example of spatial variation in attitudes toward quality, consider variations in implementation of another education-for-quality reform—that of "reducing students' burdens" (*jianfu*). Comprising a broad range of efforts to reduce students' study loads and "give them back their childhoods," this category of reform affected high schools most viscerally by reducing the number of hours that they could instruct students—most notably by banning Saturday tuition. However, schools tend to resist this reform—particularly rural schools—because they justifiably see examination score to be directly correlated to diligence (Kipnis 2001). As I mention above, rural schools continued to hold classes on Saturday and even Sunday. Mountain County Number One presents a typical example of such intensive instruction practices, although the most intensive instruction schedules are reserved as a privilege for top students (chapter 3). In Ningzhou, by contrast, the top high school in the city holds classes on Saturdays, but only does so after observing slightly higher-ranking schools in neighboring prefectural capitals lead the way in flouting this regulation. If anybody asks, teachers are instructed to respond in the guise of volunteers—students have voluntarily come to class, and teachers are voluntarily teaching them. In Xiamen, by contrast, all mid- and low-ranking schools conform carefully to the ban on Saturday instruction since defying the ban can result in steep penalties; however, it is not unheard for high-ranking schools in Xiamen to use variations of use the above-mentioned "volunteer" guise to provide limited Saturday instruction.

In the city, however, private businesses provide extra tuition in the form of after-school and weekend classes. In effect, therefore, diligent urban children probably receive as much or more instruction than their rural counterparts, but extra instruction has become the provenance of private businesses. Consider, moreover, the above-mentioned Mountain County Number One student's argument that urban diligence is emptier because it has to be bought. In sum, efforts to

“reduce study burdens” have produced the counterintuitive effect of actually increasing rural–urban and class disparities in educational opportunities.

Such examples of spatial variation in education for quality could be multiplied, but the foregoing discussions should be sufficient to identify a general trend: Quality-oriented educational reforms tend to advantage the urban over the rural, the high-ranking over low-ranking student.

The Admixture of Quality and Guanxi: Bonus Points and Direct Admissions

Like the examinization of quality, the above-described quality-oriented pedagogical reforms represent an important yet relatively subterranean or implicit way in which the recent emphasis on quality has affected college admissions. But education for quality has affected admission in more direct ways, the most blatant of which include the highly controversial practices of “direct admission” (*baosong*) and Gaokao bonus points.

A wide variety of schemes for awarding bonus points exist. In the past, such schemes varied greatly from province to province. Under current Gaokao reforms, bonus-point award schemes are being nationally unified and greatly curtailed. However, bonus points will continue to be awarded for a variety of accomplishments that are associated with high quality, including designation as a provincial-level “Three Good Student” (chapter 3) or for various artistic and cultural achievements. In addition, students may acquire extra bonus points for specific universities by taking special “autonomous admissions exams” (*zizhu zhaosheng kaoshi*), so called because, unlike the Gaokao, they are organized “autonomously” by individual universities or coalitions of universities. Through such measures, some students may achieve as many as ten,

fifteen, or twenty extra points, which in Fujian Province could correspond to an increase of 30,000 places or more in the provincial rankings.

Note that these bonus-point schemes nominally reward students for their "personal accomplishments," and thus conform to orthodox social reciprocity, that is, the notion that success repays merit (chapter 1). As critics point out, however, these schemes greatly advantage high-quality students in urban areas.[252] Moreover, opportunities to compete for various bonus points may be awarded in part through various nepotistic arrangements. In short, people perceive the award of such bonus points to be easily polluted by money and guanxi, that is, to be determined "unfairly" by social position rather than meritocratically by individual accomplishment.[253]

In addition, education-for-quality reforms have also resulted in the creation of alternative pathways to college, such as the "principal's recommendation system" (*xiaozhang tuijian zhi*) or "direct admission" (*baosong*), which were originally intended to identify students who do not test well yet nevertheless possess high quality (chapter 3). But these schemes are likewise widely deemed to favor urban children: Educational authorities give schools in more centrally located places greater quotas for the recruitment of such students. Moreover, critics complain that such

[252] The link between various kinds of bonus points and "high-quality" urban cultural capital should be clear, but the topic of autonomous admissions may require additional elucidation. Such tests usually focus on subjects that students first learn during college; however, only students in centrally located places and top schools will have access to such an advanced curriculum. Moreover, these tests suffer from another source of bias, which I discuss above in connection with my description of special admissions tests for high-ranking Xiamen junior high schools (see note 12): Such exams often have an oral-interview component. Note, however, that such oral interviews are notoriously open to the effects of cultural capital since diction and other aspects of self-presentation serve as shibboleths for class and status group (Bourdieu 1977b; Bourdieu 1991).

[253] In some contexts, however, it is considered culturally permissible to award people for their ancestry—a point that I take up again in chapter 6. Thus, for example, the descendants of certain kinds of veteran or revolutionary martyrs may receive Gaokao bonus points. The award of bonus points for being of non-Han ethnicity may likewise be analyzed under this rubric: Such awards provide the individual with a form of affirmative action or reverse handicapping, which is intended to compensate him or her for perceived deficits in his or her cultural background. I argue that both of these categories of bonus points can be analyzed as examples of the percolation of the popular-religious frame of cosmic reciprocity into nominally secular bureaucratic practice (chapter 6).

recruitment is controlled by individual high-school administrators, thus easily contaminated by guanxi.

Cultural Bias

The above-mentioned expansion and proliferation of "subjective" test questions demonstrates how urban bias percolates directly into the examination itself. Recall that people say "if it isn't tested, it isn't taught." But the pedagogical environment in Chinese schools is not really geared to teach students of rural origin to respond to subjective questions, which require implicitly acquired linguistic competencies rather than explicitly acquired memorized knowledge.

Not just the form, however, but also the contents of Gaokao questions are subject to urban bias. In short, the Gaokao exhibits an urban cultural bias.

In other cultural contexts, researchers have extensively studied such cultural bias in examinations.[254] Inspired by such studies, Chinese educational researchers have made calls to study cultural bias in the Gaokao. Such discussions have even achieved wide public attention. For example, cultural bias in the Chinese essay question forms the perennial topic of public debate. Past essay questions have asked students to respond to the lyrics of popular songs or discuss cultural buzzwords. Critics argue that rural students, who may have limited cultural exposure to such topics, have little to say about them.

But such relatively explicit sources of cultural bias are easy to address. In fact, cultural bias may be much more extensive and insidious than even many critics imagine.

Consider the following example: The leadership of a high-ranking school asked an English teacher of my acquaintance to draft the English section of a mid-term examination that

[254] Lemann (1999) and Soares (2007), among others, provide useful overviews of discussions regarding cultural bias in the SAT.

would be shared with a sister school in another city. She considered this task to be an honor since her direct supervisor, a vice-principal, would be entrusted that year with helping to design the Gaokao. In other words, her own exam questions might influence those that appeared on the final exam.

When my teacher friend asked me to look at her draft examination questions, I noticed that an important component of her exam consisted in asking students to read an advertisement for a touch-screen phone. I suggested that many rural students would possess neither the vocabulary nor the context to perform this task.[255]

This teacher initially reacted with some defensiveness to my suggestion. Herself of rural origin, however, she acknowledged that rural students might find themselves at a disadvantage in such a task: Even if they might be familiar with touch-screen phones from advertisements or classmates, many may never have owned or operated such a phone themselves. "You know," she said, "the problem is much bigger than this one example. The reason that I chose the phone is that we are encouraged to include the most advanced and up-to-date things in society in our test questions." This anecdote illustrates how teachers who construct examination questions may often be more concerned with conforming to vaguely framed directives to keep the test "modern" and "relevant" than with thinking about subtle sources of cultural bias.

Conclusion: Merit and Examinations

On her bus ride back to the Dragon Gate campus from the World Cultures Fair at Xiamen Foreign Languages High School, the above-mentioned Dragon Gate counselor, Ms. Fu, observed

[255] The test designer explained that students would be required to use their contextual knowledge of touch-screen phones to answer the associated reading-comprehension and short-answer questions. I suggested, however, that many rural students either did not possess cellphones or were not allowed to take them to school. Moreover, the cellphones that I had seen in rural schools were not usually of the touch-screen variety, which were still rare in rural areas but increasingly common in urban ones.

a lapse of "public morality" (*gongdexin*) that troubled her: Foreign Languages students did not yield their bus seats to older passengers. When I asked how she reconciled these students' "high all-around quality" with their seeming lack of public spirit, she offered the following explanation: "These students may have extremely high all-around quality [*zonghe suzhi*], but some of them are certainly lacking in moral quality [*quefa daode suzhi*]."

In a similar spirit, critics of the examination system often complain that it does not teach students how to "be people" (*zuoren*), an expression that refers to the all-around moral development of the person. Voicing such a complaint, one older teacher at Dragon Gate, Ms. Wang, used an oft-repeated analogy to frame her critique: "Students who know neither how to study nor how to be people [*zuoren*] are inferior goods [*liepin*]; students who know both how to study *and* how to be people are superior goods [*youdengpin*]. However, students who know how to study but *not* how to be people are *dangerous* goods [*weixianpin*]." Expressing nostalgia for the relative innocence of an earlier era before the marketization of the planned economy, Ms. Wang suggested that the examination system today was producing more dangerous goods than ever before. She accounted for this fact by suggesting that the school naturally forms a microcosm of wider society, which she deemed to have become dominated in recent decades by a general atmosphere of corruption and selfishness. Although she herself "placed morality before test scores," she lamented that the moral aspect of education for quality had become disconnected with the society at large. As she put it, "The kids don't believe what teachers tell them anymore about morality. They think what we tell them is not real [*xianshi*]. They look around society, and see that the bad kids adapt best."

Note, however, that Ms. Wang's critique centers more on changing social conditions—the widening social disconnect between appearance and essence, or a "performative shift"

(chapter 3)—than it does on the examination itself. Defenders of the examination argue that no matter what the explicit contents of the exam or the general state of society, diligence itself constitutes an important index of moral quality. People therefore widely speak of successful examinees in reverential terms, even as "examination heroes." Teachers and administrators commonly suggest, moreover, that students of superior moral quality—the most filial and obedient—tend also to be the students who do best on the examination: They say that students who cultivate the extreme level of ascetic self-mastery that is required to succeed on the examination tend also to be considerate and modest. Despite countervailing voices, therefore, many teachers widely associate high performance on examinations with all-around superiority of character.

Note that such debates over whether or not examinations select people of real merit appear to constitute an unavoidable structural characteristic of examinations. Similar debates surround every examination system, past or present. In the U.S. context, consider recent controversies over the usefulness of college admissions tests in choosing "good" or "worthy" students or the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT) in selecting "good" or "worthy" doctors. As with the critics of the Gaokao, critics of such examinations complain that they do not promote people of "real merit." During cycles of reform, test designers periodically respond to such critiques by attempting to compensate for cultural bias or striving to incorporate more accurate measures of merit into the examination.

Indeed, the Gaokao's cultural predecessor, the imperial civil examination, also instigated similar debates, which raged for centuries. In imperial times, the most epoch-making transformation of the imperial-era civil-examination system can be characterized as the gradual

incorporation of an anti-examination ideology, Neo-Confucianism, into the examination canon (chapter 1)—a process similar to the types of "examinification" that I describe above.

In sum, the contemporary tension between exam-oriented education and education for quality echoes age-old Chinese debates about whether or not examinations select people of high moral value. The reason that such debates are inherent to examination systems relates to the importance of examinations in valorizing the merit of social elites: Different social groups negotiate to secure canonical status for examination contents that will be advantageous to their particular social interests (Bourdieu 1977b; Guillory 1993).[256] For these reasons, intellectual currents that are initially identified with moral reservations toward examinations can eventually become incorporated into the examination orthodoxy. Competing examination contents reflect different ideals of merit or character, and thus personhood. Underlying these competing conceptions of personhood, however, are competing social interests. This tension between urban and rural, dominant and marginalized assessments of merit reveals that the examination always consists in an imperfectly negotiated and internally contradictory compromise between these many different interests. Of course, this negotiation is dominated by policymakers and elites. In this negotiation, therefore, urban areas and dominant social groups always have an upper hand; however, maintaining "social stability" by guaranteeing "fairness" remains a paramount concern of state actors (chapter 3).

As this chapter argues, however, the ethics of diligence and quality are not antithetical to each other even if the interests that claim them as watchwords sometimes are. The cultivation of

[256] These interests change as students' ideal life trajectories change: During the era of planned economy, people's highest aspirations consisted in becoming a teacher or engineer. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, people widely desired to get a job as a "white collar" worker in a joint-venture or foreign-owned company. But by the second decade of the twenty-first century, people had increasingly started shifting their hopes back to "stable" occupations "within the system" (*tizhi nei*), that is, inside government or state-controlled organizations, such as state-owned companies or schools.

quality undeniably requires great diligence and persistence, even though people understand quality to include aspects of character that they say cannot be explicitly taught. But the examinification of quality casts doubt on claims of quality's innateness. Backstage—through private lessons, cram schools, and live-in tutors—urban children diligently acquire the special abilities, attitudes, and demeanors that people associate with high quality.

Thus diligence forms a least common denominator of examination preparation and educational success at all points along the central-place hierarchy. An irony of these arrangements consists in how diligence simultaneously constitutes a sublimated wish for rebellion and an ascetic form of self-mastery. By diligently preparing for the Gaokao, people are protesting against social, family, and gender hierarchies even as they ultimately confer legitimacy on those hierarchies by attempting to achieve recognition within them. This contradiction constitutes another way in which particularistic interests haunt the universalistic ideal of meritocracy: Broad segments of Chinese society, who actually possess competing interests, unite in this diligent rebellion of examination preparation. In the process, they confer legitimacy to "universalistic" national institutions. Ultimately, however, these same institutions permit and even encourage particularistic interests—the very social inequality and corruption against which examinees and their families protest.

In short, the Gaokao is an important institution through which people recruit themselves into the social practice of diligence. This practice, which is energized by rebellious desires, paradoxically reinforces social hierarchies and confers legitimacy to national institutions. Observe, moreover, that belief in the significance of diligence goes well beyond the Gaokao, playing an important social role throughout the Chinese culture of meritocracy. People of diverse "callings" (*shiye*) profess great faith in the reciprocity between hard work and success, even if

they say that this reciprocity "never reaches a one-to-one ratio." Thus people in China generally hold diligence—the ability to work hard—to be important no matter what calling one pursues. The earthly fruits of one's diligence serve as evidence and proof of one's superior merit, forming a cultural pattern that I have termed the "Chinese culture of meritocracy" (chapter 1). This chapter calls attention to the agonistic dimension of this merit production—the way in which diligence sublimates narcissistic, competitive, and aggressive desires.

This meritocratic logic of diligence is surprisingly resistant to critique since paragons of diligence can always be cited to substantiate this logic. For example, the above-mentioned Mountain County Number One student who complained to me about the relative "emptiness" of urban diligence emphasized that urban–rural inequalities did little to undermine her faith in the fairness of society itself. To make this point, she cited the success of Jack Ma—the internet mogul of legendary diligence who failed the Gaokao three times before starting his own company, the now-famous Alibaba Group. As she put it, "Actually it doesn't really matter whether or not the Gaokao is ultimately fair. Society will always be fair—success will forever belong to the diligent."

According to this view, just because Jack Ma failed the Gaokao does not mean that the Gaokao failed Jack Ma. Repeating the exam three times evinces an extraordinary level of persistent diligence in the face of repeated defeat—character traits to which people widely attribute Ma's later extraordinary successes.

In sum, the lesson that people draw from Gaokao failure is not usually that diligence is meaningless. All committed students are diligent, if not uniformly so. The undiligent have resigned themselves to their fate long before examination day. Rather, examination postmortem discussions revolve around which "top students" "choked" and which "dark horses" pulled out

“clutch performances” (*baofa*). In short, diligence is a necessary but not in itself sufficient condition for success. In accounting for examination successes or failures, therefore, people often point to much more nebulous and difficult-to-quantify qualities of character—“attitude” and “composure”—which forms the subject of analysis of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

HEAD TEACHERS, CHARACTER, AND COMPOSURE:
"ATTITUDE DETERMINES KNOWLEDGE"

At an assembly of graduating Dragon Gate High School students in late December 2013 three months before the Gaokao, Ms. Fu—a school counselor and head teacher (*banzhuren*)—presented various psychological coping strategies for managing the pressure of "the final battle." Incorporating aspects of a corporate-style motivational training, including a PowerPoint presentation on the "four secrets of successful people," Ms. Fu's speech culminated in the impartation of a "magic spell" (*zhouyu*)—a formula for self-affirmation that Ms. Fu promised students would "improve attitude" (*gaishan xintai*) by "boosting confidence" (*tigao zixin*). I return to this formula in the following analysis. But first consider Ms. Fu's description of its general significance. Stressing the importance of attitude, Ms. Fu posed students with the following rhetorical question:

> Is knowledge more important or attitude more important in examination success? Let me tell you, on test day, it is attitude that determines everything [*xintai jueding yiqie*]. … If the test lasted a few weeks, then knowledge would be more important than attitude. But because the test lasts only two days, attitude determines knowledge. You can study all you like, but if your attitude is bad on test day, you will choke [*kaoza*].

Ms. Fu's speech articulates a widespread sentiment among students, parents, and teachers: It is impossible to succeed on the examination without "knowledge," but on test day "attitude" makes or breaks examination success. In this chapter, I consider this relationship between "knowledge" and "attitude." If "knowledge" is generally subject to the kinds of effects that Bourdieu glosses under the rubric of cultural capital (chapter 4), then how do we account for

the capriciousness of "attitude"? As observers of the Gaokao commonly remark, "top students" can "choke" on test day whereas "dark horses" can tap into their "latent potential" to "surge" from behind (*baofa qianli*). In other words, the examination seems to test not only the diligent "accumulation of knowledge" but also culturally revered aspects of character such as composure, grit, or adaptability—in short, "attitude" or "psychological quality." These qualities may be tied to cultural capital but seem also to exceed its analytical grasp.

As Ms. Fu's speech suggests, moreover, teachers in China possess a high degree of awareness of such problems. Combining aspects of teacher, counselor, and surrogate parent, head teachers like Ms. Fu play a contradictory dual role: On one hand, they help students and their families compensate for cultural capital deficits and cope with the grueling pressure of the examination. On the other hand, however, they encourage students to take personal responsibility for their performance. By so doing, they reinforce the ideology of meritocracy—the notion that test score reflects personal merit. In other words, head teachers have both progressive *and* conservative effects. That is to say, they both ameliorate social disparities *and* reinforce them. Performing both analytical and affective labor, head teachers help individuals both transcend *and* come to terms with their circumstances. The labor that head teachers perform thus complicates conventional accounts of cultural capital and the reproduction of inequality, which tend to emphasize the importance of objective factors, such as social hierarchy, in determining individual subjectivity.

A closer examination of the head teacher role sheds further illumination on its peculiarities.

A few days after her talk, Ms. Fu sat across from her colleague, Ms. Yang, in a Xiamen shopping mall over a bowl of spaghetti. These two experienced head teachers discussed the

performance of their students. Ms. Fu was teaching junior high school, where the stakes were lower, whereas Ms. Yang was teaching senior three—the all-important year before the Gaokao. Ms. Yang's class, Class 4, was an underdog class that had surged (*baofa*) from behind to advance dramatically in the school rankings since the beginning of the year. Ms. Yang had taken the class over from another head teacher, who had been relieved of her duties because of the class' long-standing poor performance.

At first glance, it was difficult to account for Class 4's sudden improvement. Ms. Yang had expended much energy on refining the class' study habits. But her predecessor—an experienced senior colleague—could not be faulted for pedagogical incompetence; moreover, Ms. Yang had only led the class for a few months, giving her insufficient time to make large changes in long-standing habits. In explaining the class' sudden change of fortunes, therefore, her colleagues attributed greater importance to the morale-boosting effect that Ms. Yang had exerted on the class through her "concern" (*guanxin*) for students and her attention to "pedagogical discipline" (*jiaoxue jilü*). As a result of these efforts, the class had achieved a result on the last monthly exam that was inferior only to that of the key class. In recent weeks, however, Ms. Yang—herself an experienced head teacher—had sensed her students slacking off. They seemed to be growing weary, becoming complacent. Ms. Fu termed this effect a "high-altitude reaction" (*gaoyuan fanying*).

"The challenge," Ms Fu said, "is to keep the students in shape [*baochi zhuangtai*] but let them relax a little so that they peak right before the Gaokao."

"Right," Ms. Yang replied, "but that's easy to say, hard to do."

As the exam grows near, these themes of attitude, timing, and motivation begin to dominate teachers' discussions of student mentality and class dynamics. In the years leading up

to the examination, the gradual "accumulation of knowledge" (*zhishi de jilei*) has primary importance. But as the examination grows closer, more capricious and harder-to-teach factors loom larger—composure, morale, "psychological quality" (*xinli suzhi*). Like professional athletes or soldiers, teachers say, students must stay in shape—neither relax too much nor burn out through overtraining. In their efforts to foster examination success, therefore, teachers emphasize not only diligent study but also mental toughness. Playing a crucial role in inculcating both virtues, head teachers are indispensable to all these efforts.

During my fieldwork, I came to think of head teachers as resembling baseball coaches. As a sport, baseball epitomizes the combination of three seemingly incongruous tendencies—an obsession with the statistical analysis of performance; a heavy interest in team dynamics; and a fascination with individual character, composure, and grit. Baseball coaches, therefore, must combine the roles of statistician, psychologist, strategist, and leader. Similarly, in the years leading up to the exam, head teachers pore over statistics from weekly, monthly, and yearly examinations. Using these measurements to conduct targeted interventions in students' study habits, head teachers coordinate the efforts of the teachers of individual academic subjects (*kemu laoshi*). Head teachers thus strive to ensure that students maintain balanced development in all subjects rather than displaying "bias" toward one discipline or another (*pianke*). The official role of school counselor that Ms. Fu assumed was relatively new, having only been instituted in the past few years. As older teachers pointed out, every head teacher is really a counselor: Through one-on-one conversations with students and various other measures, they understand themselves as making direct interventions in students' state of mind, in their psyches. Unlike baseball coaches and unlike head teachers in other countries, however, Chinese head teachers council parents and even act as surrogate parents. Head teachers frequently advise parents about

parenting, even conducting "home visits" (*jiafang*). In these ways, head teachers insert themselves into the minutiae of parenting to a degree that most parents in Western contexts would probably find offensive.

Thus head teachers form a pivot between school, society, family, and students. As Ms. Wang, a highly experienced Dragon Gate head teacher, described the head teacher role, "the head teacher is a coach, a maid, a psychological counselor. [He or she] has to pay attention to students' study and their psychology among many other things. [He or she] has to mediate [*tiaozheng*] the relationship between school and society and mediate the relationship between student and parent." Since the head teacher thus faces pressure from both above (school leaders, society) and below (parents and students), one Ningzhou head teacher said being a head teacher was like being "the chicken in a Kentucky Fried Chicken sandwich." Although the institution of the head teacher has been influenced by Western education models, people also perceive the institution, as it is practiced in China, to possess quintessentially Chinese cultural characteristics. As a provincial educational official told me, head teachers combine paternal and pedagogical authority in a way that harkens back to the "traditional" teacher role of the imperial era.

Playing what Ms. Wang termed "mediating roles" between parents and students, school and society, the head teacher labors on the threshold of what many in China term the "external" (*waijie*) and "internal" (*zishen*) factors of examination success. People generally associate the former with factors outside of the individual's control, including place of birth, gender, and background. As such, people sometimes discuss such external factors in the same breath with "innate" (*xiantian*) characteristics, such as "intelligence" (*zhili*). In other contexts, such external

or innate factors might be glossed as aspects of an individual's "fate." By contrast, people consider the latter—internal factors—to be *within* the individual's control.[257]

I suggest that all such boundaries—including those between school and society or between parent and student—are arbitrary in the sense that they are institutionally produced and culturally constructed. Indeed, I argue that the labor performed by the head teacher relies on the ultimate incoherence of those boundaries; thus the head teacher in a sense personifies the arbitrariness and porousness of such boundaries: In particular, a primary task of the head teacher consists in helping parents compensate for their lack of social and cultural capital. A central tactic of a good head teacher, therefore, is to intervene in students' "cultural environment" (*wenhua huanjing*) by making parents and students conscious of cultural deficits relative to the dominant, orthodox examination curriculum and then helping them to correct those deficits. In a sense, the head teacher plays the para-ethnographic role of an activist researcher who attempts to use the fruits of his or her research to intervene in the lives of his or her research subjects. In fact, many head teachers—particularly in urban areas—may be involved in actual research projects that aim to ameliorate social inequalities. Publication of original pedagogical research is a requirement for promotion (*ping zhicheng*). Even though teachers generally consider such publications to be relatively "empty," students may experience a boost in morale from being guinea pigs for new pedagogical approaches.

Through all these efforts, the head teacher can and often does have a real progressive social effect—that is, they can help ameliorate educational disparities. Access to a good head teacher thus itself constitutes a form of social and cultural capital, but this access varies greatly

[257] Although such boundaries between "external" and "internal," "nature" and "nurture," are without doubt influenced by Western discourses, such distinctions also have strong analogs in indigenous discourses, such as the Neo-Confucian distinction between *li* and *qi*: Heaven-given pattern or principle (*li*) is originally good and perfect but is polluted by material energy (*qi*). Through self-cultivation, however, people can purify *li*.

across the score-value hierarchy. Against the background of the fundamental geographical disparities that I discuss in chapter 3, such progressive effects are highly localized and should not be overestimated. In addition, to achieve such progressive effects, the head teacher, especially in conversations with individual students, must emphasize factors that are within students' control rather than those that are truly outside of it. Ironically, therefore, the focus on "attitude"—although helpful in enabling students to perform to the best of their ability—actually ends up strengthening the perception that the result of the examination is primarily determined by individual effort rather than by social factors. Thus the emphasis that teachers give to "attitude" reinforces the tendency for students to credit or blame themselves unduly for examination success or failure.

In this way, head teachers ultimately play a central role in the objectification of social labor into examination scores, even as they also generally have a progressive, though limited, effect on encouraging mobility. These limited positive effects on individual mobility are, in a sense, bought at the expense of the exam's greater alienating effects. In the final analysis, therefore, even as the head teacher's work relies on porousness of the boundaries between the "external" and "internal" factors of success, their labor also reinforces and recoheres these boundaries, especially in the psychic life of the individual examinee.

To bring the cultural particularity of the above-mentioned arrangements into relief, this chapter pursues a comparative analysis of cultures of meritocracy. As I discuss below, Westerners and Chinese differ in how they construct these boundaries between the "external" and the "internal" and in how they conceive mobility. As a result of these differing conceptions, I suggest that Chinese possess a relatively high, though imperfect, awareness of the effects that education theorists summarize under the rubric of "cultural capital" (Bourdieu 1977b; Guillory

1993) The head teacher role represents the institutional crystallization of this awareness, since it is the head teacher's job to combat "low levels of culture" in students and families (*wenhua shuiping di*).

The structure of the chapter roughly mirrors the process of examination preparation: Students and teachers conceive of preparation in terms of the gradual incorporation of models provided by the environment. Thus, I proceed from describing "external" influences that long precede the exam to describing "internal" processes that dominate in the months and weeks leading up to the exam. During the first part of the chapter, therefore, I discuss the "internalization" of knowledge and models. In the second part, I explore the "externalization" of inner potentials through motivation, composure, and attitude. My discussion culminates with the fateful moment of the examination itself. I analyze how this traumatic event *individuates* people, by which I mean that it encourages them to take personal responsibility for their social destinies. As in many other types of fateful event cross-culturally, the examination produces this effect because examinees somatize social pressures, experiencing them as nervousness and anxiety. In the heat of the fateful moment, one's own body confronts one as an alien power that must be faced down and mastered through heroic acts of composure.

Part I: Internalizing the Environment: Knowledge and Models

Peer Pressure and Class Rankings

Head teachers in senior high school consider a central challenge of their job to consist in establishing influence over children at an age when their habits are already largely formed. Teachers say that they can still have a direct effect on students of junior-high age or younger. In senior high school, however, children become less plastic, more resistant. As one teacher

testified, “Senior-high students are like trees that have already taken on a fixed shape” (*dingxing*).

As a result of this fixity, teachers search for indirect ways to influence students. In particular, they say that senior-high students are still susceptible to “peer pressure” (*tongban yali*; *tonglingren yali*). Thus head teachers have to find various ways to “use the class to influence individual students.”

Because of this institutional paramountcy of test score, the strongest form of peer pressure involves class rankings (*mingci*). In the past, these rankings were posted openly. Under education-for-quality reforms, however, the emphasis on class rankings was discouraged, resulting in the outlawing of this practice (chapter 4). As with many aspects of education for quality, however, the de-emphasis of class rankings was not completely “implemented in reality” (*luoshi dao shichu*). Most students still know their exact class ranking.

This awareness of class ranking has several sources. Since education-for-quality reforms encourage teachers to use “positive feedback,” teachers commonly name and praise students at the top of the rankings in class meetings and school assemblies. At Dragon Gate, billboards are displayed in prominent positions outside the teachers’ offices listing the “top” and “most-improved” students in each subject. In many schools, moreover, students’ seating arrangements for monthly examinations are based on their ranking in the previous month’s exams.

Now as before, moreover, rankings play a central place in students’ lives. For example, students know that consistently high test scores can earn them promotion to a “better” class—a “fast” or “keypoint” class (chapter 3). By the same token, low-scoring students may be threatened with demotion. Low-ranking students report feeling ashamed and humiliated, whereas high-ranking students are said to display a “feeling of superiority” (*youyuegan*)

The peer pressure induced by such practices extends to parents. Parents are periodically convened by head teachers for "parent conferences" (*jiazhang hui*). In front of the assembled parents, head teachers praise and shame individual parents by detailing their children's successes or failures, improvements or declines, exemplary behaviors or disciplinary problems.

In short, teachers consider peer pressure one of their most effective tools for influencing students and families. The recent emphasis on education-for-quality may have softened such tactics to some extent. Directly or indirectly, however, teachers and administrators incite students and parents to constant comparison between themselves according to the all-important metric of test score. As one student put it, "You're always thinking about how you're doing in relation to someone else, whether or not you study as well as him or her. The pressure is huge. It's a terrible feeling."

In other contexts, teachers may discourage students from comparing themselves with others. In particular, teachers disparage the tendency to show off family wealth or "compare daddies" (chapter 4). Many see such tendencies as an expression of the "impetuousness" (*fuzao*) of this generation of children, who grew up during China's boom years in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Ironically, however, students are encouraged to compare their examination scores, even though these scores actually provide a relatively a reliable index of social differences, such as the wealth and social position of parents.

The Paramountcy of "Environment": "One Who Stays near Vermilion Gets Stained Red, and One Who Stays near Ink Gets Stained Black"

If the modus operandi of peer pressure is comparison of test scores, the scope in which this comparison achieves its effect is the "class environment" (*banji huanjing*).

“Environments” come in many shapes and sizes. In addition to the class environment, people also refer to the “school environment.” Families and places, too, have “environments.” People also refer to environment in terms of “climate” (*qifen*) or “atmosphere” (*fenwei*)—terms that might also be translated as “ethos.” As I elaborate in following sections, the family environment or ethos is considered to be particularly important to students’ success.

The influence of the environment plays a crucial role in Chinese pedagogical discourse; moreover, many teachers feel this emphasis to be quintessentially Chinese. Consider how Ms. Wang described the significance of the environment: “In China, people have always been concerned with the environment. Do you know the expression ‘One who stays near vermilion gets stained red, and one who stays near ink gets stained black’ [*jin zhu zhe chi, jin mo zhe hei*]? It’s like that. People, especially children, are highly impressionable. They take on the color [*secai*] of the people around them.”

Confucian notions of human nature presume all people to be born good, but present this goodness as easily corruptible, thus requiring cultivation (chapter 1): According to this thinking, students must actively cultivate goodness by acquiring good habits. This cultivation of goodness requires the emulation of “good models” (*hao bangyang*). The significance that Chinese ascribe to exemplary models is widely reflected in Chinese social and educational practices (Bakken 2000). Although “environment” has material aspects (equipment, buildings, books), which I further discus below, various types of environment—class, school, family, place—are largely conceived to consist of such cultural models. “Environment” thus consists of relationships with models—peers and authority figures. Borrowing from psychological discourse, teachers sometimes explicitly refer to such relationships in terms of “identification” (*rentong*).

In Chinese high schools, teachers consider indoctrination and punishment to have a place; however, such "forceful" methods are ultimately relatively "empty" because they can be resisted. By contrast, the "establishment of good models" (*shuli hao bangyang*) has a "subliminal effect" (*qianyi mohua*), which is relatively "real." This subliminal effect occurs through "cultivation," *xuntao*, a word that evokes the image of nebulous ambient social forces that, like smoke (*xun*), gradually shape (*tao*) the individual by permeating him or her. Cultivation generally refers to "positive" (*jiji*), "healthy" (*jiankang*) influence. By the same token, however, a bad environment can ruin or destroy people. In the terms of Bourdieu's educational sociology, such subliminal influences might be described in terms of the "implicit" effects of cultural capital. In short, these conceptions of cultivation through the environment are quite similar in some respects to Bourdieu's notion of the effects of cultural capital (chapter 4).

For these reasons, many teachers devote significant thought to adjusting seat arrangements. They consider such issues as whether or not to put strong students next to weak students or to seat girls next to boys, whether or not to reward high-achieving students with seats at the front of the class, and so on. The goal of such considerations is to create an environment of mutually reinforcing role models in which students have a positive reciprocal influence on each other through emulation and competition.

This supposition of mutual influence through the "environment" forms another important rationale for the aggressive streaming practices undertaken by many schools (chapter 3). Such procedures are justified by the widespread perception that the score-value hierarchy forms a moral hierarchy (chapters 2 and 4). Although education-for-quality discourse discourages teachers from drawing a direct correlation between score and quality, many teachers privately admit that the most obedient and filial students congregate in the best classes and top schools.

Under such conditions, teachers usually strive to group good students together while minimizing the influence of "bad elements."

Fosterage Arrangements

Chinese parents likewise give much consideration to the importance of environment. Securing a "good environment" for their children forms an important part of their strategic considerations in gaming the system (chapter 3). To a degree that many North American might find alarming, Chinese parents are willing to cede control over parenting to secure a "better environment" for their children. In particular, many parents pursue various kinds of fosterage arrangements (*jiyang*).

For example, many rural teachers operate boarding houses, serving as surrogate parents for children whose birth parents are working as migrant laborers in urban areas. In the countryside, even very young children may live with their teachers. Reasoning that teachers possess "a superior cultural level," many parents prefer such arrangements to leaving their children behind with grandparents, who they say "lack culture" (*quefa wenhua*).

Migrants are not alone in desiring to improve children's environment through various fosterage relationships. With the transformation of China's economic fortunes in recent decades, generations of entrepreneurs have risen from modest backgrounds to amass great fortunes; however, many such parvenu parents consider themselves, like migrant workers, to "lack culture." It is thus common for newly wealthy entrepreneurs to hire a live-in tutor—for example, a recent college grad—to help raise their children.

Less wealthy parents may rely on an analogous strategy, namely, that of seeking a well-placed relative in the city or even a foreign country who can be persuaded through some debt of

guanxi to act as surrogate parents. Particularly in rural areas where it is common for families to have more than one child, examples of children being raised by non-nuclear relatives are commonplace.[258] Sometimes such surrogacy arrangements can take place over great separations of time and space. During my fieldwork, a how-to book appeared—*My Free-Range Daughter Got Into Harvard* (*Fangyang de nü'er shang Hafo*). This best-selling book describes a father's clever exploitation of his social network to find various foster parents in foreign countries for his daughter. From the age of four, she attended "fifteen different schools in twelve different countries," eventually securing admission to Harvard University.[259]

One final example of such arrangements should be adduced, although it does not fall completely within the category of fosterage as traditionally conceived. Chinese parents generally have much greater tolerance for sending children to boarding schools than many Western parents do. Even junior-high-age children (ages eleven and up) commonly board at school. In many rural areas, the closure of local schools means that parents' only option may be to send children to public boarding schools (chapter 2). But even parents who have a choice of schools will usually embrace the opportunity to send a child far away for school if doing so will improve his or her educational prospects.

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[258] Unsurprisingly, such arrangements sometimes cause great stress for all concerned. During my fieldwork, for example, a college professor at Xiamen University complained to me bitterly that her husband had agreed to let his older brother's daughter live with her family without properly consulting her. Her husband's older brother was an ordinary worker. Since his sister-in-law was a college professor, this parent considered the cultural environment in her family to be superior to his own. His younger brother, whose own school fees had been paid by this older sibling, felt that he could not refuse the request.

[259] Note that the importance of finding a salutary environment sometimes trumps straightforward considerations of advancing up the central-place hierarchy. Particularly when such fosterage arrangements entail significant geographic relocation, parents may consider them to provide superior access to opportunities, or, as Mr. Jian put it, a better "platform for destiny." Sometimes, however, such arrangements require minimal relocation, or even—as in the case of migrant workers leaving children in the care of teachers in their native places—even entail leaving children in places lower on the central-place hierarchy, albeit in the care of someone conceived to possess superior merit.

Since educational quality and opportunity generally increases as one moves up the geographical hierarchy of central places (chapter 2), parents seek to board or foster their children in places that are more centrally located than those in which they themselves reside. This cultural predilection is partly responsible for the recent explosion in interest in overseas education. Chinese generally conceive Western countries to occupy a superior or transcendental position vis-à-vis the Chinese civilizational hierarchy, at least as regards "education for quality" (chapter 2). As more and more Chinese parents can afford to send their children abroad, they naturally seek to do so.[260]

As mentioned, these efforts to secure a "good environment" may seem extreme to many observers from middle-class Western contexts. Many North Americans, for instance, would consider the above-described fosterage relationships to constitute a dangerous abdication of parental responsibility. Even many Chinese teachers express frustration with parents' unwillingness to take "full responsibility" for their children. As one teacher told me, "A lot of parents just see kids as pets. [Parents] think that all they need to do is feed them, clothe them, and send them to school. If they could, they would just give their children to teachers and be done with it." And, indeed, fosterage relationships enable parents to do almost exactly that. But from the perspective of many parents, such arrangements constitute not an abdication of moral duty but rather its fulfillment.

[260] Many of Fong's (2011) observations about education abroad corroborate this discussion. Fong describes how Western countries are considered a kind of "paradise." My observations complement Fong's focus on such practical considerations as "flexible citizenship" (Ong 1999) by emphasizing the cultural values that Chinese attach to education abroad.

Cultural Differences in Mobility Patterns and Understandings of Cultural Capital

In many other respects, Chinese and Western cultures of meritocracy are surprisingly similar. Thus the prevalence of fosterage in Chinese culture represents a significant cultural difference. What accounts for this difference, and what is its significance?

In the foregoing examples, note how Chinese of widely varying social backgrounds openly admit to possessing "cultural deficits." Such confessions reveal a telling cultural difference between Chinese and Westerners, particularly North Americans. In North America, open discussion of social hierarchy is considered impolite or taboo. People are not likely to openly discuss their "cultural deficits" vis-à-vis one another, just as they would never think of asking each other how much money they make. In China, by contrast, such topics are not taboo. The discussion of "cultural level," wealth, and other markers of hierarchy is commonplace and, usually, open. It is taken for granted that such socioeconomic hierarchies exist, and that people occupy very different positions within them.

Of course any such broad-stroke discussions of cultural differences must remain suggestive, ideal-typical, and heuristic. Nevertheless, attitudes toward social hierarchy in China and North America seem to differ significantly. I suggest that we might begin to account for this cultural difference by attending to differences in ideals of mobility.

As I discuss in chapter 2, Chinese experience the central-place hierarchy as a status hierarchy. In Chinese social arrangements, merit—whether conceived in terms of "culture" or "quality" or both—is correlated with one's position in the social-cum-geographical hierarchy, which more or less transparently reflects ones' life fortunes.

In North American imaginaries of mobility, by contrast, people usually conceive mobility in terms of the radical reinvention of the self—an ideal undergirded by the historical experiences

of settler colonialism, immigration, and Western movement. This ideal of radical transformation tends to deemphasize affective bonds to kin and place. Instead, this ideal enshrines the transplantation of the self, which is conceived to disrupt such affective ties. Simultaneously, people emphasize the importance of promotion within organizational hierarchies. In North America, this imaginary of mobility has led to preoccupation with the individual's moral duty to transcend his or her social background through self-reinvention. The preoccupation for this moral duty of self-reinvention—the "pulling oneself up by one's own bootstraps" of the Horatio Alger mythos—produces an obsession with "equality" that, I argue, tends to conceal and actually exacerbate the reality of inequality.

Note that in both Chinese and Western cultures of meritocracy, people conceive of themselves to have a moral duty for diligent self-cultivation, success in which they understand to be judged by a transcendental, universalistic authority—be it the market, the examination, God, or Heaven (chapter 1). Moreover, Chinese too are concerned with self-reinvention. The Gaokao forms just such a fateful moment when people attempt to reinvent themselves by transcending their circumstances. In Chinese conceptions of merit, however, the explicit purpose of such self-transcendence consists in repaying one's filial debt and in nourishing and expanding one's outward radiating network of guanxi connections, which center on one's native place—or, given the polycentric quality of most Chinese families, on several places (chapter 2). In North American conceptions of merit, by contrast, this focus on affective ties is relatively muted. Parents and children place more emphasis on independence and self-sufficiency.

Chinese anthropologist Fei Xiaotong's (1992) discussion of such cultural differences provides a useful rubric for approaching them. Commenting on Chinese preoccupations with guanxi, Fei suggests that a model of Chinese personhood might be sought in the concentric

patterns that appear when a pool of water is disturbed by a pebble. The pebble is a person and the waves represent his or her personal connections with others. Focusing on such radiating networks of differential guanxi relationships, Chinese individuals do not tend to think of themselves as equal to one another. By contrast, Western individuals tend to emphasize their individual bond with a community, that is, they adopt a communitarian ethic. As a metaphor for American personhood, therefore, Fei suggests bundles of straw. Each straw is equal, but wrapped together with others to form an organizational whole. Similarly, Westerners tend relate to one another as equals who jointly uphold the moral values of an organization of similar individuals. Summarizing these cultural differences, Fei refers to the Chinese ethic as the *differential mode of association* and the Western one as the *organizational mode of association*.

With these differences in mind, we might summarize the Chinese concern with expanding one's guanxi networks through movement up the central-place hierarchy as a *differential pattern of mobility*. By contrast, we might typify the North American concern with achievement of greater social influence through self-reinvention (joining and forming new communities) and promotion (rising within a community) as an *organizational pattern of mobility*.

I should hasten to emphasize, however, that I think neither Chinese nor Westerners can be pigeonholed as epitomizing one tendency or the other. As I note throughout my analysis, guanxi *and* bureaucratic organization play an important role in Chinese society, which is characterized by a high degree of both. Indeed, all cultures of meritocracy—and perhaps all human cultures of any kind—combine particularistic, guanxi forms of reciprocity and universalistic, organizational forms of reciprocity. Fei himself notes that both Western and Chinese societies actually mix both modes of association. As I suggest in chapter 1, therefore,

cultural difference should therefore be sought not so much in the predominance of one mode over the other but rather in the contextually specific interrelationships between them.

To account for the dual predominance of guanxi and bureaucracy in China, I suggest above that a preponderance of one form of reciprocity requires the other as its supplement (chapter 1). Building on the analysis of foregoing chapters, I can now elaborate on this suggestion by further specifying the contextual relationship of both forms of association in Chinese institutions: People widely consider guanxi relationships, which largely play out in backstage intuitional contexts, to be "genuine," "real," and "down-to-earth": by contrast, they see the front-stage performance of universalistic reciprocity and other organizational ideals to be "empty" and "false" (chapter 3). Even though such performances are largely devoid of constative meaning, however, people achieve real things in the world by carrying out such "empty" performances. In particular, they uphold, reinforce, and reproduce guanxi relationships by giving one another "face" or effecting the transfer of other forms of value to one another—status, credibility, or even money. In short, these are "empty" performances with real effects. Although these effects are often as innocent as providing moral support to a friend, they are commonly also much more consequential. In the eyes of outsiders, they may amount to collusion, deception, fraud, corruption or worse.

In short, the organizational front of "empty" fairness is required as a supplement to reproduce the down-to-earth reality of backstage guanxi relationships. The sacredness of the Gaokao—society's "only relatively fair competition"—derives from its reversal of these customary polarities: What is customarily empty becomes real, and vice versa (chapter 3).

All these observations recapitulate earlier arguments. But consider a corollary that they suggest: In contrast to Westerners, Chinese seem to be under relatively few illusions about the

"reality" of universalistic fairness. Consequently, they attribute great importance to the type of effects that Bourdieu summarizes under the rubrics of cultural and social capital. In most contexts, Chinese understand the universalistic ideal that "everyone is equal before the law" to be an empty slogan.[261] Certain places and times may come closer to the achievement of that universalistic organizational ideal. But most Chinese would consider it "naïve" (*danchun*) to claim that a universalistic system could exist that is unpolluted by guanxi, particularly in China, where guanxi forms a fundamental aspect of China's "national circumstances" (chapter 2).

Moreover, the egocentric pattern of mobility discussed above encourages Chinese to conceive of all people as being ranked within one social-cum-geographical civilizational hierarchy. In short, the expansion of one's guanxi network is coterminous with one's rise up this universal social-cum-geographical civilizational hierarchy, in which everyone is differently situated. By contrast, North Americans—and, to a large degree, Euro-Americans more generally—assume themselves to be more equal than they really are. This assumption of equality tends to conceal the effects of cultural capital from North Americans more completely.[262] By the same token, the North American preoccupation with radical self-reinvention encourages North

[261] Some might expect Chinese skepticism of such universalistic ideals to issue from training that Chinese schoolchildren receive in Marxist critique of such bourgeois ideologies. But Marxism is foremost among those ideals that most Chinese assume to be virtual and false. In short, Marxism is defanged of any critical potential by being transformed into an "empty" ideology by the examination system. Moreover, similar cultural attitudes toward such ideals as "fairness" long precede the introduction of Marxism to China.

[262] As a result of these differing arrangements, Chinese at every level of society pursue the accrual of benefits to themselves and their kin through the subversion of organizational ideals, which nearly everyone perceives (albeit to differing degrees) to be empty. In Western societies, by contrast, the subversion of organizational ideals is a strategy mainly pursued only by those on the margins of society, for example, among the dispossessed (who flout rules) and the wealthy (who pursue lawfare or legalized corruption). Since most ordinary people are more or less engrossed in the reality of organizational ideals, the capitalistic expropriation of surplus value by the ruling classes probably generally proceeds more efficiently within Euro-American cultural context, where fewer ordinary people embezzle or subvert that flow of value for their own uses. A pleasant side-effect of these more efficiently exploitative arrangements, moreover, is the relative seriousness with which people in the West take public morality and other organizational ideals. From a Chinese point of view this engrossment in organizational ideals is "naïve," but this engrossment perhaps makes these places a more pleasing place to live for the (rapidly diminishing) middle classes since various institutions (the university, environmental protections, and so on) represent a closer semblance of their ideal selves. There is evidence, however, that Euro-American cultures are undergoing a performative shift, just as in some respects such organizational ideals may be becoming more constative within certain contexts in China (chapter 2). In short, all such trends are subject to regional and global cycles and trajectories.

Americans to emphasize every child's unique individuality rather than their rank against an abstract civilizational hierarchy.

The foregoing discussion helps to account for Chinese predilections toward pursuing fosterage relationships and boarding arrangements that would be intolerable to most Westerners. Westerners tend to emphasize the unique contribution of parents to cultivating a child's individual personality, which has "equal value" no matter what that child's social position. By contrast, if Chinese parents believe that fostering a child away will help improve his or her eventual position on the civilizational hierarchy, many will consider it highly irresponsible not to pursue such arrangements. As a result, many parents conceive of their primary parental duty to consist in securing through diligent labor the economic and social capital necessary to arrange for fosterage or boarding relationships that will maximize their child's acquisition of the "culture" that they themselves or their native places cannot provide. Through fostering their children away, Chinese see themselves as performing an act of self-sacrifice—one of course that they expect will pay later dividends in the form of a successful, filial children.

"Intelligence" versus "Latent Potential"

The Chinese sensitivity to the importance of "environment" or cultural capital accompanies a relative de-emphasis of factors considered to be predominantly "innate" (*xiantian*) such as intelligence. Chinese students and teachers are much less enamored of describing the results of norm-based standardized examinations as a product of varying intelligence or "smartness" than their North American counterparts.

The most common standardized college entrance examination in the United States, the SAT, is descended from an IQ test (Lemann 1999). Americans still commonly conceive the SAT

to test “smarts” or “intelligence.” But administrators at elite American colleges have long resisted overreliance on the SAT, stating that the test cannot measure “character.” These debates call to mind similar debates in China (chapter 4): Just as “quality” discourse has been employed to exclude people of rural origin from elite colleges in China, such notions of “character” have been employed to exclude certain groups from American colleges. In the 1960s and 70s, when the SAT started gaining in dominance, administrators used “character” as a criterion of admission in part to reduce the proportion of successful Jewish applicants, who excelled at standardized tests (Karabel 2006). Fighting what many term a “bamboo ceiling,” Asian Americans allege similar discrimination today (Soares 2007). But the situation is complex. The goal of American college admissions does not lie purely in admitting the “most qualified”; admissions officers justify looking beyond the SAT and other numerical metrics in the pursuit of creating a “diverse class” (Stevens 2009). Thus resistance to the SAT also grows out of very valid concerns about the cultural and socioeconomic bias in the examination. Critics of the exam point out that test score seems to correspond more closely to socioeconomic background than to any other variable (Soares 2007).

It would be incorrect, however, to assume that the SAT does not test “character.” As a fateful event, the SAT, similar to the Gaokao, is a trial of merit in which people personify high cultural virtues. At different times, the company that administers the SAT, the College Board, has stated that the “A” in SAT stands for “aptitude” or for “achievement.”[263] As mentioned, however, test-takers themselves often account for test performance in terms of “intelligence” or “smarts.” We are not accustomed to thinking of “intelligence” as a cultural virtue—an aspect of

[263] Indexing the insoluble contradictions of meritocratic ideology, the SAT has now become an empty initialism—the letters officially stand for nothing. The current pendulum of reforms is pushing the test in the direction of “achievement”: Reformers hope to synchronize the exam with the high-school curriculum—an arrangement that more closely resembles the Gaokao.

character. Upon closer examination, however, “intelligence” possesses many similarities with folk notions of character.

Recall that character is conceived cross-culturally as both a relatively durable aspect of the self and something that requires periodic proof (chapter 1). Similarly, we think of intelligence as something that people both “have” and need to “demonstrate.” This folk conception seems to influence scientific understandings of intelligence. Consider the distinction between “crystallized” and “fluid” intelligence that has become commonplace in intelligence research: “Crystallized” intelligence describes habituated patterns of cognition that are learned through experience. “Fluid” intelligence describes “innate” cognitive dexterity—the ability to “think on one’s feet.”

In short, I suggest that this notion of intelligence reflects not only “neurological processes”—that is, properties of “the brain”—but also the above-mentioned underlying folk conceptions of character. Note how the distinction between “crystallized” and “fluid” intelligence maps on to conceptions of character as something that is both durable and requires demonstration. In the last analysis, this contradiction reflects a fundamental human existential dilemma that expresses itself in culturally various ways (chapter 1): Recall that this contradiction centers on the question of whether people produce themselves or are produced by society. In intelligence research, this contradiction has incited endless “scientific” debates about the heritability of intelligence, most notably the “bell curve” debates of the late 1990s (Jacoby, Glauberman, and Herrnstein 1995). In my view, however, such debates more closely reflect underlying cultural (and cross-cultural) assumptions about character than they do the scientific reality of “intelligence” per se.

In short, intelligence represents not an objective scientific fact but a culturally determined character ideal—one that has long competed with various (usually elite) notions of "character" in North American college admissions. As such a character ideal, intelligence is conceived both as durable and requiring of proof, both innate and fungible, internally produced and externally molded. Such notions of intelligence have diffused globally along with "scientific" intelligence research, but nevertheless exhibit cultural variability. In North America, the general (unmarked) tendency is to emphasize the innateness and heritability of "intelligence," despite little evidence that this characteristic is primarily or even largely "genetic."

In fact, authoritative new research suggests that variation in intelligence can largely be accounted for through the type of effects that Chinese summarize under the rubric of their culturally prevalent concept of "environment." Intelligence researchers have long been perplexed by the "Flynn Effect," which refers to how intelligence paradoxically appears to be both heritable and environmentally determined. The intelligence researcher after whom the effect is named, James R. Flynn, himself suggests that this paradox can be resolved by analyzing how children are influenced by their environments, on the one hand, *and* learn to create their own environments, on the other (Dickens and Flynn 2001).[264]

Although Flynn is writing from the tradition of mainstream psychometric research, his insights track closely with those of the critical educational sociology of thinkers like Bourdieu.

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[264] In particular, the Flynn Effect refers to how IQ is increasing from generation to generation across the whole industrialized world. Describing this effect, Flynn notes that some IQ studies support the hypothesis that IQ is genetically determined, others that it is environmentally determined. Flynn himself accounts for this apparent contradiction by observing that the correspondence between the IQ of parents and children actually increases as children age (Dickens and Flynn 2001). The level of correspondence is relatively low (.4 to .6) in children's pre-teen year but relatively high (.7 or .8) in children's late teenage years—a research finding that corresponds closely with Chinese teachers' perception that children take on a "fixed form" by senior high school. Flynn thus surmises that the heritability of IQ must be to a large degree environmental, suggesting that culture and heritability, nature and nurture, form a false dichotomy. In sum, writing from the disciplinary perspective of mainstream psychology, Flynn accounts for environmental effects on "heritability" in terms that are strongly suggestive of anthropological notions of cultural capital and habitus. Flynn thus in effect reinvents the insights of a critical sociology of education, albeit helpfully lending such insights a greater imprimatur of scientific authority.

But such views remain relatively marginalized in North American culture, where people continue to emphasize the "innateness" of intelligence. By contrast, Chinese tend to see "innate" intelligence as less important than do their North American counterparts. Teachers are almost unanimous in agreeing that the Gaokao is not a test of intelligence per se but rather one of diligence, persistence, composure, and (perhaps) "quality."

Granted, analogs to the North American obsession with IQ exist in China. For example, some Chinese researchers suggest (unofficially, at least) that if the Gaokao was administered "scientifically," the exam would result in an "ideal society" ruled by people of high IQ.[265] In a further example of IQ fetishism, many Chinese believe that the world's "races" (*zhongzu*) can be ranked in a hierarchy according to intelligence.[266] And as I describe in chapter 4, women and men are commonly perceived to vary in their mental capacities, men supposedly possessing "superior logical thinking" to women. In other contexts, moreover, genetic heritability of intelligence is emphasized. Many Chinese exercise great care in selecting an intelligent and otherwise "genetically superior" spouse in the hopes of having "excellent" offspring.[267] Since

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[265] In this society, the division of labor would be organized according to intelligence, with high-intelligence masters coordinating the labor of the low-intelligence masses. This vision uncannily resembles the dystopian predictions of Michael Young—the coiner of the term "meritocracy"—who, in his 1964 science-fiction novel, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, describes a revolution of a "low-merit" proletariat against their "high-merit" masters. Ironically, the early American adopters of the SAT interpreted Young's term not as a warning but a social ideal (see note 31 above); similarly, this teacher saw such an IQ-based class society to constitute the ideal social arrangement.

[266] Typically, people say that China's own "ethnic minorities" demonstrate the most "inferior" intelligence, bested by blacks, who are "inferior" to whites. The latter, in turn, are said to be "inferior" to Chinese and Jews, who purportedly vie for first place in the racial intelligence scale. One teacher, after asserting the cognitive superiority of Han Chinese and Jews, assured me that the mental disadvantages of my race (she identified me as white) could be transcended through luck and diligent effort. This teacher (incidentally also an education researcher with a doctoral degree) shared these views with me in a private conversation in a restaurant. She assured me that under ordinary circumstances she would not dare give public voice to such "real ideas." As a result of such self-censorship, it is difficult to assess—as with racist views in other cultural contexts—how prevalent such beliefs are in China. Research into Chinese racial attitudes, however, suggests that such conceptions of racial hierarchy, even if publicly muted, play a prominent role in Chinese cultural life.

[267] Many Chinese fear subjecting their unborn children and grandchildren to the discrimination faced by people of small stature or other perceived physical blemishes or handicaps. In discussing potential marital partners, therefore, parents commonly set certain minimal physical standards of height, appearance, intelligence, and skin tone for their children's love matches in an attempt to ensure that their grandchildren will inherit characteristics that "ensure a smooth life." By concealing the social dimension of allegedly "biological" characteristics, such ostensibly

"superiority" is widely associated with urbanity, Han ethnic origin, and "health," these practices reinforce and naturalize discrimination against rural people, ethnic minorities, and the disabled.[268] More generally, Chinese population-control policies have eugenicist goals, including the improvement of intelligence.[269]

But people in China consider even such supposedly heritable characteristics to be influenced by the behavior and environment of parents and children. Consider for example the widespread practice of "infant education" (*taijiao*), in which mothers sing, read, and play music for their unborn child—a practice that people believe contributes to children's intelligence and positive educational outcomes. In accounting for success and failure in life, moreover, most Chinese—including professional educators—will argue that intelligence is overrated. Even if metropolitan urbanites widely describe people of rural background as "stupid" or "simple," such descriptions—like the commonest expression for "intelligence" (*congming*, often translated as "clever")—seem to describe ingrained dispositional attitudes as much as they do innate characteristics. The term for IQ, *zhili*, is rarely used in educational contexts. Instead, teachers emphasize differences in disposition that are acquired through good habits, among which diligence and persistence reign supreme. People talk about success as representing not the fruits of "intelligence" but rather the spoils of a hard-won battle between diligent self-cultivation and the dark forces of anti-diligence—guanxi and nepotism (chapter 3). In accordance with above-

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"scientific" standards reinforce discrimination against rural people, whose lower education, generally smaller stature (probably as a result of undernutrition), and darker skin serve as indexes of their rurality.

[268] Kohrman's (2008) treatment of disablement in Chinese society is highly useful, but provides little direct discussion of schools. During my time at Mountain County Number One, a delegation of Canadian schoolteachers visiting the school remarked on the conspicuous absence of disabled children—a topic that deserves much further investigation.

[269] In a recent iteration of such eugenicist desires, various Chinese corporations have attempted, apparently with state backing, to provide scientific support for the improvement of population quality by developing genetic technologies for enhancing human intelligence. More prosaically, evidence exists that the use of various forms of genetic-choice technology to avoid "inferior births" is increasing (Sleeboom-Faulkner 2010). These eugenicist imaginaries accompany various forms of discrimination, including a disturbing public absence of visibly disabled people in China.

mentioned Confucian pedagogical ethics, the cultural environment of an individual—including his peers and role models—create the conditions for the cultivation of good habits.[270]

Teachers thus overwhelmingly concur that innate intelligence forms a necessary but in itself insufficient condition of examination success. "Environment" is widely understood to play the predominant role. Consider how one Dragon Gate head teacher, Ms. Yang, responded to my comments on a newspaper exposé about "super high schools" (*chaoji zhongxue*). In this case, this term referred not to rural test-prep factories (chapter 4) but to high-ranking high schools in metropolitan centers. The article described in detail the superior educational resources of such schools, as well as the great sums of money that they sometimes charge in illicit fees. Notable student achievements at super high schools included publication of original scientific research papers and admission to elite Western universities.

My response to the article was quite different from Ms. Yang's. I reacted with awe over the great social disparities between such schools and ordinary high schools like Dragon Gate. I suggested to that such super high-school students could not possibly be superior to Dragon Gate students in intelligence, a capacity that I argued must be equally distributed throughout society. Rather, I argued, students must differ primarily in access to opportunity. But Ms. Yang responded to my comment dismissively. To her the issue of intelligence was a non sequitur. "What is amazing to me," she said, "is how these super high schools are able to stimulate children's latent potential" (*jifa qianli*).

Note, therefore, that whereas I automatically reached for intelligence as an explanation—even if a negative one ("there cannot be such large differences in intelligence")—this teacher's starting position consisted in her notion of "latent potential." According to this view, students

[270] Such cultural differences probably largely account for why Asian Americans—and Americans of East Asian cultural origin in particular—form a "model minority," surpassing Whites in many measures of educational success.

may differ in their latent potential, but latent potential, unlike innate characteristics like intelligence, is fungible and possessed by all.

The conception of students' educational development in terms of latent potential forms a mainstay of educational discourse all over China. But this concept has a wide cultural life beyond education, structuring people's understandings of finance, history, and medicine among other domains: Stocks, nations, and *qi* or "spiritual power" (*lingli*) are also described as possessing "latent potential." A common structural metaphor guides people's understandings of these disparate domains, between which much conceptual cross-pollination occurs. Like stocks, nations, or *qi,* students have the ability to "surge" or to underperform. As a primary stakeholder in student's test outcomes, the head teacher hopes that students' latent potential will blossom; indeed, she actively campaigns for that eventuality. But such outcomes are chancy, subject to factors beyond any single individual's control. Moreover, only students with room for development in their latent potential may be worthy of a teacher's investment of time.

"Internal/External" versus "Innate/Acquired":

Analyzing Cultural Difference as Markedness of Explanatory Model

In describing how the super high school unleashed students' latent potential, Ms. Yang described the "school environment" as part of what she termed the "external world" (*waijie*), which forms an overarching term for environmental influence. According to her view, different aspects of students' external world activate or unlock their latent potential. In this way, students internalize or incorporate aspects of the external world as "personal" (*zishen*) characteristics.

Such views of personal development have wide currency in China. My sense is that Chinese educators vastly prefer this external/internal model of explanation to one based on the

innate/learned binary that dominates in North American views of intelligence. The difference is subtle. Both types of pedagogical model assume that the individual is to some degree a blank slate. Western conceptions of innateness, however, evoke something like original sin: Learning serves to unleash hidden potentials but also to correct intrinsic flaws in the individual. By contrast, Ms. Yang's model—which evokes Confucian notions of inherent goodness (chapter 1)—tends toward the assumption that all children start out more or less equal but are influenced differently by their external environments. As these environments becomes internalized through habit, children's quality or level of cultivation gradually becomes "fixed," as Ms. Wang would say.

"Latent potential" is understood differently in different times and places. For example, the current obsession with conceiving the stock market in terms of latent potential may be unique to this historical moment. But "latent potential" also points toward something enduring and fundamental about Chinese conceptions of personhood: Confucian currents of thought harkening back at least to the great twelfth century synthesizer of Neo-Confucian or "Way Learning," Zhu Xi, similarly emphasize that the perfectible pattern (*li*) of human beings, which must be cultivated through purification and cultivation of material energy (*qi*) (Bol 2008; Brokaw 1991)

Chinese also possess conceptions of innateness. These conceptions are generally associated with "Heaven" (*Tian*): Innate characteristics are described as "before Heaven" (*xiantian*) or "Heaven born" (*tiansheng*) and learned ones as "after Heaven" (*houtian*). The Chinese word for "genius" (*tiancai*) literally means someone who possesses "talent" (*cai*) given by "Heaven" (*Tian*). Such notions of Heaven-given talent recalls Western notions of "giftedness."[271]

[271] Such notions of "Heaven" will have different resonances in different contexts and for different people, sometimes scientific, sometimes religious. In all cases, however, these terms index innate differences that exist

Note, therefore, that Chinese employ one model of learning based on the "innate/learned" binary and another based on the "external/internal" binary. These different models are structured by different underlying metaphors: The innate/learned (*xiantian/houtian*) binary emphasizes time, whereas the external/internal (*waijie/zishen*) binary foregrounds space. Although both types of explanation are possible, Chinese generally prefer the latter. Similarly, Westerners also employ both types of explanatory model—temporal and spatial. But in contrast to the Chinese preference for the external/internal binary, Westerners generally prefer the innate/learned binary. In short, people in both cultures employ both types of explanatory models, but tend to prefer one over the other, depending on context. As I suggest above with regard to differing notions of reciprocity, therefore, analysis of cultural difference between Chinese and Western ideologies of meritocracy should not so much focus on elevating one or the other culture as an exemplar of some ideal type but rather should pursue a more nuanced approach, for example that of identifying contextually varying cultural predilections.

Consider how the linguistic theory of markedness helps describe such differences in predilection. In markedness theory, "unmarked" refers to default, taken-for-granted grammatical components or semantic categories whereas "marked" refers to those that require elaboration or qualification. In English, for instance, the male gender is unmarked whereas the female gender is marked: "He" is the default pronoun; moreover, most descriptors or nouns are presumed to be

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before birth and thus prior to "environment." Scientific and popular religious explanations may be conflated. In many contexts, people interpret such "Heaven-born" differences as biological. In the last analysis, however, many Chinese will account for such "biological" differences through notions of "karmic merit" (chapter 6). Of course, such views vary widely according to context and religious predilection, but Chinese of all backgrounds seem to emphasize environment over innateness. One might expect, for example, Christianity's emphasis on original sin to impel Christian Chinese to prefer explanations of innateness. But even Christian Chinese seem to give greater weight to environment than to innateness. For example, Mr. Jian, the founder of Mountain County's private junior high described in chapter 2, attributed the success of his school to its carefully crafted environment, including human factors such as teachers and the grouping of students by class as well as material factors such as the spatial arrangement of school grounds.

male-gendered unless modified linguistically (for example, “actor” versus “actress”). Markedness theory, originally developed by the Prague School of linguistic structuralism (Roman Jakobson and Nikolai Trubetzkoy) has been applied by cultural anthropologists to analyze symbolic systems (Battistella 1990).

I suggest that in ordinary Chinese pedagogical discourse, models based on the innate/learned distinction seem to be more marked whereas models based on the environment/personal distinction seemed to be less marked. Conversely, in North American contexts, the opposite pertains. But some signs exist that North American educational practice may be undergoing a massive sea change in the direction of a greater emphasis on “diligence” and “environment,” whereas education-for-quality reforms in China are pushing that country in the direction of American practices.

The Distorting Mirror of the Other:
The Convergence of U.S. and Chinese College Admissions

Recent shifts in the strategies of guidance counselors and admissions officers in the United States seem to indicate a growing unease with the innate/learned model of merit. Colleges are increasingly making norm-based exams like the SAT optional and giving greater emphasis to criterion-based “subject” exams. Moreover, the SAT itself is being reformed to emphasize learned knowledge or “achievement.” By the same token, admissions officers are paying more attention to grades and extracurricular activities, which they say reflect “hard work” and “grit”—close analogs to Chinese notions of diligence and persistence. In the long run, admissions officers say, such qualities, which “cannot be tested,” are better predictors of success. To secure admission to an elite college, therefore, students must now display a wider array of

accomplishments than ever before. Education researchers have described the resulting transformation of U.S. college admissions in terms that evoke the performative turn in post-socialist Chinese ideology that I described in chapter 3. A culture of performance pervades elite high schools and colleges, performance here understood in the dual senses of athletic and theatrical performance (Blum 2009): Like professional athletes, students feel that one sub-par performance can destroy their career—an attitude that leads to an overweening ambition to achieve perfect grades. But critics suggest that students also perform in the theatrical sense: Current generations seem to possess less "authenticity," less sincere engrossment in their study than did earlier generations.

The watchword of this academic culture of performance is "excellence," which resembles Chinese notions of "quality." Like "quality," excellence can mean different things to different people, thus uniting disparate social groups around one unifying symbol or master signifier of merit (Readings 1996). This culture of academic "excellence" is accompanied by a steady long-term decline of interest in humanities and pure sciences, on one hand, and an increase in pre-professional training, on the other.[272]

The current emphasis on performance is not entirely novel (Blum 2009). Broader cultural vacillations between "authenticity" and "performance" are subject to historical cycles (chapter 3). But in higher education in the U.S. and elsewhere, the pendulum appears to have swung far in the direction of performance over the last thirty years or so. In short, the "performative turn"

[272] For a representative discussion of the recent decline in humanities enrollment, see this recent New York Times article by Tamar Lewin: http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/31/education/as-interest-fades-in-the-humanities-colleges-worry.html (accessed February 26, 2016). But other sources point out that this decline is a long-term trend—one that is tied in part to women's steady migration from humanities to STEM fields (Tworek 2013). Humanities in the U.S. have long been associated with femininity, as they are in China (chapter 4). However, the decline of the humanities is only one dimension of larger shifts in higher education (commercialization, marketization, professionalization, etc.) that critics associate with "neoliberalism." See my further discussion in note 273 below.

described in chapter 3 may have local causes and effects but to some degree represents an international trend.

The reasons for this shift are complex, but include economic transformation and increasing social inequality. Over the last three decades, inequality has risen not only in the U.S. and China but nearly everywhere (Dorling 2014).[273] Many critics attribute growing inequality to the laissez-faire economic reforms of recent decades in the U.S., China, and elsewhere—reforms that critics gloss as "neoliberalism" (Harvey 2005). This term flattens cultural differences but helps highlight converging international trends (Kipnis 2007). In the domain of higher education, these trends are associated with the steady "commercialization," "commodification," and "corporatization" of the university (Bok 2003; Tuchman 2009; Shumar 1997). Chinese higher education, too, is pursuing such a "global model," albeit one with "Chinese characteristics" (Mohrman 2008). Some suggest that such trends signal an epochal worldwide sea change in higher education from producing national elites to preparing children for success in an international or even "postnational" marketplace of technocratic corporate professionals (Readings 1996).

Be that as it may, many U.S. educational officials and reformers covetously regard China's high scores on international standardized exams, in particular the OECD's Programme

[273] The global economic crisis that began in 2008 has exacerbated this unequal trend, but inequality has deeper roots. Many critics also attribute growing inequality to the laissez-faire economic reforms of recent decades in the U.S., China, and elsewhere—reforms that critics gloss as "neoliberalism" (Harvey 2005). This term flattens cultural differences but helps highlight converging international trends (Kipnis 2007). By reducing all change to a single concept, however, "neoliberalism" tends to gloss over the complex contributing causes of the international economic transformation of recent decades. In identifying such causes, some point to the movement of fossil fuels outside the northern sphere of control (Mitchell 2011). Others suggest that technological change—in particular, automation—may be an important but underexamined contributor (Bregman 2016). Economists likewise debate the causes of rising global inequality, and whether increasing inequality signals a fundamental change in the world system or part of a complex economic cycle (Milanović 2016; Piketty 2013).

for International Student Assessment (PISA) examination.[274] As I note in chapter 4, such tests do not accurately reflect the Chinese education system as a whole, but some U.S. officials have interpreted China's performance on the PISA test to constitute a "Sputnik" moment that heralds the urgent need for wide-scale change.[275] Partly as a result of such concerns over national competitiveness, the use of standardized tests in U.S. primary and secondary education has expanded greatly in recent decades even as their use in college admissions has diminished.[276]

In many respects, therefore, the U.S. system is converging with that of China. The U.S. education system is increasingly emphasizing performance, diligence, grit, and standardized testing. In both the China and the U.S., moreover, the prevalence of standardized testing at the primary- and secondary-school levels has produced widespread anxieties about the genuine quality of students. As a result of these anxieties, Chinese educational reformers have striven in recent years to supplement "test-based education" with the cultivation of "all-around quality"; moreover, Chinese educators take "Western education"—epitomized by the United States—to be the ideal model of "quality" (chapter 4). But this supposition of American "quality" appears ironic in light of the recent increase in standardized testing in the United States. When Chinese teachers hear that standardized testing is being given such prominence in American education, they react with great incredulity: How can the great model of "quality" be going down the road

[274] Of course, national competition in education is nothing new, but the degree to which this competition is increasing under conditions of *decreasing* national authority seems novel. Elite U.S. colleges are increasingly training not only national elites but international or transnational elites.

[275] A recent New York Times article on the Gaokao by Brook Larmer makes reference to U.S. government officials' description of China's PISA results as a "Sputnik moment": http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/04/magazine/inside-a-chinese-test-prep-factory.html (accessed February 28,, 2016). For a useful and trenchant critique of China's performance on PISA tests, see Loveless (2014). Loveless analyzes how China's PISA results reflects biased sampling rather than widespread educational "excellence." See also notes 135 and 208 above.

[276]Critics of the expansion of standardized testing blame this trend for exacerbating inequality and misapprehending the "real" mission of public education, which they say should consist in producing critical citizens rather than good test-takers (Kohn 2000; Ravitch 2010). Such fundamental critiques of the meaning of "education" are important but tend toward philosophical idealism, overlooking the importance of public education in undergirding political legitimacy. Reform of the "purpose" of education cannot be divorced from more fundamental economic and political reforms.

of standardized examination? Thus reformers on both sides of the Pacific perceive the Other darkly through a distorted looking glass constructed of their own anxieties and desires.

In other words, just as Americans and Westerners more broadly possess a distorted view of Chinese education, so do Chinese have a distorted view of "Western" education, in particular American education. Just as American anxieties about national decline undergird perceptions of China as "educationally superior," Chinese desires for "quality" are projected onto a largely imagined Western Other. This Other is conceived to be the opposite in every respect to China.

For example, people in China say that Chinese college admissions are exemplified by an approach that they characterize as "narrow entry, wide exit" (*yanjin, kuanchu*). By this they mean that it is difficult to gain entry to a Chinese university but, once admitted, students are guaranteed to graduate. For this reason, people say that college education is very "empty"—students "do not actually have to learn anything." By contrast, they say that "Western" education is typified by the opposite approach—"wide entry, narrow exit" (*kuanjin, yanchu*). In other words, gaining admission to Western colleges is "easy," but, once admitted, students must work hard. Thus Western college education is considered to be very "full" or "real." These cultural perceptions have some basis in reality, but their strict structural symmetry reveals projective thinking.

Motivated by such cultural perceptions, Chinese reformers are making gradual moves toward college admissions based on an "all-around assessment system" (*zonghe pingjia tixi*). But few believe that China can completely abandon the Gaokao. Teachers and researchers in China almost universally agree that incorporating such "subjective" factors as high-school grades, extracurricular activities, letters of recommendation, and other achievements into the mainstream Chinese admissions process would result in great injustice. In contrast to Western countries, they

say, China is a society ruled by social relationships or guanxi, which form an unavoidable part of China's "national circumstances" (chapter 2). People say that the cultural prevalence of guanxi in China makes it easy for the well-connected and well-heeled to fabricate achievements in "subjective" domains, whereas "objective" achievements like test scores are harder to fake.[277]

But the "national circumstances" of China and the U.S. may not be as different as people think, particularly during this period of cultural convergence. In both places, "meritocratic" individual achievements such as test score objectify or alienate social labor. In the U.S. system, the opportunities that students require to demonstrate "excellence" are more easily purchased or fabricated than many Chinese assume. On both sides of the Pacific, moreover, success requires great efforts of diligence, even if the opportunities to demonstrate this diligence are unequally distributed. In both places, ascetic forms of diligent self-cultivation help erase the trace of the social labor that creates the conditions for that self-cultivation. Summarizing these trends, critics have termed this type of culture a "hereditary meritocracy"—a term that could easily be used to describe both China and the U.S.[278]

It is too early to predict the result of this convergence of educational models. On both sides of the Pacific, resistance exists to the reforms that are bringing these models closer. In both China and the U.S., however, critical reflection about the significance of these reforms would benefit from more objective dialog. For example, the Chinese assessment of the U.S. educational model's unsuitability to China's "national circumstances" suggests a possible critique of the

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[277] Indeed, many "agencies" (*meijie*) exist to help Chinese apply to foreign high schools, colleges, and graduate schools. Such agencies advertise that they help Chinese applicants "package themselves" (*baozhuang ziji*)—largely a euphemism for fabrication. These companies sometimes liken the college admission practice to "fishing," thus describing the process of applying to a foreign college in terms similar to those women sometimes use to describe finding a "good" husband (chapter 4).

[278] I borrow the term "hereditary meritocracy" from this 2015 Economis article: http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21640316-children-rich-and-powerful-are-increasingly-well-suited-earning-wealth-and-power (accessed February 15, 2016). To some degree, all "meritocracies" are "hereditary" in this sense (chapter 1), but this term can be usefully employed to highlight the above-described increasing cultural convergence and widespread unease with the "authenticity" of meritocracy.

American model. Many critics of U.S. college admissions, including admissions officers themselves, openly discuss how the system reproduces privilege (Stevens 2009). But deep cultural logics in Western and, in particular, North American conceptions of mobility militate against more fundamental critique.[279]

Critics of U.S. college admissions have become increasingly aware of the fallacies surrounding the cultural logic of "intelligence" exemplified by the SAT, but tend to demonstrate less critical awareness of the important role that cultural and social capital plays in the successful demonstration of "grit" and "hard work" through educational and extracurricular achievements. I believe that the above-described North American cultural taboo against acknowledging inequality tends to suppress discussion and awareness of cultural and social capital, which Chinese explicitly and openly emphasize through such terms as "environment" and "guanxi." Even with this taboo, however, radical educational experiments can occur in the nooks and crannies of the U.S. education system. Consider, for example, the SEED Foundation's initiatives to provide low-income children with comprehensive early-childhood education in boarding schools where they live full-time from Monday to Friday (Fryer and Curto 2014). Such initiatives break down the boundaries between "public" school and "private" life—the home and school "environment"—in ways that are reminiscent of the Confucian-minded thinking that I describe above. But such efforts strike even many self-identified "liberal" Americans as extreme.

[279] In many cases, U.S. college admissions' focus on "diversity" may have only limited effects on counteracting inequality (Stevens 2009). Without doubt, diversity policies represent salutary and important initiatives. As currently implemented, however, they represent what John Guillory (1993) calls an "idealist politics of image," altering the optics of inequality rather than attacking its roots. Since people of color are vastly overrepresented in low-income groups, some researchers have concluded that racial and ethnic diversity in U.S. colleges would be much higher than it currently is if colleges admitted students in quotas by income quartile (Lemann 1999). But such radical forms of affirmative action may be fiscally infeasible in the current funding environment of higher education; in addition, they would likely falter on the resistance of the elite: In American notions of mobility, people of low social origin are conceived to have a moral duty to reinvent their social class. Consider, moreover, the effects of what Bourdieu (1992) terms "delayed selection." Elite colleges may admit students with cultural capital deficits. Without great supplemental training, however, such students will rarely be able to compete with their privileged cohort mates.

Most Americans—and most Westerners more broadly—consider the "home" to be a sovereign domain: As I note above, Westerners tend to emphasize the sacredness of parents' unique contribution in cultivating a child's individual personality.

In China, no such taboo against discussing inequality exists; thus, parents and teachers are more painfully aware of the significance of cultural and social capital. Granted, in both places students are conceived as the heroic protagonists of their own success stories. To a greater degree than in the United States, however, Chinese emphasize the importance of "environment" in stimulating or unleashing people's potential for success; moreover, they obsess about the importance of guanxi in securing a good environment.[280]

As I elaborate below, however, Chinese awareness of cultural capital is only partial. Moreover, this awareness is a double-edged sword: Chinese cognizance of inequality actually makes Chinese susceptible to official efforts to mask or censor its scope (chapter 3). What is hidden from view in U.S. college admissions is thus hidden in plain sight in China. People cynically believe that they fathom the true extent of educational inequality when inequality is in fact far worse than they suspect.

But the relative high degree of awareness of social differences among Chinese educators also increases their scope for taking certain actions to ameliorate those differences: To some degree, moreover, combatting inequality is actually institutionalized within mainstream educational practices in China, notably in the person of the head teacher. Within Chinese high schools, head teachers are the street-level bureaucrats in charge of helping students and parents overcome their "cultural deficits." The effectiveness of head teachers in this task derives from

[280] Consider how such cultural differences lead to subtly differing accounts of poverty. Americans tend to blame people for their own poverty, which reflects a lack of capacity for self-reinvention. Among Chinese elites, a similar culture of blaming people for poverty exists, but the Chinese tendency is toward blaming the individual's environment, which failed to instill moral virtue, rather than the individual per se. The blame is not necessarily less intense, but the attribution of ultimate cause is different.

how they easily traverse domains that Westerners usually consider to be separate: The goal of head teachers' analytical and affective labors is to "harmonize" (*xietiao*) students' various environments, particularly the "school environment" and the "home environment." In comparison, Western teachers only infrequently and indirectly intervene in home life.

But head teachers have complex social effects. They reinforce inequality even as they ameliorate it: In their role as examination coaches, head teachers incite students to rebel against the status quo. But in their roles as counselors and surrogate parents, they must help children "recognize fate," that is, come to terms with their place in the social order.

Securing Access to Conscientious Head Teachers

Head teachers can be a parent's best resource in overcoming cultural capital deficits. But access to a good head teacher is no given in Chinese schools.

For one thing, high-scoring students receive preferential treatment. Thus head teachers may actually work to reinforce cultural-capital differences by neglecting students with low test scores or by giving biased advice to parents based on conscious or unconscious prejudices against rural people, ethnic minorities, and women. These tendencies are exacerbated by the gift-giving culture surrounding Chinese schools: Families who can afford to give expensive gifts to their child's teachers or hold banquets in their honor can expect more individualized treatment.

By the same token, the commitment and skill of head teachers vary widely along the central-place hierarchy: Head teachers in high-ranking or centrally located schools tend to be relatively "committed" (*touru*) to their roles, whereas head teachers in low-ranking and rural schools tend to be relatively "unserious" (*bu renzhen*). The commitment of head teachers in central places like Xiamen is embodied in such practices as visiting students' homes (*jiafang*),

talking frequently with parents, holding motivational speeches during class meetings (*banhuike*), and actively monitoring and advising students. In Xiamen, even low-ranking schools like Dragon Gate possess committed head teachers.[281] In Ningzhou, by contrast, only teachers in top high schools display the hallmarks of a serious attitude. At lower-ranking schools, students complain about the "unserious" attitude of their teachers: They said, for example, that teachers smoke and drink tea when they should be answering students' questions.[282] At Mountain County Number One, only fast classes have "serious" head teachers who "take responsibility." By contrast, slow classes possess "irresponsible" and "unserious" head teachers. At all points on the score-value hierarchy, students may have differential access to committed head teachers within the same school. But this problem tends to be particularly acute in rural areas where students of widely varying test scores congregate in the same educational institution (chapter 3). In addition, head teachers in Mountain County Number One and other rural places seldom conduct home visits, partly because many rural students travel far from their homes to board at school.

Parents know that the commitment and quality of head teachers varies widely. Thus securing access to a good head teacher forms an important consideration in gaming the system to obtain admission to "good" schools and "good" classes. As noted in chapter 3, parents may use a variety of licit, quasi-licit, and illicit means to obtain such admission, ranging from paying official "school-choice fees" (*zexiaofei*) to outright nepotism and bribery. But the ability to game the system, as well as the knowledge of when to do so, itself forms a kind of cultural capital—one that head teachers actively assist parents with.

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[281] As I discuss in chapter 2 and elsewhere, most Dragon Gate teachers had either joined Dragon Gate after teaching for many years at high-ranking rural schools or had graduated from top provincial or national-level teachers' colleges.

[282] Another characteristic of "unserious" head teachers consists of an unwillingness to keep discipline: Students generally prefer teachers who are "strong" since lax discipline creates a "bad classroom environment"; teachers who are overly lax are described as "not taking responsibility" (*bu fu zeren*).

Head Teachers' Role in School Choice

An important way in which good head teachers can help parents overcome deficits in cultural capital consists of advising them about how and when to game the system.

In many cases, parents struggle with the choices that they face. For example, parents may possess the means (guanxi and money) to secure access to a "better" school for their children, but may be in doubt about whether or not the investment of such economic or social capital will pay dividends that justify the expenditure: Students of middling academic achievements may thrive in a lower-ranking school, where they receive extra attention, but languish in a highly ranked school, where they will be relegated to the bottom of their class (chapter 3).[283]

When children take the high-school entrance exam, parents commonly consult with their junior-high head teacher about school choice.[284] Shortly after a child commences senior high school, many parents may likewise consult with a child's new senior-high head teacher about whether or not it is "worth it" to "spend money" to secure access for the child to a better school or class. Although head teachers may be of great value to parents in making such decisions, many parents may be only dimly aware of the complexity of head teachers' considerations in

[283] As I note in chapter 3, many people say that it is better to be a high-ranking student in a middling school or class than the opposite, that is, it is "better to be the head of the chicken than the tail of the phoenix." Another example can be added to those in chapter 3 to illustrate this principle. One Mountain County student—the daughter of the Mountain County Public Security Bureau chief—described the following experience: Enrolling in the "study-abroad class" (chapter 3) of a top Xiamen high school during her senior-one year, she found that she could "not adapt" to life in the city. Accustomed to individualized attention from teachers and administrators who had a personal relationship with her father, she floundered without this extra guidance. For her senior-two year, she transferred back to Mountain County Number One, where she secured access to the top fast class through her father's relationship with the principal of the school, whom she affectionately termed her "uncle." "You know," she said, "Xiamen teachers at [top Xiamen high schools] are good. However, there I was just a normal student in a normal class. The top teachers at Mountain County Number One may be older or more traditional, but they are pretty much as good as our teachers in Xiamen. Here, though, as students in the experimental classes, we receive lots of special treatment."

[284] In most places, the process of selecting high schools closely resembles that of selecting colleges: The process, called "tendering one's aspiration" (*tian zhiyuan*), is like a lottery based on test score (chapter 6). But many strategic considerations go into this process; moreover, high-school admissions are much more amenable to influence through bribery and guanxi than college admissions are.

responding to such requests: In deciding whether to advise a student to stay or to go, head teacher's typically take into consideration not only the child's but also the class' interests.

One Dragon Gate head teacher, Ms. Wang, said that there were only two types of children whose parents she would advise to arrange for the transfer of their children to a better school. The first type consists of children who merely had a bad day on the high-school entrance exam. Such students might lack "psychological quality" or composure, but could make large improvements in their mental fortitude by competing with high-scoring students. In any case, the actual ability of such students (as measured by test score) exceeded the average of the class to such a great degree that they needed a much more challenging environment to reach their maximum potential. In such cases, Ms. Wang actually acted against the larger interest of the school in advising students to transfer: As I describe in chapter 3, high schools use various ploys to "steal" high-scoring students—"student resources"—who would normally gain admission to "better" schools (chapter 3).

The second type of student that Ms. Wang advised to transfer consisted of "bad" students—bullies, rebels, and other troublemakers. Ms. Wang said she typically employed academic pretenses to persuade the parents of such students that it was in their best interest to switch schools, but she actually had her class' best interest at heart. Such students would damage the class environment, affecting other students' test scores and, eventually, Ms. Wang's own reputation.[285]

[285] Note that dilemmas similar to those surrounding problems of school choice also accompany the decision of whether or not to send children abroad for high school—a decision about which parents likewise consult head teachers.

Shadow Education and Blind Spots toward the "Environment"

Head teachers also help families address cultural capital deficits by advising parents on how to supplement their children's regular school learning through various forms of "shadow education," either by hiring private tutors or by paying for tuition in after-school "supplemental study classes" (*buxiban*), sometimes termed "cram schools." Head teachers commonly advise parents and students on which subjects to "supplement" (*bu*) and on how best to secure such supplemental instruction given a family's financial constraints.

Although educational disparities are even greater than most parents and even teachers usually suspect (chapter 3), parents and teachers generally understand that supplemental study can play an important role in making up for deficits in their children's "cultural foundation" (*wenhua jichu*). But this awareness varies by family and academic subject. It is relatively easy for parents to see the importance of supplemental instruction in sciences, math, and English. However, the importance of supplemental study in Chinese may elude even the most vigilant parents. After all, they reason, Chinese is their native language—what need has one for special instruction in it? Particularly parents of rural origin, however, possess serious cultural-capital deficits in Chinese vis-à-vis orthodox cultural norms. As one head teacher in Ningzhou put it,

> Parents rarely consider that the process of acquiring the knowledge [*zhishi*] that is necessary for success in Chinese is one that requires years of accumulation [*duonian leiji de guocheng*]. This is particularly a problem for students from rural county seats, who are strong in science but often weak in Chinese and English. Thus, I advise rural students to start supplementing Chinese lessons as soon as possible.

Although I argue above that Chinese parents possess a relatively high awareness of the effects of cultural capital, note that this awareness has pronounced limits. Ironically, these limits derive from the same quality that helps parents overcome disparities in cultural capital, namely, their faith in diligence. Parents understand that they possess "cultural deficits" and that these

deficits can be eliminated through diligence. But deficits that cannot be so addressed fall into a cultural blind spot—one that is particularly pronounced in rural parents. In other words, students can compensate for cultural-capital deficits in such areas as science, math, history, and so on through diligent study. But such "subjective" skills as Chinese, and, to a lesser extent, English, cannot really be tackled through diligence alone. Rather, these competencies require "cultivation" (*xuntao*), or, as Bourdieu terms it, implicit learning.[286]

The above observations highlight an important aspect of Chinese pedagogical attitudes toward cultural environment: Various methods exist for vigilant parents to compensate for deficiencies in cultural capital through diligent gaming of the system, of which shadow education and school choice form important examples. Most of these methods require money, which ordinary people must diligently toil to earn, and often also guanxi, the cultivation of which people likewise consider to require diligence in addition to moral quality. From ordinary people's perspective, therefore, these various means to supply children with a better environment represent methods by which parents can transform their own diligence and general moral quality into opportunities for their children to compensate diligently for cultural deficiencies.

At points lower on the central-place hierarchy, however, people are mainly concerned with the role that such cultural environments play in cultivating and enforcing habits of diligence. In rural areas, teachers who attempt to give students opportunities to develop their

[286] Of course, communicative competencies can be taught, but few successful language learners will deny the importance of "environment" in that process, whether such "environment" be created or imposed. Note, moreover, that parent's blind spot toward English is subtly different from their blind spot toward Chinese: Parents understand the need for supplemental tuition in English, since English (in most cases) is not spoken at home; however, their focus on diligence causes them to overlook the significance of fluency. Particularly in rural areas, parents tend to resist "unserious" teaching methods, such as encouraging students to engage in English conversation. Instead, they focus on what they deem to be of most consequence to examination success, namely, the memorization or "backing" of words (*bei danci*). But the subjective sections of the English examination require students to produce evidence of linguistic competency. By itself, rote learning through repetition is an insufficient condition for the acquisition of such competency.

"all-around quality" often do so in secret, lest they face rebukes from administrators for "slacking off" (*songxie*) (chapter 4). At points higher on the hierarchy, by contrast, parents and teachers are much more concerned with the cultivation of all-around quality. In these places, parents take greater cognizance of the cultivation of implicitly acquired competencies, including communication ability and all-around "social skills."

The Magic of Educational Research

Conscientious head teachers reflect on differences in cultural capital and consciously seek ways to compensate for them. In practice, as mentioned, these activities involve, among other things, poring over and analyzing excel spreadsheets of test-score data. In this sense, teachers are not so different from sociological researchers, that is, they perform a para-ethnographic role (chapter 4). Indeed, the practice of pedagogical research is institutionalized into the high-school bureaucracy. At Dragon Gate, for example, Ms. Fu conducted surveys of students' psychological states and coping mechanisms, using this information to help her craft her "motivational assembly."[287]

As I mention above, teachers must produce research papers to be promoted. Such papers are widely considered to be very "empty," formulaic exercises. To support this requirement for publication, high schools produce reams of academic journals that very few people ever read. But occasionally, teachers approach such projects with a highly "sincere" attitude, especially if they are able to align their efforts with government-supported pedagogical research that is

[287] In addition to the example I describe below, further examples of the institutionalization of research in Chinese high schools could be adduced. The teachers of each subject (math, English, Chinese, history, etc.) are organized into teams or "groups" (*zu*). The head each team is termed "group leader of pedagogy and research" (*jiaoyanzu zuzhang*). The official job description of this person is to coordinate the research of effective pedagogical methods and oversee their implementation. In practice, these tasks require balancing a formulaic nod to "education for quality" with the serious business of raising children's test scores. Another prominent example of "research" in Chinese high schools consists of the giving and attendance of "demonstration lessons" (chapter 4). Even if formulaic and goal-directed, therefore, "research" plays an important role in the everyday life of high-school teachers.

conducted by university professors. Such research is perceived to possess a comparatively high degree of charisma.

Particularly in urban areas, teachers frequently participate in such university-sponsored research projects, which usually focus on studying the effects of various pedagogical innovations on student test outcomes. Although such projects derive prestige from receiving state funding, the university-based researchers that organize them may not necessarily be closely aligned the interests of official-state educational bureaucracies. Such researchers often voice criticism of various aspects of state educational policy. They see themselves to be allied with conscientious teachers in a battle to provide all children with equitable access to good education despite various shortcomings in state policy. Nevertheless, a disconnect may exist between the goals of the principal investigator, who is interested in scientific proof of principle for a particular educational intervention, and the goals of head teachers, who hope to see their students' test scores rise. Head teachers may have doubts about the actual effectiveness of the pedagogical innovation being proposed but nevertheless see utility in aligning their classroom efforts with the charisma of science.

At Dragon Gate high school, Ms. Shen—the head teacher of the school's only keypoint class—had affiliated herself with such a university-sponsored research project, which was aimed at researching the effects of a "novel" pedagogical technique—"long-writing method" (*xiechangfa)*—on student English learning. The champion of this methodology, a professor at a provincial-level teacher's college, believed that encouraging students to increase the length of their essays would result in the twin benefit of improved "feeling for the language" (*yugan*) and higher test score. An important part of the long-writing methodology consisted of the teacher's refraining from correcting students, since corrections would increase their "rejection [of English]

and feeling of being wronged" (*weiqu he paichi de taidu*). The purpose of the "long-writing method" research project was twofold. On one hand, the project sought to ameliorate social inequality by helping children at low-ranking schools like Dragon Gate improve their test scores. On the other hand, the project aimed to correct a perceived weakness in the Chinese education system, namely, the focus of foreign-language instruction on raising test scores rather than on improving competency. Thus the long-writing methodology joined a slew of recent pedagogical innovations focused on "education-for-quality," but was constructed to overcome teachers' criticism of such innovations, namely, that they were disconnected from teacher's "real" task of raising test scores.

In reality, however, the "long-writing method" seemed to promise more than it delivered. Privately, Ms. Shen admitted to me that she was deeply skeptical that merely requiring children to write longer essays would really help them on the test. As she put it, "kids need to have more English in their heads before they sit down to write."[288]

The principal investigator and teachers also disagreed about another important point of research methodology: The teachers actively cultivated awareness among students that they were being studied in a provincial-level research project. Teachers promised students that their participation in the project would increase their test scores. The principal investigator, fearing loss of scientific objectivity, suggested that the long-writing method be introduced gradually and surreptitiously—students need not even know that they were being researched.

In direct contravention to this principle of blind research, Ms. Shen persistently emphasized to her students that they were the object of a research project. Moreover, she

[288] In presentations to the principal investigator during his visits of Xiamen to gauge the project's progress, Ms. Shen and another teachers presented their misgivings about the project in an indirect fashion: They sugar-coated these misgivings in the scientific aura of a questionnaire that they had given students. The result of this questionnaire "proved" that children wished to be corrected more.

“proved” to students that the method worked. She did so by using the method to produce a model student essay, which she attributed to one of the weakest students in the class. She created this model by laboriously guiding the student through several revisions of his “long writing,” even though the “long-writing method” explicitly prohibited correcting students in this way. During this revision process, Ms. Shen injected the model essay with her own knowledge of how to achieve a high score on the Gaokao. For instance, she emphasized the importance of good handwriting. Graders spend only a few seconds on each essay, so impressions count (chapter 3). Showcasing the evolution of the essay to her class, she told them the improvement was due to the “long-writing method” that they were learning.

In the end, therefore, the “long-writing method” became a vehicle for Ms. Shen’s own pedagogical theories, but Ms. Shen’s association with the “long-writing” research project enabled her to imbue her theories with the charisma of “objective” scientific research. Her student’s test scores did improve, but she herself suggested that this improvement resulted from the combined effect of pedagogical innovation and the morale boost that students received from participating in a state-funded research project. In other words, Ms. Shen’s performance of pedagogical effectiveness combined “subjective and objective factors” (*zhuguan he keguan de yinsu*), or what I have termed affective and analytical labor, in ways that are difficult to disaggregate. Note, therefore, how the head teacher’s art resembles the magic performed by shamanic healers. Like a healer, the effectiveness of Ms. Shen’s practice resulted in part from bringing students’ experience into harmony with powerful collective cultural symbols—in this case, the objectivity of science (Lévi-Strauss 1967).

But the effectiveness of Ms. Shen’s practice certainly also resulted from the great energy that she devoted to her work. Ms. Shen was widely recognized by her colleagues as deeply

ambitious. Many of her colleagues said that she associated herself with the research because of the status that it conferred upon her. Indeed, I noted that Ms. Shen expressed a deep interest in my own research when I first came to Dragon Gate—an interest that gradually attenuated as she determined that my research seemed to have no immediate practical application. But she deemed the mere association of her class with a foreign researcher to have a positive effect on her class' morale and to increase her own prestige. Thus, Ms. Shen began to compete with other head teachers for my time, asking me to visit her class more often than I did others. (Eventually, a school administrator intervened, resolving the conflict by arranging for me to rotate through all classes on a fixed schedule.)

Rather than disparaging Ms. Shen's careerism, however, I wish to underscore how her behavior epitomizes the ideal type of the conscientious head teacher: Combining aspects of coach, counselor, researcher, and parent, Ms. Shen embraces a through-going pragmatism in her attempts to affect students' educational outcomes. Within the general limits of acceptable behavior, she would do anything to improve her students' test scores.

Home Visits

Among the most profound ways that committed head teachers can influence educational outcomes is through direct interventions in the life of families. Head teachers understand these interventions in the "home environment" to form an integral and indispensable part of their work. Various methods exist to exert such influence. Parents frequently consult teachers about parenting advice. Periodically, moreover, teachers hold the above-mentioned parent–student meetings. By far the most direct method, however, consists in home visits. On these occasions, the teacher physically travels to the family home to speak with parents and students together.

The pretenses for home visits vary. Sometimes a disciplinary problem—such as a student's skipping classes or missing evening study sessions—can provoke a visit. More generally, teachers conduct home visits of specific students at strategic junctures when teachers believe that such an intervention might make an appreciable difference in students' study approach or morale. Whatever the explicit rationale, however, the underlying motive for home visits invariably consists in raising children's test scores.[289]

Note, moreover, that teachers see their visits of individual students to affect the dynamics of the class as a whole. In other words, home visits are intended to affect not only individual student performance but also the general "academic atmosphere of the class" (*banji de xuexi fenwei*). In short, teachers often conduct home visits to achieve control over a class, seeing intervention in the home as integral to the life of the class. Ms. Yang attributed the remarkable level of control that she had achieved over Class 4 to conducting extensive home visits.

Head teachers are unified in the general objectives that they set for home visits. But their individual approaches to may vary greatly. Despite the great institutional significance of head teachers, few attempts exist to standardize their practices. Instead, head teachers learn their craft from mentors and word of mouth. Head teachers also frequently consult colleagues for advice, as, for example, Ms. Yang did Ms. Fu in the anecdote that opens this chapter.

Within this variation, however, general trends emerge. On home visits, head teachers commonly advise students and their families on the minutiae of study habits and even sleep routines. Head teachers appeal to parents to remove various technological distractions, such as

[289] Consider, for example, Ms. Liu's visit of Zeyu, which I describe in the introduction: The pretense for her visit was Ms. Liu's concern about Zeyu's having skipped one afternoon of classes, which in itself would appear to be inconsequential. However, she considered this absence to be a symptom of a deeper problem—namely, flagging morale—which she worried would affect his test score.

cellphones and TV remote controls. They may also urge families to improve students' home environment by making reading material available—books and magazines.

Since teachers see a student's examination success to be connected with his or her moral quality, their advice for families frequently contains a moralistic dimension. Head teachers may even insert themselves into family disputes about proper filial behavior. Consider, for example, how Ms. Yang admonished a girl, Jingjing, when her mother, who was taking care of three other children, mentioned that the girl had not been washing her own clothes as she had promised to do. "Don't be so lazy," Ms. Yang scolded Jingjing. "Washing your clothes will only take you fifteen minutes before you go to bed. Having more regular habits will also help your study and sleep routines." Parents usually express gratitude for such help. As this girl's mother said "Teacher, it is best that you say it … She doesn't listen to me at all." In their efforts to ensure a good home environment, head teachers will even resort to giving marital advice, imploring parents to reduce family conflict or even to delay separation or divorce until after the big test.[290]

In these ways, the head teacher inserts him- or herself into the functioning of families and the lives of students in ways that would usually be unthinkable in Western cultural contexts. A head teacher at a top-ranking Xiamen high school who had spent a year on a Fulbright program serving as a teacher's assistant in the States summed up this cultural difference succinctly, with a giggle of schadenfreude: Speaking in English, she said, "In the States, students have 'rights.' In

[290] Similarly, head teachers will encourage parents to avoid telling students about serious illness or other family tragedies in the year before the exam—a request that most parents are more than willing to oblige. A similar form of secrecy is common in another domain of Chinese life—healthcare and illness. Patients with terminal illness are often not informed by family members of the severity of their condition. Such forms of secrecy go against Western and particularly North American notions of the sovereign responsibility of individual persons for their destiny. In the U.S., people say that patients have the "right to know" that they are ill. Children, who by definition are not yet accorded full personhood, may form a partial exception to this rule; nevertheless, I think most North American parents would feel deeply conflicted about keeping secrets of such magnitude from their children.

China, they have no 'rights.'" [291] In sum, effective head teachers exert a considerable degree of control students' and parents' "private lives" through home visits. Far from resenting such visits, however, Chinese parents—especially those of humble social backgrounds—generally consider them to be an honor: The very fact that the teacher deigns to visit their home can have a moralizing effect on child and family.

Part II: Externalizing Inner Potential: Attitude and Composure

Motivating Underperforming Students: Finding Pressure Points

During home visits and other interactions with students, an important task of the head teacher consists in providing encouragement to students who possess "latent potential" but lack motivation. Head teachers invest the greatest amount of time and energy into underperforming students who have the greatest potential upside in terms of score improvements: If underperformers can be persuaded to "raise their efficiency" (*tigao xiaolü*) and "throw themselves into" (*touru*) study with greater vigor, they can contribute significantly to the class' ranking and the head teacher's reputation. Unsurprisingly, therefore, head teachers devote extensive thought to the problem of motivating such students, frequently consulting close colleagues for advice.

One such consultation occurred during the spaghetti dinner between Ms. Yang and Ms. Fu, which I described at the beginning of this chapter. Ms. Fu, a school counselor, was perceived by Ms. Yang to have special insight into student psychology.

[291] The occasion for this remark was a post-mortem discussion of a visit to the home of a student with disciplinary problems. The student appeared very nonchalant throughout the ritual, until his head teacher admonished him to cut his hair shorter: Genuinely distressed, the boy protested, "But teacher, it is the third time you have made me cut my hair in two months. I really don't want it shorter than this." Apparently, she had "gotten him where it hurts" as Ms. Fu would say (see below).

"I just don't know what motivates him," Ms. Yang said of an underperforming student, Yijun. "He isn't doing as well as he could. It is so frustrating. I don't feel like I am getting through to him."

"There are two kinds of motivations—the motivation to achieve happiness and the motivation to avoid pain," Ms. Fu replied. "For this kind of student," she continued, "it is not enough to give him positive motivation. Find out what he hates most, what he most afraid of. Take a systematic approach. Try surveying his parents, his classmates. Find the right point, then prick him where it hurts."

Ms. Yang's and Ms. Fu's discussion of this problem student demonstrate the types of pressures that head teachers face. Having already made much progress with her class in a few short months, Ms. Yang was feeling the weight of her success: All her efforts would be for naught if the class failed to live up to parents' and administrators' heightened expectations for her class's Gaokao performance. If she could succeed in keeping the class "in shape," however, she could enjoy a significant monetary bonus and, more important, the rewards of increased reputation. Of course she cared about the students and their families too: Helping them to achieve their best score was helping them to fulfill their dreams.

As one of Xiamen's lowest ranking schools, Dragon Gate had its share of rebels, bullies, and slackers. But Yijun was none of these. Ms. Yang felt that the boy's potential for development justified special attention. She had already tried to talk with him but failed to have an effect. In exasperation, she started ignoring Yijun, giving him "the silent treatment" (*leng chuli*) to show her dissatisfaction. Ms. Fu did not agree with this approach. Expanding on her suggestion to "prick him where it hurts," Ms. Fu offered the following advice:

> No, you can't give him the silent treatment too long. After you find his weak spot, try approaching him normally. Let's say you find out he hates it when people look

> down on him. Then you approach his weakness indirectly, by saying something like, "What kind of person do you hate most?" You'll catch him off guard—he won't know what you are talking about. Then you say something like, "I think you most hate people who look down on you." He won't be expecting the prick. But you have to get him when he isn't expecting it, when his defenses are down. That is how you can get into his unconscious [*qianyishi*] to have a real effect. Then after you've done it, walk away. Let your words sink in. Don't let him question you or follow up. Have the last word. This approach is bound to work.

Many will find this manipulative use of psychology ethically questionable. Although such ethical concerns are important, I wish to focus on another aspect of this anecdote, namely, how it highlights the meticulousness of the affective labor that conscientious head teachers perform: Although they may lack Ms. Fu's official counseling credentials, every head teacher expends considerable effort considering student psychology. Many employ similar tactics even if they do not discuss them in psychological jargon.[292] Various forms of humiliation, subtle and unsubtle, form one important weapon in the head-teacher arsenal.

In short, head teachers think long and hard about how to talk to students. In crafting motivational speeches, they combine, as Ms. Wang said, aspects of teacher, coach, counselor, and parent. As the above exchange between Ms. Fu and Ms. Yang illustrates, head teachers tailor such speeches to students' individual circumstances. Consider another example of such individual tailoring. In addressing Jingjing during the above-mentioned home visit, Ms. Yang both employed peer pressure and appealed to the girl's filial duty to save money for her parents, who were experiencing financial hardship.

> This is the most important year of your life. … You have lots of latent potential that you are not realizing. With a few exceptions, everyone in the class has about the same ability, right? So you have to ask yourself, 'Why do they manage to [get high scores] when I do not?' .. So you need to work harder … Everyone knows: If you have money, you can go to a two-year college [*dazhuan*]. But you don't want to burden your parents, who are already working very hard [*xinku*].

[292] The approach that Ms. Fu suggested was not novel, what stood out to me about this conversation was how Ms. Fu framed her approach in psychological terms as an intervention in the student's "unconscious."

Although the contents of such speeches vary, they conform to some general patterns. Children's filial duties form a frequent topic. During home visits, head teachers take advantage of the presence of parents to remind students of their debts to parents and family. Comparison to peers is another recurring theme. In addition, teachers' speeches often possess a strongly gendered dimension. For example, head teachers may tell boys that they have a responsibility to be the "man in the family" and tell girls that the Gaokao is important to their marriage prospects, marriage being their "second big chance to change fate after the Gaokao" (chapter 4).

Using Inner Potential to "Change the Environment" and "Master Fate"

In addition to illuminating head teachers' use of peer pressure and filial duty to motivate students, Ms. Yang's speech highlights several aspects of the discussion thus far: Consider, for example, how Ms. Yang eschews mention of purported intrinsic or innate characteristics, such as intelligence; instead, she focuses on students' relative equality to each other, thus emphasizing the value of diligent effort.

Note, however, that a disconnect exists between the head teachers' practical interventions in the family—including guidance in study habits and supplemental study—and the rhetoric of diligence that head teachers promulgate. To some degree, head teachers do one thing and say another: On one hand, they help families overcome various cultural capital deficits by encouraging them to "adjust" (*tiaojie*) various aspects of the home environment. On the other, head teachers emphasize the importance of personal responsibility for diligent study. Consider, for example, how Ms. Yang responded to one parent's apologies for having "no culture" (*mei wenhua*). This mother, a vegetable seller, lamented that she had not provided her son with an

adequate cultural environment. “You can’t blame yourself,” Ms. Yang said. “It is your son’s responsibility to do better.”

But this apparent contradiction is not really so paradoxical from the head teacher’s perspective. In a statement that evokes Flynn’s theory of intelligence, which I describe above, Ms. Yang explained this apparent contradiction as follows; “The external world [*waijie*] influences personal factors in success, but personal factors [*zishen yinsu*] can also change the environment.” Moreover, teachers emphasize that students cannot “slack off” [*songxie*] but must maintain persistent diligence up until the examination if they wish to obtain their best possible score. In short, examination ability is less an enduring capacity of the individual but rather like a muscle that must be constantly trained. Like athletes, therefore, it is important that students do not “peak” too early, but rather hit the final examination at a high point in their training.

For these reasons, teachers emphasize how students must remain sanguine about their ability to change the outcome of the exam. As Ms. Yang put it, “In the end, you have to encourage students to believe that their fate is in their own hands [*ming zai ziji de shou shang*]; you tell them over and over that ‘you can master your own fate’ [*ni de ming ni ziji zhangwo*].” Indeed, Ms. Yang and other conscientious head teachers, like Ms. Shen and Ms. Wang, are true believers in this principle—for them, attitude really *can* change fate. They see the effects of attitude every year during the examination when some students give up and other students “surge” at the last minute. As Ms. Yang put it, “Teachers shouldn’t amplify unchangeable objective factors [*bu neng gaibian de keguan yinsu*]. Instead, we focus on what can be changed.”

Boosting Confidence and Morale: "Maintaining the Pace" and "Getting in the Zone"

As the test approaches, the domain of "what can be changed" grows smaller and smaller. For this reason, teachers' speeches begin to focus on morale and attitude rather than on study strategies and habits. In the final months before the exam, teachers increasingly emphasize the importance of confidence and determination, admonishing students to remain perseverant and "not to surrender" (*bu tuoxie*).

Of course, teachers talk about morale and attitude throughout high school. As Ms. Fu said in her motivational speech, however, teachers believe that the relative importance of "attitude" and "knowledge" switches places as the exam grows closer: On exam day, teachers say, "attitude determines knowledge."

Consider the "mobilization rallies" (*dongyuan dahui*) or "assemblies to pledge resolution" (*shishi dahui*) that I describe in chapter 3. These events form important occasions on which teachers attempt to "improve attitude" and "boost morale." Because of their formulaic quality, however, such occasions are sometimes considered "empty." By contrast, Ms. Fu's talk was considered by students and teachers to constitute a relatively "real" variant of this genre—a "modern" urban equivalent of the "empty," "traditional" forms of mobilization rally.[293]

In her approach to boosting morale, Ms. Fu emphasized the importance of the "unconscious" in determining test outcomes, telling students that their unconscious perceptions of themselves could make or break their exam performance. The above-mentioned self-affirmational "magical spell" that she taught students was thus designed to transform their

[293] Counselors were a relatively new addition to the staff of Dragon Gate High School, but Ms. Fu was already showing her value in motivating students. The Xiamen Education Department had only recently started requiring schools to employ counselors as part of the municipality's drive to modernize pedagogy by instituting education-for-quality reforms. At Dragon Gate, some resistance had originally accompanied the hiring of school counselors (there were now two). However, leaders soon perceived the counselors' usefulness in improving test scores, which meant that they started receiving a warmer welcome than before. In other words, instead of representing another iteration of education for quality that would have to be performed for government inspection, they had "actual" (*shiji de*) value for the school.

unconscious perceptions of themselves: “Think of your best quality,” she said, “and insert it into this phrase: ‘Because I am the most ‘diligent,’ ‘kind,’ ‘athletic,’ ‘considerate’ or whatever, I am the most amazing person!’ … Everyone stand up. I want you to shout out your magical spell.” Although perhaps damaging to students’ hearing, the assembly was widely reckoned to be good for their confidence.[294]

In addition to such “mobilization rallies,” weekly “class meetings” (*banhuike*) constitute another important occasion on which conscientious head teachers give eleventh-hour motivational speeches to students. As the exam approaches, however, many head teachers tend to concentrate their morale-boosting efforts on individual students with the greatest potential to “surge” late in the game. Particularly conscientious head teachers conduct last-minute home visits of such students.

Such late-stage home visits frequently focus on urging students to “keep in shape” for the examination and avoid “slacking off” during the final weeks. Recall, for example, how such considerations formed the gist of the conversation between Ms. Liu and Zeyu, the garbage collector’s son, which I describe in the introduction.

As another example of late-stage morale-boosting interventions, consider the following exchange between Ms. Liu and another underperforming student, Yujian. During this conversation, Yujian’s mother was also present and played an active role. Ms. Liu felt that Yujian was not living up to his potential to be a top student.

“I know you don’t mean any personal disrespect to me by missing evening study hall, but look at the top students in the class. They really never do anything but study,” said Ms. Liu.

[294] During this activity, Ms. Fu paired off randomly selected students to compete over who could shout their personal self-affirmations the loudest. Because Ms. Fu supplied each competitor with a microphone, however, the assembly descended into a bedlam of ear-shattering feedback as pairs of usually shy teenagers faced off against each other to bellow at the top of their lungs through the auditorium loudspeakers.

“I have seen it myself,” interjected Yujian’s mother. “Every day after class, Yujian and his friends all have to get together and hang out, but the top students are always sitting in class and studying.”

“I really worked hard for a while during the second semester of senior two, but I couldn’t hold out,” Yujian replied.

“But now you’ve got little time to make up for slacking off, so you have to increase your efficiency,” said Ms. Liu. “It is forty days before the Gaokao. If you keep your leisurely attitude [*youyou de wan xiaqu*], you are just not going to be able to … hold out against other people [*bieren didang bu zhu*].”

“That’s why the teacher is visiting today. You have some more latent potential that can surge [*yingai you qianli keyi baofa*].”

“Yes, this is it. It is really time to give it a go [*qiao yixia*].’

Note Ms. Liu’s reference to the exact number of days remaining before the Gaokao. In the final year before the big exam, every student and teacher always knows this number, which is ubiquitously displayed on the school grounds and in every senior-three classroom.

As this countdown falls into the double digits, teachers become wary of what Ms. Fu called “a high-altitude reaction”: Just as athletes “taper” their conditioning before a race, students must neither “peak” too early nor “slack off too much.” Thus, the goal of student’s final preparations is to “get into” and “maintain” what students and teachers call “examination shape” or “the examination zone” (*kaoshi zhuangtai*)—a phrase that literally translates as “examination state.” This notion of entering such a “state” implies a physical and mental discipline that must be “maintained” (*baochi*): The “state” can easily be “lost” (*shiqu zhuangtai*) As with notions of “zone” or “flow” cross-culturally, “being in the state” evokes the ideal of being able to perform

in the fateful event with an effortless unselfconsciousness that one only achieves only through diligent preparation and mental focus (Csikszentmihalyi 1991). But few students describe their actual exam experience in such terms of unstrained engrossment. As in many fateful events cross-culturally, the greatest impediment to achieving such a state during the Gaokao lies not one's competitors but in one's self. As the test grows closer, psychological pressure increases to a fever pitch

Coping with Pressure

It is more common for students to react to examination pressure by overworking than by slacking off. Teachers, too, become overworked, running themselves ragged in the brutally hot summer weather. Ms. Liu took on a skeletal appearance. Ms. Yang suffered from chronic back pain. But the suffering of teachers is considered to be inconsequential, whereas the "state" of students makes or breaks a school's reputation.

During the final weeks, students tend to be accident prone, fall ill, or encounter various other forms of "inauspicious" (*bu jixiang*) occurrence. To curb these tendencies, schools institute special policies, treating students like athletes before a big competition. In the final days before the exam, students are not required to attend classes or evening study hall, although teachers must be available at all times to answer questions. Some schools make the last practice examination optional. Teachers tell students to relax their study schedule, cutting their daily regime to a minimum that keeps their knowledge "activated." At the same time, however, they admonish students about the importance of maintaining normal life habits and sleep routines. Teachers ask parents to spend time with children engaging in relaxing activities. In many

schools, parents are instructed to avoid talking about the upcoming exam except to emphasize their unconditional love no matter what the result.

Some student like to "let off pressure" (*faxie yali*) through physical exercise, but school administrators fear that students will injure themselves or suffer from heat exhaustion. Thus students are banned from participating in competitive sports or strenuous physical training in the weeks before the exam.

Methods for coping with pressure include a variety of medically minded interventions, which increase in number and frequency as the exam approaches. Depending on the context, people ambivalently assess such measures either to possess "actual effectiveness" (*shiji xiaoguo*) or to consist mainly in "psychological comfort" (*xinli anwei*).

A relatively "scientific" measure taken to control the body consists of the widespread practice of intervening biomedically in girls' menstrual cycles. Since menstruation is considered to have a negative effect on girl's psychological state, many teachers will advise parents to have their daughters control their cycle through the administration of birth control pills—a practice that medicalizes and pathologizes menstruation, but which many girls quite eagerly follow.

Many other practices exist for "adjusting" the body. To help children fortify their bodies, parents will go to great lengths to help them supplement (*bu*) their diet with various kinds of healthful foods, many of which—such as fish, walnuts, and eggs—are conceived as having brain-boosting powers. Meanwhile, medicine shops everywhere carry expensive herbal products for "supplementing the brain" (*bunao*).[295] In some schools, teachers have been reported to hand out ginseng tablets to children on test day, telling students that they will get "ten more points" if they take one. Many other examples of such medical interventions could be adduced. Ms. Fu

[295] During my fieldwork, I did not hear any reports of Chinese students using prescription cognitive enhancement medications, such as Adderall, which are now so popular in the U.S. and elsewhere.

taught the assembled Dragon Gate students a form of acupressure massage for coping with anxiety. In a 2011 case that was reported nationwide, moreover, a Hubei school was widely criticized for administering students intravenously with vitamins.

Other important mechanisms for coping with examination stress include various popular religious and magical practices, I examine in chapter 6. In the present context, it suffices to say that such popular-religious practices, like dietary supplementation and medical interventions, are ambivalently perceived both as psychological comfort and efficacious intervention.

Bodily Conditions, Untimely Love, and Unconscious Rebellion

In sum, parents and teachers employ a variety of methods to help students cope with examination pressure. Despite these efforts, however, many students succumb to stress. During the critical period leading up to the exam, therefore, parents and teachers exercise great vigilance, constantly observing students for various types of strange behavior—a new love interest, a sudden illness, bouts of insomnia, or other problems. Any deviation from the normal routine is generally interpreted as a symptom of examination pressure.

Consider, for example, how parents and teachers reacted when Ms. Liu's highest-scoring student—Yuqing, the daughter of a local police detective—suddenly fell in love with one of her classmates just a few short weeks before the final exam. The young couple's romantic involvement was sleuthed out by Ms. Liu when she noticed the pair sharing an umbrella during a squall. Confiding in Ms. Li, the girl confirmed her teacher's suspicions. Ms. Liu promptly informed Yuqing's parents, who reacted with great alarm. Although they fretted that the girl's having a boyfriend might affect her reputation, Yuqing's parents did not primarily object to her romance on moral grounds. Rather, they worried about how the budding relationship might

affect her exam score: Yuqing was a top student, ranked number one in Ms. Liu's class and number three in the whole school. She had a real chance of testing into Beijing University, Qinghua, or a top university in Hong Kong, which would represent a coup for all concerned parties—the municipal educational authorities, the school, Ms. Liu, Yuqing's family, and (according to her teacher and family) Yuqing herself. Thus Yuqing's private life became a matter of official concern, administrators' regularly probing Ms. Liu for updates on Yuqing's emotional state.

To protect Yuqing's relationship with her head teacher, Yuqing's parents decided to tell their daughter that they found out about her relationship by observing the lovebirds talking by watching the couple on the apartment complex's security cameras, which, given her father's detective skills, apparently seemed plausible to the girl. To avoid adding to the girl's pressure, her parents pretended not to mind about the boy. Backstage, however, a frantic series of consultations between parents and teacher ensued. For a time, Yuqing's mother spent at least thirty minutes every day on the phone consulting with Ms. Liu about her daughter's state of mind. The general consensus among administrators and head teacher was that Yuqing's relationship was not likely to have a negative effect on Yuqing's boyfriend, who was not a top student; in fact, it seemed to have provided him with renewed motivation. Yuqing, on the other hand, seemed distracted and listless; her scores on the practice exams flagged. Thus her performance on the Gaokao was anticipated with a mixture of hope and anxiety.

Parents and teacher diagnosed Yuqing's love interest as a form of rebellion. Indeed, as the rhetoric between father and daughter heated up, Yuqing openly accused her father of being "a dictator," in contrast to her boyfriend, who she said was mild and considerate. She told Ms. Liu that her love for the boy had opened her eyes to the meaning of life beyond the narrow world of

examinations. As Yuqing later told me, she began to question the meaning and significance of the Gaokao. Her budding love suggested to her that one could be happy in life without so much pressure and toil. Parents and teacher felt helpless: The more they implored Yuqing to consider the future the more she protested that they did not understand her.

In the end, Yuqing did indeed perform much worse than expected—an outcome that everyone attributed to an "unstable psychological state" (*bu wending de xinli zhuangtai*). In retrospect, Ms. Liu, who, as a young head teacher, professed relative inexperience with such matters, regretted having betrayed Yuqing's confidence: "I should not have taken the situation so seriously (*bu yinggai dang wei shi*). Doing so just ended up adding to the pressure."

Like a love affair, a sudden illness before the Gaokao is likewise usually interpreted as a symptom of stress or even rebellion—a somatized symptom of examination pressure: As Ms. Fu said of illness, "Getting sick is the unconscious' way of giving students an excuse to do poorly on the exam." Or as another teacher said, "being sick is a coping mechanism—a way of finding an external reason why you are going to fail the test."[296] As noted in the introduction, for example, Zeyu experienced symptoms of stomach illness before the exam, which he treated with traditional Chinese medicine (*zhongyao*).

Some students resist such theories of somatization, reacting to them with great skepticism. Consider one Mountain County Number One student's bitter complaint about the attitude of parents and teachers to student's illness or injuries. She compared this attitude to that of Olympic spectators toward the injury of star hurdler, Liu Xiang, who hurt himself right before the 2008 Beijing Games: "If you don't test well, [parents and teachers] couldn't care less about you [*bu mai ni de zhang*, literally, 'won't pay the bill']. When Liu Xiang was hurt, people

[296] Note that examination stress forms one prominent "social origin" of illness in Arthur J. Kleinman's (1988) influential case studies of somatization.

blamed him for the injury even though it wasn't his fault. It was so unjust. Some things are just out of the individual's control."

In addition to illness, people widely consider insomnia to be one of the most pernicious symptoms of pressure. This symptom disturbs people so much because it resists individual efforts of conscious diligent control. Indeed, the culture of diligence is antithetical to sleep. Recall, for example, the widely repeated motto: "Sleep five hours per day, fail the test; sleep four hours, get into university" (*si dang wu luo*). To combat insomnia, teachers and administrators encourage good sleep hygiene, emphasizing the importance of "regular habits." Nevertheless, insomnia seems to be widespread, and constitutes an prominent cause of underperformance. In unguarded moments, few Gaokao veterans will admit to sleeping well during the exam. Such disturbances can prove long lived. Many Chinese report having recurring nightmares about examinations throughout their lives.

Macho Nonchalance, Literary Masculinity, and Composure

In general, however, Chinese students treat all such symptoms of pressure with macho nonchalance. Mental toughness is lionized as an important character trait and predictor of exam success. Thus discussion of such matters is generally confined to the deep backstage. Frailty is usually only shared with close friends and family. For this reason, it is difficult to estimate the prevalence of insomnia and other such afflictions, which, because of their stigma, survey methods are not likely to capture.

Consider, for instance, how I learned of the examination experience of one close friend, Ms. Liu. After having known her for nearly two years, I visited Ms. Liu in her hometown in the countryside, where we were joined by her little sister and her fiancée. While the four of us were

sitting in Ms. Liu's living room one night, her little sister produced a stack of Ms. Liu's photos, report cards, and certificates for me and her fiancée to admire.

Ms. Liu was full of surprises. A placard certified her as a national-level athlete. "How on earth did you get one of those?" her fiancée asked. Ms. Liu's little sister passed around class photos from various years of school, asking if we could pick her out. I tried to imagine the transformation that occurred from the playful smiling child in Ms. Liu's primary-school photos to the grim-faced hardened test athlete in her high-school photos. As we looked at these materials, Ms. Liu's sister suddenly described the night before Ms. Liu's Gaokao. She remembered staying up all night holding Ms. Liu, who was shaking uncontrollably. "We didn't get a wink of sleep that night, did we?" said Ms. Liu's sister. Ms. Liu laughed embarrassedly while her sister told this story. "I bombed the Chinese section," she said. "Thank God my English score was so high."

In dozens of conversations about her examination, I had never heard Ms. Liu describe this emotionally charged moment in such visceral terms. As with many of the best, most successful students, a certain affectation of coolness and emotional distance always accompanied her narration of her examination success. Among other things, her sister's story left me wondering how well Ms. Liu would have done if she had *not* been so nervous. Just as her certificates of success were locked away in a dusty drawer, her examination humiliation was carefully excluded from her public persona. Display of the former would signify immodesty, display of the latter a lack of "psychological quality."

The strictures against immodesty, however, do not seem to apply to boasts of examination composure. Men, in particular, are wont to make a public virtue of this character trait. The macho nonchalance that attends examination success is considered a masculine trait, a

form of literary masculinity that girls also can adopt but which does not come "naturally" to them (chapter 4).

Consider the persona of one high-level manager of a Shanghai pharmaceutical company, Mr. Zhang: This man described how Gaokao success catapulted him from a rural Zhejiang village into a good university in the early 1980s at a time when the admission rate for such a university was only 1 or 2 percent (chapter 1). Mr. Zhang bragged that he had subsequently succeeded brilliantly in every exam that he had ever taken—the graduate-student entrance exam, the Chinese bar exam, and the notoriously difficult accountant's exam. What was his secret, I asked. He replied as follows:

> I never get nervous. You know why? I just tell myself it doesn't matter. I wasn't nervous about the Gaokao at all. My parents are farmers. I just told myself that it wasn't so bad being a farmer. I didn't care whether I passed or failed. My classmates were all nervous. None of them got into college. Only I did. Afterwards, whenever I take an examination, I have never been nervous.

Neither was nervousness a professional problem for Mr. Zhang, who was renowned for his decisiveness and steady hand in a high-pressure position. Commenting on this story, another Shanghai manager—an executive at a construction company—said that the secret to success in management was the same as the secret in examinations: It was the same lesson that Zen meditation teaches aspirants to enlightenment. "You have to learn to let go [*fangqi*]," he said. "Let go of your desires, let go of your worries. Let go of what people think of you. Only by letting go, can you succeed."

Conclusion: The Individuating Moment of Action

In contrast to the attitude of relative "unseriousness" that accompanies the endless litany of practice examination, great ceremoniousness attends the Gaokao, marking it as the genuine

event—the real "final battle": Police direct traffic. Taxi drivers volunteer to take children to their respective examination venues. Parents and bystanders congregate in front of school gates, where they are interviewed by TV and newspaper reporters. Volunteers distribute water, and sales people hand out flyers advertising computers ("the perfect machine for college"), post-Gaokao tours ("give your child with an unforgettable trip"), driving schools, and other products and services with which parents typically reward Gaokao veterans. Temples fill with pilgrims. The media admonish drivers to avoiding honking their horns, and praise the government's success in ensuring good public order on test day. Press reports underscore the seriousness with which the state treats the occasion, even sometimes hinting, for instance, that airplanes may be diverted to control noise levels. Although such reports are probably exaggerated, they contribute the air of sacred ceremony surrounding the exam: If the whole twelve years of schooling is a rite of passage, then the Gaokao itself is the culminating rite within this broader initiation, the climatic ritual within the ritual.

Although the twelve years of study leading up to the exam in many senses forms a team effort—incorporating the help of the extended family, teachers, and school—the moment of the examination itself is a profoundly individuating experience: Students train for the exam as members of various social constituencies (family, school, place, nation) but take the test as individuals. For days before the test day, the school may be open for business, but the examination halls themselves—converted classrooms—become sacred ground.[297] Before the exam, entrance is restricted to high-level administrators and certain other necessary personnel. On test day, only students and test proctors are allowed through the school gates. At the gate,

[297] I discovered this restriction myself when I naively approached an examination hall from what I thought to be a safe distance with a camera three days before the exam. Several agitated individuals ran over to me yelling, "Stop that foreigner from running around [*luanpao*] the examination hall [*kaochang*]!" Fortunately, the vice-principal of the school recognized me from another event, which probably saved me from more dire consequences of my indiscretion.

security guards check students' identify against their "examination admission badge," seeking to circumvent any attempt to cheat through the use of a "substitute examinee" (*tikao*). Various anti-cheating measures are employed in an attempt to ensure that individuals face the examination without any help from kibitzers (chapter 3). Cellphones and other electronic devices are strictly prohibited. Students must carry all writing implements, the inventory of which is meticulously prescribed, in a clear plastic container. The examination halls themselves are surveilled by proctors in person and through closed circuit TV. High-tech countermeasures are reported to include signal-jamming devices and even aerial drones. In sum, every effort is taken to strip the individual of any vestige of his social environment so that he faces the examination alone.

These measures temporarily strip students of any vestige of their social identity. Thus the raw Gaokao score—before any bonus points are added—is termed "the naked score" (*luofen*) (chapter 4, chapter 6). Recall how the award of such bonus points is considered to be corrupted by guanxi, whereas high achievements of "naked score" are considered to be "purely" an individual achievement.

Other policies ensure that students are removed from their guanxi networks. Teachers serve as test proctors but do not invigilate the exam at their own schools—a policy that evokes the "rule of avoidance" that prohibited officials from serving on their home turf during imperial times (chapter 1). In addition, senior-three teachers, whose own students are taking the examination, are forbidden from serving as proctors. In contrast to practice exams, which students usually take at their own school, the Gaokao may require students to travel to a neighboring school to take the test. On test day, therefore, students are surrounded by strangers, which heightens their sense of isolation, "nakedness," and individualization.

Surely, however, the greatest moment of individualization is the fateful moment of the exam itself. Students face their test paper alone, as individuals, each behind a single desk separated from other desks by a meter—an arrangement that evokes the isolated examination cubicles in imperial exam halls. As they break open the seal on their examination papers, students' hearts race. All their lives have been leading up to this one moment, which they have been told since childhood "decides fate." What ensues is a dramatic struggle of wills, in which the individual examinee approaches every problem with the wary eye of a test veteran: What traps have the test designers laid? What surprises lurk in waiting? A bad performance on a single section can rattle even an experienced examinee, making it impossible for him or her to eat or sleep between the first and second day of the exam. In many ways, the Gaokao, like other such high-stakes examinations, is a modern version of China's imperial "examination hell" (Miyazaki 1981)—a hell that each student must face alone.

Thus the examinee is not merely engaging in a game of wits against the test designers but in a struggle to maintain control over his or her own body. Extreme stories of failed composure are legend: Students regale one another with tails of examinees who faint, wail, lose control of their bowels, or even attempt to commit suicide during the exam. But the sensationalism of such tales overlooks the legion of prosaic individual struggles for composure as hall after hall of isolated examinees face down their individual demons in ghostly silence. Consider how one Mountain County student described the examination experience:

> Anyone who has been working hard knows how to solve the problems. You think that we encounter a problem that we don't know how to solve [laughs]? Lack of knowledge is not what causes you to fail on test day. Instead, it is your mental state that matters. How fast can you work? Will you be able to stay cool if you encounter a variation of a problem that seems unfamiliar? Will you be too nervous to think straight? Those are the kinds of questions that make or break a test performance.

On test day, as Ms. Fu says, attitude determines knowledge.

As a fateful event that every student must face alone, the Gaokao subjects every examinee to an individual trial of merit. Of course, the notion that students are really the sovereign producers of their own fate is belied by the massive amount of labor that the "external world" has expended on educating each child. As one parent put it, "examination success is not the accomplishment of individual students alone but that of their whole family"—and, I would add, the accomplishment of their teachers, school, place, and the myriad other "external" social circumstances that make them who they are.

But the examination rips students away from this social context, encouraging them to take individual responsibility for the outcome. During the exam, individual examinees struggle against their own bodies, which opposes them like an alien power that must be subdued. In short, preparation for the examination is a social process, but on test day examinees face fate alone.

The individuating moment of exam day forms the climax and the crux of the ritual process that alienates the social labor of exam preparation into a charismatic badge of individual merit. The capriciousness of composure, and the epic struggles of "character" that individuals undergo to master their bodies, provide every examinee with seemingly objective support for this attribution of personal responsibility. By the same token, the concerted efforts of head teachers to strengthen the will of students—a necessary part of exam preparation—further encourages students to believe in their personal responsibility for success or failure. Despite everyone's awareness of the "environmental" causes of examination success, teachers and parents join students in seeing final exam performance as a badge of individual character. In the days and weeks following the examination, all these stakeholders ruminate about the individual triumphs of will and failures of character that make people "surge" or "choke."

As with other aspects of the examination, much evidence suggests that great inequality attends the distribution of "attitude" or composure on examination day: As Mr. Zhang said, it is easier to keep a cool head if one does not care. In many cases, however, the stakes of the examination are higher for students who hail from relatively marginalized social backgrounds. Students of rural origin, in particular, attach great importance to the examination as a "way out" of the countryside. But the exam constitutes a highly consequential event for most students, including many students of relatively privileged background. In the examination post-mortem, however, few students of any origin will blame society for their failure. Instead, immediately following the examination, students and teachers begin employing notions of social reciprocity to account for the score, discussing who "deserved" and "did not deserve" success based on their diligence of effort and "psychological quality" or strength of will.

By themselves, however, such rational explanations do not fully satisfy people's search for meaning. In the preponderance of cases, such orthodox accounts lack full persuasiveness. In particular, such accounts seem to fall short in explaining away the many chancy factors that attend the examination. How does one account for a last-minute fever, a correctly or incorrectly guessed answer, a good or bad seat, a hot day, or a myriad of other accidents that can have fateful consequences for examination performance? In these cases people are wont to reach for less tangible, more volatiles and effervescent explanations of success or failure—luck, fate, divine intervention, and other forms of cosmic reciprocity.

CHAPTER 6

COSMIC RECIPROCITY AND "LOSTNESS AND CONFUSION": *"PACING BACK AND FORTH BETWEEN IDEAL AND REALITY"*

On the early morning of Sunday, June 5, 2012, just six days before the Gaokao, a tour bus transported a group of head teachers and senior administrators from the front gate of Ningzhou City's premier elite public high school, Ningzhou Number One, to a village fifty kilometers south in the mountains of neighboring Fuqiang County. There the entourage prayed at a prominent Daoist temple—Yongning—for the success of school and students in their imminent trial of merit. The worshippers included all of Number One's senior-three head teachers. In addition, senior administrators joined the pilgrimage, including the senior-three year leader, two of the school's three vice-principals, and the principal himself.[298]

The pilgrimage had originally been scheduled to take place on Monday, not Sunday. Monday was the fifteenth day of the lunar month—an auspicious day. Moreover, organizers had wished to incorporate a side trip to the Confucius Temple, located only a few blocks from the school and the Ningzhou Municipal Government. At the last minute, however, Ningzhou government officials had informed the principal that his attendance was required at an important meeting on Monday, which was a work day. Thus the trip was split into two parts: The journey to Yongning Temple was rescheduled for Sunday so that the principal could join this leg of the pilgrimage, which was deemed to have "real" significance. Then, on Monday, while the principal was in his meeting, the teachers would make an unaccompanied trip to the Confucius Temple, which was considered to be of secondary importance. Despite being located so close to the

[298] As elsewhere in my dissertation, I alter place names to protect confidentiality.

school, the Confucius Temple, which had lain derelict during the 1980s and 90s, received relatively few visitors. In recent years, however, the Chinese Communist Party had begun to resuscitate the status of Confucianism as a quasi-official state ideology, even organizing public displays of veneration for the sage. In obeisance to official secular ideology, however, such veneration is framed—on public occasions, at least—as symbolic and formulaic. In other words, the state presents its support of Confucianism as philosophical, even if many ordinary people regard the sage as a deity. By visiting the Confucius Temple therefore, the school was paying lip service to official embracement of Confucianism *and* providing students and parents with visible evidence that the school was taking all appropriate steps to help raise children's examination scores. Although the Confucius Temple visit was not reported in local media, the school left a large wreath of flowers next to the Sage's statue in the temple courtyard.

In short, the school visit to the Confucius Temple occupied a grey area between official and popular religion. As in imperial times, however, officially sponsored deities are not always considered to be the most efficacious ones. Thus many participants saw the trip to the Confucius Temple as a relatively formulaic or "empty," if solemn, affair. By contrast, the pilgrimage to Yongning formed an utterly earnest event—one that participants widely conceived to exercise a genuinely fateful influence on the school's examination performance.

Unlike the cult of Confucius, Yongning receives no central-state sponsorship. But Yongning ranks among the region's most venerated temples, attracting thronging crowds of pilgrims from far and wide, including Taiwan and Hong Kong. In contrast to the historical neglect of the Confucius Temple, many rural temples such as Yongning have remained active throughout living memory: Locals say that Yongning and other rural places of worship continued to attract pilgrims from Ningzhou City and the surrounding countryside even during the Cultural

Revolution (1966–76), when popular religious temples, deemed to be symbols of the "old" society, were widely desecrated and destroyed. They say that rural temples in this area of China were relatively protected from such ravages. Even if exaggerated, these reports testify to the great piousness with which such places are regarded.[299]

As with other prominent temples, people consider the temple's great popularity to provide evidence of the efficacy of its deity—the Yongning Ancestral Patriarch (*zushi gong*). But worshippers widely avoid explicit reference to the deity, whose name is taboo. Thus parents and students, many of whom attributed great significance to the official school pilgrimage referenced the trip only in oblique terms as "going to that place in Yongning." Families and teachers visited many other temples—in particular the Ningzhou temple to the God of Examinations, Wenchang (figure 9). However, schools preferred visits to Yongning for official pilgrimages because of this temple's special "potency."

Despite the great importance attached to such school-sponsored pilgrimages, these activities are not widely publicized. Unlike the school's visit of the Confucius Temple, moreover, which can be rationalized as a nod to Communist Party support for the Sage's philosophy, the pilgrimage to Yongning directly contradicts official secular ideology. I was in my field sites for almost a year before I learned about such school-sponsored popular-religious worship. In Chinese high schools, such earnest forms of magico-religious practice are closely confined to the institutional backstage; thus, their importance is veiled from the casual observer. The clash of backstage reality with front-stage ideals produces a form of cultural intimacy that is

[299] In a reversal of the customary logic of the geographical hierarchy, which equates more centrally located places with higher status and higher value, peripherally located temples appear to draw "efficacy" from their remoteness (chapter 2): In many cases, the more peripherally located a temple is, the more "potent" or "efficacious" (*ling*) it is considered to be (Sangren 1987). This perception of the efficacy of peripherally located temples may derive in part from the extra labor required to worship at such places: In times past, Ningzhou City residents walked the fifty kilometers to the temple, journeying all night to pray there.

not easily shared with foreigners.[300] As the Chinese saying goes, "family scandals cannot be exposed to outsiders" (*jia chou bu dui wai yang*). When I first began living and working in Chinese high schools, therefore, they appeared to be disenchanted places. With time, however, I began to see that schools are suffused with magical beliefs.

Figure 9: People of all ages pray to the God of Examinations (Wenchang) for examination success
Source: Photo by author

These beliefs take many forms, which only became apparent to me with time. Consider, for example, beliefs surrounding the banyan tree in the courtyard of Mountain County Number One. Despite its obtrusiveness, no principal would dare cut the tree down for fear of angering its

[300] Indeed such a front-stage/back-stage clash may be taken as definitive of "cultural intimacy," which Herzfeld (2005, 1) describes as "a sense of [state] unity that … springs from shared irreverence and defiance of the state itself."

spirit. I was in the school for months before I learned about this taboo. It took me a similar amount of time to notice the inconspicuous protective magical wards above every senior-three classroom. As time drew on, I also took note of the secret obsession of students with luck and karmic merit. And the aforedescribed secret official pilgrimages to local temples were revealed to me by close friends. At schools where such pilgrimages do not take place, teachers express great incredulity about their existence. Nevertheless, at schools that do sponsor such pilgrimages, these religious activities form an open secret.

On the morning of the pilgrimage, the group fasted. The weather was hot and humid, approaching 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Arriving at the base of the hill upon which the temple is situated, the assembled teachers hiked up several flights of stone stairs, some of them stopping to burn incense at some of the sixteen minor temples that lay on the path to the shrine of the main deity.[301]

All along the way to the main temple, teachers passed evidence of the deity's potency: Row after row of names had been etched into the stone-lined temple-complex walls, displaying the identity of donors from close and afar who had given money to the temple to thank the deity for his assistance.[302] The main temple complex was old, but it was overlooked by a gigantic statue of the Ancestral Patriarch, which had been recently constructed on an adjacent mountain slope. Over 100 feet tall, the bright golden statue housed a temple hall containing countless rows of hardwood vestibules, each of which was occupied by a golden-leaf statuette purchased by a wealthy donor to repay the deity for answering prayers.

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[301] Along the way, they could elect to accumulate karmic merit (*jide*) by feeding fish (for the price of three renminbi) or, more solemnly, by "freeing captive animals" (*fangsheng*), that is, "liberating" some hot and dehydrated aquatic turtles back into a large pool of water at the price of 60 renminbi per turtle.

[302] In years past a donation of 200 or 400 *renminbi* had sufficed to thank the deity in this way, but now 1,200 (about two-hundred U.S. dollars) was the minimum.

At the top of the last flight of stairs, the group approached the main temple, which overlooked the whole valley below. The small space was crowded with people praying. So close to the Gaokao, many of them were teachers, parents, and students entreating the deity for assistance on the examination. Students took turns infusing their examination implements with magical power by passing their clear plastic pencil cases over the smoking cauldron of incense located behind the black-faced effigy of the Yongning Ancestral Patriarch (*guo xianglu*). Worshippers waited their turn to "draw lots" (*chouqian*), a mantic practice common at temples: Subvocalizing their questions to the deity, lot drawers gripped bamboo cups filled with numbered strips of bamboo between their outstretched palms. In a gesture of prayerful entreaty, each lot drawer shook his or her cup until one of the strips slowly extended out of the cup and fell to the earth. Seated at a nearby table, a bored-looking "master of interpreting lots" (*jieqian shifu*)—a middle-aged villager—cross-referenced the numbers on these strips against a series of cryptic poems, which were printed on small slips of thin pink paper that he handed out to supplicants. Widely understood to be speaking with the actual voice of the deity, the master decoded these messages with reference to worshippers' questions about the future, which at this time of the year often revolved around the big test.

The teachers had already made a trip to Yongning in early April to "submit a wish" (*xuyuan*) to the deity for success on the examination. On that earlier trip, they had blessed students' "test-admission certificates" at the incense urn. Kowtowing in front of the Yongning Patriarch's effigy, they had offered sacrifices of fruit, snacks, and wads of "spirit money" (*shoujin*)—colorful pieces of paper that worshippers present as offerings to deities and ancestors. Afterwards, the teachers had burnt the spirit money along with lists of names of their students, thus transmitting a request for students' success to the spirit world. Teachers had used official

class funds to purchase the edible sacrifices—candies and crackers—or, in some cases, taken up individual donations of two renminbi per student so that the small minority of Christian students could elect not to participate. Upon returning to the high school, the head teachers had distributed these sacrifices to their students, who ingested them to receive the protection (*baoyou*) of the deity. For a small donation to the temple, teachers had also acquired the above-mentioned protective wards—small pieces of red paper inscribed with magical glyphs—which they affixed above the inside of the main door to their classrooms. Unnoticed by the uninitiated, these wards formed an inconspicuous but incongruous addition to classroom décor, which was otherwise exclusively dedicated to two messages—encouragement of students in their diligent study and praise for the Communist Party.

Now, a few days before the test, the group was conducting a pious renewal of its original wish for examination success. As is typical during such pilgrimages, this supplication involved the promise of returning to the temple after the deity had granted the request—a practice known as "repaying the wish" (*huanyuan*). The school planned to undertake this third trip to the temple in July after students had received their Gaokao scores.

Such officially organized high-school pilgrimages to pray for examination success are widespread in the Minnan region of Fujian Province and beyond; moreover, these official pilgrimages form only one manifestation of broader participation in various forms of popular religious practice surrounding the Gaokao. Note, however, that these expressions of popular religious belief contradict not only the public commitment that Chinese educational institutions must maintain to official state secularism but also the emphasis that high schools customarily place on the orthodox conception of social reciprocity—that is, the notion that diligence and

character account for success in life. By contrast, such religious activities incorporate the belief that transcendental cosmic forces such as fate and luck partly account for individual fortunes.

Teachers' energetic assertions of the importance of diligence notwithstanding, therefore, official school participation in such activities represents a de facto concession that orthodox conceptions of merit are by themselves inadequate to account for the outcome of the examination, and thus of students' lives. In this chapter, therefore, I examine a variety of magical and religious activities aimed at accumulating and accounting for fate, luck, and karmic merit or secret virtue (*de/yinde*). I employ "karmic merit" and "secret virtue" synonymously. Moreover, I sometimes shorten "karmic merit" to "merit," as in the phrase "doing good to accumulate merit" (*xingshan jide*). This pattern of usage sometimes requires the reader to use context to disambiguate whether "merit" refers to the orthodox or "secret" (that is, popular-religious) variety. But I think that this ambiguity usefully indexes the constant slippage between orthodox secular and religious explanations, which I refer to as two different "cosmologies or "cosmological frames" (Goffman 1974).

Examining contextual and geographical variation in how people frame magical and religious activities, I suggest that people use such practices to reconstitute psychic and social coherence in the face of the fundamental contradictions in meritocratic ideology. Despite their widespread adherence to this ideology, people do not always experience one of its core tenants—orthodox social reciprocity—to be fully persuasive: On the one hand, people observe that random events, such as weather or guesswork, can have fateful effects on test day and thus on life outcomes; in other words, the examination, like other fateful events, involves great chanciness. On the other hand, people note that relatively immutable aspects of personhood—such as place of origin, class, gender, or ethnicity—greatly influence educational outcomes. The

importance of such "unchangeable objective factors," which people commonly identify with "fate," belies the meritocratic ideal that people can "determine their own fortune."

Such contradictions index the inherent lack or emptiness in the calculating apparatus of the examination—its ultimate inability to provide justice. In the final analysis, therefore, this incoherence reveals the gaps between ideals and realities—gaps that are simultaneously personal and social. In response to these contradictions, people follow in a long tradition of popular belief in cosmic reciprocity, by which I mean the practice of using magical signifiers such as "luck" (*yunqi*) and "fate" (*ming*) to account for and master life's vicissitudes. But such magical signifiers themselves prove insufficient to bridge the widening gap between expectations for social mobility and actual life trajectories: Following the rapid expansion of higher education in the 2000s and the economic slowdown of the 2010s, a glut of college grads is flooding a faltering employment market. These circumstances are producing an epidemic of "lostness and confusion" (*mimang*)—an existential malaise that people describe as depression in the face of their inability to repay their filial debt to the elder generations and thus to establish their own sense of potency.

The chapter is divided into three parts. Part I, "Cosmological Frames," explores how people reconcile and negotiate the frames of orthodox and cosmic reciprocity and how these two cosmological frames are institutionally and geographically distributed. Part II, "Cosmic Retribution," discusses how people produce meaning and coherence through magical and religious practices that are aimed at accumulating and accounting for "secret virtue." Part III, "Lostness and Confusion," explains the causes and consequences of the vacuum in existential meaning that ensues in the months and years following the examination.

Part I: Cosmological Frames

Religious Pragmatism and Cosmic Reciprocity

In my field sites, pilgrimages to Yongning are undertaken by elite high schools at every point in the central-place hierarchy and by non-elite high schools in peripherally located places. By contrast, non-elite high schools in Ningzhou and, in particular, Xiamen generally eschew officially organizing pilgrimages, although individual schools sometimes formed exceptions to this rule: Teachers at top high schools in Xiamen admit to participating in such pilgrimages, but teachers and students at Dragon Gate High School expressed great surprise about the existence of such activities. As one Dragon Gate teacher said, such officially organized religious prayer "violates the fundamental principles of education for quality" (*weifan suzhi jiaoyu de jiben yuanze*). These principles include the imperative to inculcate students with a reverence for science, on one hand, and inoculate them against "feudal superstitions" (*fengjian mixin*), on the other. Another Dragon Gate teacher, the school counselor Ms. Fu, emphasized that it was "definitely illegal" for teachers to encourage students in any religious belief, although she privately admitted that Yongning Temple was "quite potent" (*hen ling*).

In both elite urban schools and rural schools, however, the imperative to raise test scores overrides that of paying lip service to official secular ideology and education for quality. In short, administrators at such schools take a highly pragmatic attitude toward scores. Focusing on efficacy over ceremony, administrators are committed to doing "whatever works" to improve examination results. In this attitude, they are close to the position taken by influential pragmatist philosopher, psychologist, and sociologist of religion William James (1936): If asked about the existence of supernatural powers, administrators and officials may attempt to leave open or "bracket out" this question, as James does. Instead, they emphasize the salutary psychological

effects of religious faith—its ability to provide what they term "psychological comfort" (*xinli anwei*). Without doubt, however, many administrators and teachers also possess deeply held religious faith, which is common in this region of China.

Under such circumstances, it seems natural for high schools to seek guidance and help from popular-religious deities. In the region of my fieldwork, moreover, there are few forms of magico-religious intervention that people consider more effective than worship at Yongning. People seek out the deity's assistance during life's most fateful moments—illness, love, family feuds, business decisions, and examinations. And little exerts more fateful influence in people's lives than the Gaokao.

Magic and fatefulness are everywhere associated, not only in China. Anthropologists have long observed that people in a variety of cultural contexts employ various forms of magical and religious practice to ward off back luck and help ensure a positive outcome during fateful events: Note the prevalence of magical practices among a wide variety of specialists in fateful action, including soldiers (Stouffer 1949), fishermen (Malinowski 1935), baseball players (Gmelch 1978), gamblers (Lindner 1950), stock market investors (Lepori 2009), candidates for high office (Geshiere 2003), and even astronauts.[303] I suggest, therefore, that fatefulness provides a useful rubric for analyzing cross-cultural commonalities in the use of magic: Events that people use magic to control tend to be ones that combine high stakes with uncertain outcome. Consider, for instance, Malinowski's (1948) observation that Trobriand Islanders required the performance of magic for open sea fishing but not for lagoon fishing: The former represents an uncertain, high-stakes enterprise; the latter a day-to-day occurrence. Cross-culturally, moreover, the most potent forms of magic appear to be reserved for the life's most fateful events. Like people

[303] See this recent Southern Weekend (*Nanfang zhoumo*) article on the superstitions of U.S. astronauts: http://www.infzm.com/content/114688 (accessed January 25, 2016). Like people elsewhere, people in China are fascinated by the seemingly paradoxical quality of "modern magic."

elsewhere, therefore, Chinese seek divine assistance for fateful trials of merit, of which the Gaokao forms a paradigmatic cultural exemplar.

Below I revisit the above-mentioned pattern of geographical variation in pilgrimage activities to offer a more thorough-going account of why the practice of official collective backstage pilgrimages seems to be confined mostly to rural and elite urban schools. Here it is sufficient to note that parents and students from all places in the geographical hierarchy generally share the pragmatism that is characteristic of the attitude toward worship in these rural and high-ranking schools. Relatively unburdened from the exigency of schools to perform obeisance to the ideal of state secularism, many parents and students include religious pilgrimage in their everyday arsenal of methods for coping with examinations. People apply this same pragmatism, moreover, to a wide range of magical, mantic, and apotropaic practices that they follow to give themselves an advantage on the examination. But people nevertheless differ in their precise attitudes toward religious practices. Some approach worship with great piety, others see it as a form of "insurance" (*baoxian*), "psychological comfort," or apotropaic magic.

Although a wide variety of magico-religious practices exist, in the final analysis most such practices revolve around some notion of balancing the cosmic scales of merit. For instance, many students reason that a good examination performance will follow a bad one, and vice versa. Many other students will do good deeds before the examination to accumulate merit—or, as high-schoolers currently term this practice, "to earn character" (*zan renpin*)—a practice that I further describe below. Still others may buy lottery tickets, calculating that a loss in the lottery will lead to better luck in the examination. Note that what underlies all these practices is a belief in the ultimate cosmic harmony of reciprocity in social action—the notion that "good repays good and evil repays evil" (*shan you shan bao, e you e bao*) (Brokaw 1991).

Both orthodox and cosmic notions of reciprocity share a similar faith in cause and effect (chapter 1). In contrast to cosmic reciprocity, however, *orthodox* social reciprocity restricts the causal chain of explanations for examination success to individual diligence and character, following the formula "the expenditure of hard work is reciprocated by success" (*fuchu de nuli you huibao*). By contrast, cosmic reciprocity expands the spatial and temporal horizon of reciprocity to include the accumulation of merit more broadly through all kinds of moral action, in this and other lifetimes; moreover, people conceive the scope of this reciprocity to expand beyond the boundaries of the individual person to include the deeds of ancestors. As people say, "no deed goes unreciprocated; it is merely that the time has not arrived" (*bu shi bu bao, shi hou wei dao*).

Cosmic Reciprocity as a Continuum of Magico-Religious Practice

Thus many ordinary Chinese share the pragmatic attitude of high-school administrators toward religious worship, incorporating many practices into their worship that people from other cultural contexts might term "magical." Under ordinary circumstances, however, most Chinese tend to draw few sharp boundaries between the domains of religion and magic.

In contemporary mainland China, people do distinguish between "religion" and "superstition," but these domains are contested. The former is associated with high culture (the "Great Tradition") and later with popular culture (the "Little Tradition"). In everyday life, however, these two labels actually form the end points of a complex continuum of practices. The same person may oscillate between relatively philosophical and "superstitious" understandings of religion depending on context (Sangren 2000). Note also that one person's pious conviction might be another's apotropaic magic. As I elaborate below, moreover, magical mantic practices,

such as the drawing of lots, are closely integrated with devout prayer—the "submitting" and "repaying" of a wish.

In short, worshippers do not see any great conflict between practices that they identify with ordinary worship and those that they identify with more "heterodox" (*xie*) forms of communion with the spirit world, such as spirit possession or the appearance of omens in dreams; nor do they draw firm boundaries between these practices and more mundane magical practices that they undertake to influence luck. For example, regular worshippers at the Temple to the God of Examinations receive, for a donation, a lucky necklace and a lucky pen to improve their chances on test day. In this context, recall the above-mentioned practice of obtaining magical wards at temples or that of blessing test implements and test-admission certificates. More cultured or pious adherents of institutional Buddhism oppose such popular practices to the "true" teachings of the religion. But few ordinary worshippers make such distinctions. This close association of religious and magical practices produces great demand for entrepreneurial ritualists who make a living on the fringes of official religious life: After devoutly praying at a Buddhist temple, worshippers frequently visit one of the fortunetellers who tend to congregate outside such places.

Note, therefore, that many people who do not "believe" in religion nevertheless participate in magico-religious practices. Consider, for example, how some worshippers at the temple to the God of Examinations (Wenchang), which I further describe below, did not know whether this temple was a Daoist temple or a Buddhist temple, nor did they very much care. Instead, as one middle-age woman put it, many worshippers had merely "jumped on the bandwagon" (*genfeng*), glad to achieve any added advantage for their children by any means

possible. As another such "worshipper" testified, prayer is an "insurance policy" (*baoxian*): "You never know—[praying to Wenchang] might increase my daughter's luck."

To some degree, such agnosticism testifies to the atrophying of popular-religious knowledge on mainland China. Under Communist Party rule, popular religious practice underwent retrenchment—especially during the campaigns of the Cultural Revolution. This atrophy is particularly severe in relatively centrally located places. But even people who normally refrain from participating in religious observance almost invariably possess theories about how to influence "luck" based on various notions of cosmic reciprocity.

But popular religious practice has resurged in recent decades; moreover, this resurgence is relatively strong in Southeastern China, where, as mentioned, many continued visiting temples even during the Mao era. Referring to the prevalence of "superstitious" beliefs in this region, Chinese migrants from other places characterize this part of China as "highly feudal" (*fengjian*). On the evening of the ninth day of the lunar new year, for example, the balconies of houses all over Ningzhou City light up as families burn carefully folded paper-money wheels in sacrifice to the Heavenly Emperor (*Tiangong*)—the patriarch of the Chinese pantheon of popular gods. Many families regularly pray at temples and regularly attend religious events, such as temple parades (*youxing*) and rituals to banish evil influences or "exorcisms" (*xiaozai*). Such public worship is integrated into a regimen of household sacrifice to domestic deities and ancestors. Such practices have been handed down and adapted to changing circumstances since times immemorial and remain vibrant in Fujian relative to other places China.

In sum, ordinary people in my field sites omnivorously integrate a broad spectrum of magico-religious practices in a diffuse way throughout everyday life.[304] In emic terms, all such

[304] Borrowing from Joachim Wach, C.K. Yang (1967) usefully distinguishes between "diffused" and "institutional" religion: Diffused religion refers to a religion in which values, practices, and practitioners are "so intimately diffused

magico-religious practices fit into a common "supernatural" frame governed by the laws of what I term cosmic reciprocity.

Front-Stage and Backstage Cosmological Frames: "Playing by the Chart"

To recapitulate, people do not draw clear distinctions *within* the magico-religious domain of cosmic reciprocity. But they *do* recognize a sharp boundary—in discourse, at least—between orthodox secular social reciprocity, on the one hand, and cosmic reciprocity, on the other. Thus people widely identify these two forms of reciprocity with two distinct cosmological frames or explanatory models (Goffman 1974). The former frame is magico-religious and supernatural, the latter scientific and quotidian. From the perspective of orthodox Marxist Party-state ideology, the promulgation of which ostensibly forms an important mission of schools, the magico-religious frame of cosmic reciprocity consists of "feudal superstitions" that should be surmounted as China develops toward the telos of modernity.[305]

In regular "quality evaluations," students are supposed to be rated on their eschewal of such "superstitious" belief.[306] In practice, however, teachers—who themselves possess "superstitious beliefs"—do not take such evaluations very seriously, considering them to be "formulaic" and "empty" (chapter 3). Insofar as teachers *do* judge students on their beliefs, this judgement concerns students' ability to suppress them appropriately by paying proper lip service

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into…secular social institutions that they become a part of the concept, rituals, and structure of the latter, thus having no significant independent existence" (Yang 1967, 295). Yang suggests that Daoism and Buddhism form institutional religions, whereas Confucian practices of filial piety and ancestor worship form part of a diffused popular religion. However, he likewise contends that no strong boundary exists between diffused and institutional religious practice in China.

[305] The role that schools play in indoctrinating people to "leave behind" such "primitive" beliefs may help account for why schools are so frequently visited by ghosts and other uncanny apparitions: Nearly every Chinese child has a ghost story associated with schools (Bosco 2007). Recall that for Freud, such uncanny experience constitute the return of the repressed, including "primitive" (in this case "superstitious") thoughts that we believed ourselves to have surmounted.

[306] Since China nominally possesses freedom of religious freedom, belief in institutional religion should now in theory be exempted from such evaluations. As mentioned, however, the distinction between institutional religion and popular magical practices is difficult to sustain.

in front-stage contexts to the orthodox Party-state ideology of secular modernity. In everyday high school life, therefore, teachers in my field sites do not necessarily resort to the relatively pejorative expression "superstition" to sanction inappropriate discussion of cosmic reciprocity in public, front-stage settings. Instead, they usually prefer less muscular expressions of disapproval. For example, teachers may refer to such transgressions as "not playing by the chart" (*bu kaopu*), a relatively jocular, anodyne expression that can refer broadly to any public expression of unorthodox sentiment.

Depending on context and audience, therefore, teachers frame religious activities differently. In more official contexts, teachers speak of religious prayer as representing a "psychological comfort" (*xinli anwei*) to themselves and their students. This framing incorporates religious activity into the scientific cosmology of psychological explanation, providing everyone with an ideologically sanitized view that is acceptable within the front-stage context of official Chinese state secularism. When pressed in front-stage contexts to account for the efficacy of prayer, however, some teachers will employ one of a variety of closely related phrases that people commonly use to account for the effectiveness of religious belief: "If your heart is sincere, then [your prayer] will be effective" (*xin cheng ze ling*) or "If you believe, then [your prayer] will be effective" (*xin ze ling*). Such explanations, too, encompass religious belief within the frame of natural-scientific explanation, suggesting that theories of "mind over body" might help account for the effectiveness of religious belief.[307] Unlike the explanation according to "psychological comfort," however, the latter type of account—"if you believe, your prayer will be effective"— incorporates a strong vein of agnosticism. This type of account is more often

[307] Note the similarity to many anthropological accounts of the effectiveness of religious beliefs. For example, Siegel (2006) accounts for the death of bewitched people as a form of altruistic suicide: Believing themselves to be bewitched, the afflicted literally wither away and die. In the last analysis, the afflicted effects his or her own death, thus the death is a suicide. According to Durkheim's (1951) typology, the suicide is altruistic since it is conducted in deference to the cultural norms of the community.

uttered by people who themselves genuinely believe in the effectiveness of deities, but dare not or prefer not to give voice to that belief. In short, such agnostic accounts more often serve as a sop to the skeptics than they do as a rebuttal to pious belief.

Note how both types of frame—the scientific and the agnostic—are compatible with presenting religious activities in pragmatic terms as having a positive effect on student attitudes. According to the logic of these relatively orthodox frames, religious activity serves as a mechanism for improving student's psychological state, thus helping them to cope with examination pressure (chapter 5). Privately, however, many teachers concede that they attribute "real" efficacy to religion.

Consider, for example, how one participant in the above-mentioned pilgrimage to Yongning, Ms. Liu, recounted praying throughout her high-school and college years for academic success to the local deities in her small town. She not only sacrificed to the deities but engaged them in continuous dialog, for example by praying to the deities while she lay awake at night worrying about her studies.

Moreover, this teacher, like others, considers the process of praying to the Yongning Ancestral Patriarch *itself* to be a fateful event—one in which ritual missteps may have disastrous consequences for students' examination outcomes. In particular, Ms. Liu fretted about having to visit the temple during her menses, which is considered ritually polluting. She later worried that her class' subsequent substandard examination performance could be attributed to this ritual transgression, but expressed frustration about the double bind that such pollution taboos impose on women: If she had not prayed to the deity, he might have been angered; moreover, it would have been impossible for her to avoid the official school temple pilgrimage, which was, as mentioned, mandatory for senior-three head teachers.

In sum, religious activities can be a double-edged sword. On one hand, they provide people with comfort. On the other, they expand the experience of fateful consequentiality surrounding the examination to include activities that may initially seem only remotely related to the actual moment of the examination itself. Construed to be fateful events, both prayer and closely associated divinatory practices, on which I elaborate below, are perceived to incorporate a strong element of indeterminacy. Prayer is undetermined because one does not know whether or not the deity will answer one's prayers. And divination directly incorporates an added dimension of indeterminacy: Most forms of mantic practice revolve around an aleatory event, such as the selection of a lot, that worshippers cannot control. To reiterate: Prayer and divination, like the Gaokao, are construed to be moments of fateful action.

It is no accident that the structure of such magical rituals mirrors that of the event that they are meant to influence. Like the Gaokao itself, the authority of such rituals derives from the perception—which is undergirded by indeterminacy—that people's performance in them is judged not by the worshippers themselves but ultimately by a transcendental power outside of worshippers' control (chapter 1).

Below I elaborate on the fatefulness of prayer. First, however, I return briefly to question of how the deployment of various cosmological frames varies along the central-place hierarchy.

Accounting for Geographical Variation in Pilgrimage Activities

To recapitulate the above discussion, different cosmological frames dominate in different institutional contexts. In front-stage contexts such as public rallies, lessons, and (to a lesser extent) parent–teacher meetings and home visits, students must learn to "play by the chart." When religious behavior is mentioned in such contexts, it is generally explained in scientific

terms as “a psychological comfort.” Backstage, of course, high-ranking and rural schools themselves organized religious pilgrimages. But teachers at lower-ranking urban schools, which generally do not conduct such pilgrimages, express great surprise about their existence.

How can we account for why low-ranking urban schools do not conduct religious pilgrimages? As a partial answer to this question, I suggest that administrators and officials secretly see education at such schools to consist mainly in ritualistic social performance and impression management—that is, to consist in a relatively front-stage, “formulaic,” or “empty” activity. In the final analysis, educational officials see the purpose of such schools to consist mainly in ensuring social stability. As an educational official told me, the purpose of the examination is to “give the common people hope” (chapter 3). And as teachers say of the Gaokao, it helps ordinary families “accept their fate” (*renming*).

At low-ranking urban schools, therefore, the imperative to ensure that children recruit themselves into a belief in orthodox social reciprocity supersedes the imperative that they do well on the examination. Granted, the principal and teachers at such low-ranking schools can contribute to their own reputation and to that of their higher ups through improving examination performance. But the vast disparities in college admission rates along the score-value hierarchy ensures that no students at such low-ranking schools will do well enough on the examination to raise the reputation of the region as a whole. Not a single student from Dragon Gate had ever tested into Qinghua or Peking University. Thus such low-ranking schools mainly contribute to the reputation of educational officials through, as the Dragon Gate principal put it, “displaying” (*zhanshi*) achievements in education for quality. Officials generally only expect such schools to demonstrate modest improvements in test score on par with the general annual increase in college admission rates. Because of the relative inconsequentiality of examination scores at such

schools, the decision of whether or not to pray for examination success does not ordinarily rise to the level of an institutional imperative. In short, examination performance at such schools may be fateful to individual examinees and teachers, but not to officialdom or to the locality as a whole.

In rural areas and high-ranking urban schools, by contrast, educational authorities tacitly condone and, in some cases, even encourage or actually participate in official school pilgrimages. In the case of elite urban high schools, the performance of such schools on the examination is highly consequential not only to teachers and administrators but also to local officials. The reputation of educational officials is closely tied with the educational accomplishments of such elite high schools (chapter 3). Moreover, the great prestige of administrators at such high-ranking schools provides them with some immunization against the exigencies of paying obeisance to official secular ideology.

Rural schools conduct pilgrimages for related but slightly differing reasons. As in centrally located places, examination success is highly consequential to the reputation of administrators and officials. But even low-ranking rural schools are known to sponsor religious pilgrimages. I suggest that such schools' remoteness from central authorities partly protects them against the necessity to perform adherence to the tenets of quality education. As the saying goes, "Heaven is high and the emperor is far away" (chapter 2). In addition, popular religious belief is generally more fervent and widespread at places lower on the central-place hierarchy than it is in centrally located urban places.

Balancing Ritual Efficacy with the Exigencies of Impression Management

In sum, rural areas play backstage to an urban front stage (chapter 2): Orthodox cosmology tends to play a more dominate role in urban places than it does in rural places, except when, as in the religious practices of high-ranking urban schools, the exigencies of effective action trump those of impression management.

But the division between front-stage and backstage cosmology also occurs within institutions. Consider the following anecdote, which provides vivid illustration of this division: A few weeks before the examination, some classmates at Ningzhou Number One bought lottery tickets together, reasoning that their failure to win the lottery would help them on the examination by tipping the scales of merit in their favor. They pasted these lottery tickets on the back of a classroom door, an addition to the class décor that their head teacher initially tolerated. But a vice-principal noticed this unorthodox decoration, subsequently ordering the students to remove the lottery tickets. Students complied by following the vice-principal's instructions in fact but not in spirit—a form of strategic response that Chinese sometimes refer to as "hitting an edge ball" (chapter 3): Instead of removing the individual lottery tickets, the students removed the whole door, swapping it with another one that they found in a school attic. Thus their old classroom door became a secret backstage shrine. The classroom had thus been purified of this public display of "not playing by the charts." Note, however, that the vice-principal did not ask this head teacher to remove the magic ward from Yongning over her door, which was de rigueur in all senior-three classrooms. The school's rejection of one magical display and endorsement of the other can be reconciled by recognizing that the ward was both highly inconspicuous and deemed to be genuinely "effective" (*ling*).

Another anecdote illustrates similar tension between front-stage institutional impression management and the exigencies of backstage "reality." When a student committed suicide at one rural high school, the administration closed the school for a day so that a Daoist ritual specialist could be called in to conduct an exorcism. School administrators worried that the deceased student's spirit would contaminate other students, resulting in a negative influence on their examination performance. But any official public announcement of such religious activities would seriously violate the principles of official secular ideology. In response to this dilemma, administrators settled on an ingenious approach to impression management: They conducted the exorcism under the guise of disinfecting the school following a purported flu outbreak—a fabrication that presumably suggested itself because of the close metaphorical association between spiritual and biological forms of contagion.

This last anecdote begs the question of how people perceive the relationship between magical and scientific frames of explanation. In the case of the "flu outbreak," "science" formed an acceptable front-stage "packaging" (*baozhuang*) for the backstage reality of religious practice. Yet I also suggest that science is generally identified with the backstage efficacy of "getting real work done," in contrast to the humanities, which are associated with the front-stage performance of orthodox ideology (chapter 3). As the foregoing anecdotes illustrate, however, the "upholding" (*hongyang*) of science itself forms an important part of the orthodox front-stage ideological performance. But note that this apparent contradiction between magic and science dissolves when we consider that both are conceived to share a common concern with efficacious technique (Mauss [1902] 2006). Thus the move from front-stage to backstage merely involves a shift in perspective on the primacy of science: In the front stage, science is presented as transcending or encompassing the magico-religious domain, which is reduced to a

"psychological comfort." In the backstage, by contrast, religion is conceived to encompass science and to form its transcendental outside.

The Blending of Orthodox and Popular Frames:

Audits of Virtue and Karmic Bonus Points

Terms such as "science" and "superstition" are unique to the contemporary era. In orthodox Chinese Marxism, the former is associated with "materialism" (*weiwu zhuyi*) and the latter with "idealism" (*weixin zhuyi*). But similar types of tension between front-stage orthodox social reciprocity and backstage cosmic reciprocity seem to have constituted an important aspect of Chinese social life since at least Song times (960–1279 CE), long preceding contemporary manifestations of this division.

As Cynthia Brokaw (1991, 28) notes, the "belief in supernatural or cosmic retribution" has formed a "fundamental, at times *the* fundamental, belief of Chinese history since the beginning of recorded history." In early Chinese history, this belief may be traced through different historical practices ranging from Shang oracle-bone divination, through Zhou beliefs in the Heavenly Mandate, to Han notions of cause and effect (*gan-ying*). In medieval times (that is, between the end of the Han [220 CE] and the beginning of the Song [960 CE]), this principle of cosmic retribution constituted a common denominator between orthodox Confucian ideology, popular religious belief, the ideas of Daoist immortality cults, and Buddhist conceptions of karma. Note how all of these beliefs revolve around the common human existential dilemma that I discuss in chapter 1: They all hinge on understanding the degree to which people determine their own fate and the degree to which their fate is determined by factors outside their control.

But scholars widely distinguish two main types of thought about fate—popular currents and orthodox Confucian currents.[308]

Orthodox Confucian currents of thought about fate can be traced through the writings of Mencius and Zhu Xi's (1130–1200) Neo-Confucian reinterpretation of Mencius during the Song Dynasty. According to such orthodox currents, Heaven and the human world are linked in cosmic correspondence; however, the workings of Heaven are beyond the ken of humankind. Human beings are endowed by Heaven with a fundamentally good nature or "pattern" (*li*); however, they must strive to overcome the conflicts inherent to "material energy" (*qi*) to reach perfection. According to this logic, the moral duty of every human being is to cultivate his or her fundamental goodness. Such orthodox Confucian logic generally eschews notions of karma and reincarnation; however, virtue is closely associated with the extension of life: The meritorious can look forward to a long life and to symbolic immortality through the continuation of the patriline.[309]

In popular understandings of fate, by contrast, fate is determined by a pantheon of anthropomorphized god-bureaucrats, which is ruled by the supreme deity—the Heavenly Emperor. These god-bureaucrats communicate with gods resident in the family (the kitchen god) and even in the body (the three worms). They carefully tabulate and calculate every person's individual and family merit in this and past lives. Just as this-worldly bureaucrats may be liable to graft and corruption, these spirits are sometimes petty and mean. On the whole, however, their

[308] The following discussion draws heavily on Brokaw (1991) but also derives inspiration from Yang (1967).
[309] In these Confucian conceptions of merit, long life constitutes the just reward of sagehood and merit. In many ages, Chinese have sought to perfect virtue in the pursuit of immortality. It makes sense that long life or immortality should be represented as the reward of virtue. Virtue describes, in essence, adherence to proper norms of social reciprocity (*bao*), whereas death represents the interruption of all social reciprocity. Death strikes everyone, but the moment of its arrival cannot be precisely predicted. Thus death is the paradigmatic source of incoherence in social reciprocity.

panoptic view of human affairs enables them to make fair decisions on the allotment of individual success by assessing the "secret virtue" of every person.

Brokaw (1991) notes that the more orthodox vision of fate restricts individuals' agency to earnest and sincere self-cultivation. Within the ambit of this self-cultivation, however, individuals have perfect control, and thus complete responsibility, over their lives. On the other hand, the popular tradition allots more scope for action to individuals. According to the popular logic, individuals have the power to affect fate by performing meritorious acts, thus tipping the balance of the scales of "secret virtue" in their favor. Paradoxically, however, the popular view of fate also attributes human success or failure to factors outside of individual control, such as the merit of ancestors. By contrast, the orthodox view of fate focuses exclusively on individuals' self-cultivation in the here and now. Whereas the orthodox conception cherished a view of human nature as intrinsically good, the popular one seems closer to Mohist or Legalist philosophies, which stress the necessity behavioral correctives and the vigilant avoidance of evil.

Note that imperial divisions between orthodox and popular views of fate correspond closely with the distinction in contemporary culture that I draw between orthodox reciprocity and cosmic reciprocity. Some may object to this distinction—along with similar distinctions such as that between the "Greater Tradition" and the "Lesser Tradition." Skeptics rightly note that such divisions differentiate too sharply between official and popular culture. Nevertheless, people *themselves* routinely draw clear distinctions between orthodox and popular explanations, even if they blend both types of explanation in practice.

Consider, for example, the popularity of "ledgers of merit" in imperial times (Brokaw 1991). These ledgers consisted in moral account books that people used to tabulate and quantify

good deeds, which were awarded various scores based on a predetermined point system.[310] One particularly popular example of the genre was called "Determining Your Own Fate" (*Liming pian)*. The usage of such ledgers was neither isolated nor short lived. The phenomenon can be traced from medieval times but became popular during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). In the contemporary era, this tradition of tabulating merit in ledgers was continued by the Chinese Communist Party in its campaigns of political education: Registers of merit and demerit (*gonggubu*) encouraged people to "self-create" themselves as new people by letting "merits … wash away demerits" (Ibid., p. 226, n. 140). The "work point" system used during the era of collectivized agriculture—to be further described below—also resembles such ledgers. In the present, such concerns with quantifying merit are sustained in ubiquitous efforts to tabulate, quantify, record, and audit students' "quality" (*suzhi*) along with various other measurements of morality.[311]

Brokaw notes that such ledgers combine popular obsessions with "secret merit" *and* orthodox concerns for individual self-cultivation. In short, ledgers syncretized popular and orthodox approaches in a way that orthodox Confucians sometimes tolerated but did not wholeheartedly embrace.[312]

If the ledgers of merit represent a fusion of the orthodox and popular cosmological frames, other practices demonstrate how imperial-era examinees contextually shifted from one frame to another. Many of the same examinees who wrote examinations essays on the niceties of

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[310] As I suggest in chapter 1, Confucian and Protestant ethics of self-cultivation display many uncanny similarities. Note, for example, the uncanny similarity between such ledgers and Benjamin Franklin's methods of moral accounting.

[311] Kipnis (2008) provides a useful overview of the moral auditing practices of Chinese schools.

[312] As Brokaw describes, the idea that any man could enjoy the fruits of success and sagehood by following a regimented program of self-cultivation attracted advocates of public education. But more conservative scholars argued that ledgers appealed to humankind's baser desire for profit and gain. Others accepted ledgers, but only insofar as they seemed to serve as a useful instrument for promoting social stability. By late imperial times, ledgers contained precise prescriptives for etiquette between status groups, thus emphasizing social stability in a period of cataclysmic social change.

orthodox Confucian philosophy consulted fortune tellers, who congregated around examination halls. A wide range of imperial-era literature describes the supernatural beliefs of scholars, who frequently attributed examination success and failure to the influence of ghosts and karmic merit (Elman 2000; Miyazaki 1981). A favorite subject of such literature is the interpretation of dreams: The success of many a first-place examinee (*zhuangyuan*) was said to be foretold in prescient visions.[313]

In the contemporary era, too, the discursive clarity with which people draw the distinction between orthodox and cosmic forms of reciprocity belies the syncretism of their actual practices, which frequently blend both frames.[314] Consider, for example, the practice of awarding extra points on the Gaokao to the sons and daughters of war veterans and "martyrs of the revolution." Superficially, this practice might be understood as a form of affirmative action (chapter 4). However, this practice highlights not only the disadvantage of awardees but also the merit of their ancestors. Such policies acknowledge the state's debt to the progeny of virtuous martyrs, which is tantamount to acknowledging the heritability of ancestral merit.[315]

The Examination as an Engine for Producing Fatefulness

After the Gaokao, teachers, students, administrators, and officials inevitably conduct postmortem discussions of the exam. These discussions revolve around which student "deserved" or "did not

[313] Imperial-era literati loved to collect such tales, which form the basis of such collections as the *Qian-Ming kechang yiwen lu* [Recording unusual matters heard in the earlier Ming examination grounds]. The Qing-era satirical novel The Scholars (*Rulin waishi)* also contains such accounts as does Pu Songling's (1640–1715) Qing-era collection, Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio (*Liaozhai zhi yi*).

[314] In the 1980s, leading Chinese scientists, such as American-trained physicist Qian Xuesan, "King of Chinese Rocketry," advocated for a Chinese science of the supernatural, which would investigate and leverage the power of "traditional" Chinese body practices such as *qigong* for the glory of the nation (Palmer 2007). See also Schmalzer's (2008) discussion of the Chinese Yeti craze in the 1980s. Thus I do not mean to imply that the tension between orthodox and cosmological frames is historically unchanging but merely that such a tension, as it is variously realized in different periods, appears to be fundamental to the "modern" experience since at least late imperial times.

[315] In imperial times, the much-debated hereditary Yin privilege, by which certain officials could automatically qualify their children for official service, seems similarly to have blended traditional beliefs in hereditary merit with recognizably modern beliefs in individual responsibility for self-cultivation.

deserve" his or her success, which school or region "earned its reputation" and which is merely lazily "living off old capital" (*chi laoben*), that is, resting on its laurels. Successes that are not "earned" can only be explained through "fate" and "luck." But the unavoidable indeterminacy of the examination means that no result can be justified through orthodox social reciprocity alone.

Indeterminacy forms an important structural commonality of all fateful events: Such events constitute trials of merit because they combine uncertainty of outcome with consequentiality (chapter 1). But note how indeterminacy undergirds and necessitates popular beliefs in cosmic reciprocity: Unable to create a coherent account of indeterminacy within the orthodox cosmological frame, people appeal to transcendental categories such as "fate" and "luck."

Recall that fateful trials of merit generally involve two types of indeterminacy—(1) an agonistic form, which derives from social limits (other people) and (2) an aleatory form, which derives chancy or happenstance events. The former form of indeterminacy, which I term *precariousness*, includes aspects of indeterminacy that the individual (or group) deems to be (potentially) under his or her (or their) control. The latter form of indeterminacy, which I term *chanciness*, includes all factors that people perceive to fall totally outside their control.

In the context of examinations, manifestations of chanciness may range from misguessed questions to bad weather on test day. But in the pursuit of "objective," "scientific" assessment, test designers and teachers strive to eliminate such manifestations of chanciness. They hope thereby to foreground the exam's agonistic dimension, which is considered its proper function (chapter 4).

The reason for these attempts to create a "scientific" examination lie close at hand: Whereas precariousness can be more easily explained through the orthodox notion of reciprocity,

which emphasizes diligence, persistence, and composure, chanciness is difficult to subsume under this orthodox frame. As I note elsewhere, students remark on the great consequentiality of guesswork. They complain, for example, that "you move your hand a little, you lose five points, and your whole fate is different" (chapter 1). Much to the consternation of test researchers (many of whom are in denial of this fact), head teachers report that it is ordinary for students' scores to "fluctuate" (*bodong*) as much as twenty points even without such catastrophic occurrences as sleeplessness, illness, and so on. But even a relatively minor fluctuation of ten points is highly consequential to examinees.

In short, it is impossible to purify the Gaokao or, for that matter, any fateful event completely of chanciness. Chanciness both forms an intrinsic aspect of all fateful competitions and intrudes upon fateful events "from the outside" in the form of accident and happenstance. Therefore, chanciness introduces unavoidable incoherence into the orthodox notion of reciprocity, belying the notion that success repays hard work. Consequently, people must use magical signifiers such a "fate" or "luck" to square the circle between belief in social reciprocity and the examination's aleatory character. In other words, the only way for individuals to achieve coherence in the face of chanciness is to appeal to the more encompassing frame of cosmic reciprocity. Since "science" can never explain everything, the all-encompassing transcendental frame of cosmic reciprocity will always trump the finitude of orthodox "scientific" explanation.

Therefore, the efforts of examination researchers to create a more "scientific" examination appear naïve at best and misguided at worse. These attempts overlook the examination's close affiliation with "heterodox" forms of fatefulness, such as gambling or divination: Far from being an extraneous or inessential component of the examination's

functioning, the aleatory component of the examination enables people to suppose that it speaks with transcendental authority.

In using "fate" to account for the examination's aleatory dimension, people infuse the whole experience—including its precarious dimension—with the transcendental authority of fate. In this context, it is useful to recall that the exam's significance to people lies in how they see it as an opportunity to "change fate." People identify "fate" with relatively immutable aspects of personhood, such as gender, place of origin, and family background—in short, one's position in the social division of labor. It is this position in the division of labor that people hope to change through examination competition—the exam's precarious or agonistic dimension. But note that by using the exam to "change fate" people are actually producing "fate" as a causal explanation and force in their lives. The aleatory dimension of indeterminacy greatly facilitates this production of fate.

In other words, people see the exam as an opportunity to "change fate," but the great chanciness of the examination causes "fate" to reassert itself as a causal explanation. In short, it is a close step from attributing chance happenstance to the vicissitudes of "fate," on the one hand, to attributing one's place in the division of labor to "fate," on the other. Analytically, these two usages of "fate" are distinct: The former refers to random events, the latter to arbitrary social relations. The former indexes the agonistic dimension of indeterminacy, the latter its aleatory dimension. But these two aspects of indeterminacy are rendered indistinguishable when people attribute both forms of non-choice to a common transcendental cause—that of fate.

Above I suggest that the examination ritual is a form of labor that people use to objectify socially produced capacities (knowledge, morality, "quality") into a charismatic measure of individual merit—the exam score (chapter 3). Due to the above-described intrinsic chanciness of

fateful events, however, orthodox forms of labor—diligence, persistence, and composure—are not in themselves sufficient to produce this objectification. An additional form of labor is required to restore coherence to the scales of reciprocity—the magical labors of prayer, pilgrimage, accumulation of "secret virtue," mantic practices, and endless examination postmortems, in which "fate" inevitably plays a paramount role. But this labor is not secondary or superficial to the exam's functioning. Indeed, the construction of "fate" through the examination forms the crux of its cultural meaning.

Ironically, therefore, "purification" of chanciness from the examination, were it possible, would result in ritual failure. In sum, the examination, and similar fateful trials of merit, are like engines that people use to produce a belief in fate.

The Lottery of College Selection or "Tendering One's Aspiration"

In the preceding section, I note that test designers do their best to exclude chanciness from the examination, even though chanciness forms an essential aspect of the examination's social and psychological influence. But it is not strictly true that the examination system has been designed to minimize its aleatory dimension. Just as a contradiction exists in the United States, for example, between the ideal of direct democracy and the byzantine reality of the electoral system, a contradiction exists in China between the ideal of selection by merit and the actual college selection process—the so-called process of "tendering one's aspiration" (*tianbao zhiyuan).*

After the Gaokao, students wait anxiously for three weeks before receiving their score. Once they have received their score, they have two weeks to create a ranked list of colleges and courses of study to which they seek admission. After one's "aspiration is tendered," one has little further influence over the result: One's college and major are assigned through an opaque,

backstage process that, from the individual perspective, appears as highly chancy. After starting college, it may be possible to make changes to one's course of study, but the process for doing so is usually fraught and difficult.

For all these reasons, the process of "tendering one's aspiration" is widely compared to gambling: As in a game of chance, families can pursue strategies to maximize their odds of securing admission to their college and major of choice, but the result is ultimately beyond their control. Until recently (circa 2008), the college-selection process incorporated an even more substantial aleatory dimension because students were required to tender their aspirations *before* receiving their Gaokao scores. Most regions and provinces have now reformed the system. But people still see college selection as extremely capricious and risky.

A whole section of most bookstores is dedicated to college-selection guidebooks, and many high schools hold informational assemblies for parents to help them navigate the process, which is highly complex.[316] But schools are generally more concerned with their own reputations than with helping students fulfill their professional and educational goals. Thus the advice that schools give families frequently centers on ensuring that as many students as possible gain admission to top-tier colleges, since the top-tier admission rate forms the central metric by which schools are judged. Parents routinely seek head teachers' advice on the process, but head teachers, though they are presumed to be authorities, often know little more about the process than well-informed parents. For these reasons, the process of college selection creates an added layer of pitfalls for families with cultural-capital deficits. Just as American students who lack

[316] College selection involves the consideration of a number of factors, including at least the following: (1) one's Gaokao score; (2) the cut-off scores for various tiers of colleges ranging from elite first-tier institutions to obscure third-tier and two-year junior colleges; and (3) the historical cut-off rates for various majors. Strategic considerations include whether to attempt to secure admission to the most desirable college possible or the most desirable major possible. This already complex mixture of factors is further complicated by other decisions, such as whether or not to apply for admission to military or teacher's colleges, which have special requirements and deadlines, or to submit applications to colleges in Hong Kong or overseas that now consider Gaokao scores.

access to guidance counselors often pursue misguided college-selection strategies, Chinese families who have little understanding about the process are at a distinct disadvantage.[317]

Not only, therefore, is the process of "tendering aspirations" fraught with chanciness; it is also structured—almost as if by design—to increase children's subordination to their elders. That is to say, parents dominate the college-selection process. The wishes of students—to the degree that they have any definite wishes—play only a secondary role.[318]

At this stage in their careers, the young scholars have been studying more or less non-stop for twelve years. In their high-school studies, they have been encouraged to develop their testing capacities as evenly as possible in all subjects, since a so-called "bias" toward one subject or another (*pianke*) results in lowered test performance.[319] As a result, however, students have had little opportunity to selectively cultivate their interests. As one put it, "before the Gaokao, there is no time to think about the future; you have to put your whole heart into study [*suoyou de*

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[317] One female masters student of rural origin at Xiamen University told me that her Gaokao score would have qualified her for admission to a Project 211 school. Because of mistakes in tendering her aspiration, however, she ended up at a prefectural teacher's college. Her parents lacked money and did not feel sure that she could repeat her exam performance. Note that this student's experience predates the above-mentioned reform: When she tendered her aspiration, this student had no certain knowledge of her exact Gaokao score. Post-reform, such large mismatches between score and college are less common.

[318] When students do have ideas about their future, these ideas are generally based on vague principles rather than on specific wishes. When queried, many articulate a general desire for a less alienated existence than they have hitherto experienced as students. They, suggest, for example, that they would enjoy professions in which they can exercise their "creativity" or in which they can "supervise their own work." But these desires for a freer life are balanced with the imperative to "make money," which is required for the fulfillment of filial obligations and the establishment of their own agency as providers. Students who do possess a very clear idea about what they wish to study generally choose majors based on perceived earning potential, job stability, and prestige rather than on interest.

In the absence of specific ideas, however, students usually defer to their parents, who often make decisions by following prevailing trends. During my fieldwork, for example, it was fashionable to pursue majors in finance or information technology or, especially, majors that combined these two fields, such as "Financial Management and Information Systems."

[319] Under the current round of reforms, students will select three of seven possible "electives" rather than a general "humanities" or "sciences" course of study (chapter 4). Thus, students will have slightly more ability to introduce personal preference into their studies. But I am skeptical that this relatively modest reform will produce large changes in students' educational experience. Under the old system, most students selected humanities only if they did not feel able to compete in the sciences. Thus I predict that students will cluster themselves into two groups—one broadly focused on humanities electives, the other on sciences electives: Now as before, moreover, students will not be allowed to demonstrate "bias" toward any particular course.

xinzi fang zai xuexi shang].” Thus very little has prepared students for the actual moment of using their Gaokao score to determine destiny. Having just completed “the final battle,” moreover, students are physically and emotionally exhausted. Many are plagued by anxiety as they await their final scores. Thus they are generally in no emotional state to think about the future. When they finally receive their scores, they must make a snap decision—within two weeks. For all these reasons, parents usually make the decision for children, often with fairly minimal consultations.[320]

Despite parents’ best preparations, moreover, the result of the college-selection process largely lies outside their control. Depending on how the process pans out, a student may have to “adapt” (*shiying*) to widely varying destinies. More and more universities are giving students some flexibility to change their majors, but this flexibility is far from absolute. For many, therefore, adjusting to their college major incorporates a large measure of “coming to terms with fate” (*renming*). Almost as if by design, therefore, the process of “tendering one’s aspiration” heightens the indeterminacy of the Gaokao selection process, making it an even more powerful engine for producing fatefulness.

In this context, it is useful to note the striking resemblance between the secular process of “tendering one’s aspiration” in the Gaokao and the sacred process of “submitting a wish” (*xuyuan*) to a deity during prayer. This resemblance appears even more conspicuous when one considers possible alternative translations of “tendering one’s aspiration.” “Aspiration” (*zhiyuan*) could be translated as “wish,” but also has a second meaning—“to volunteer.” Thus the phrase

[320] Consider another way in which parents decided their children’s course of study: Many parents pressure their children to enter into professions that are closely allied with their own, reasoning that they could use their connections, or guanxi, to help their children succeed. Thus, for instance, the Ningzhou daughter of Chinese medicine traders encouraged her to study traditional Chinese medicine. Many teachers will encourage their children (especially daughters) to take up teaching. And a well-established anthropologist encouraged his son to study anthropology, explaining to me, “I am not much use to him in other areas, but in the world of anthropology, I can help him a lot.”

possesses the additional connotation of volunteering for society—a terminological holdover from the era when college graduates were assigned jobs, and thus literally conceived to be "volunteers" for the country. Although I doubt if college applicants typically compare the college-selection to submitting one's wish to the deity, the parallels are striking: Just as the worshipper promises to "return the wish" by paying back the deity, the college applicant (in principle, at least) promises to pay back the motherland.

In short, both worshippers and college applicants experience themselves as supplicating a transcendental power to grant their wish. In the case of "tendering one's aspiration," allowance or refusal of that wish takes the form of socially enforceable consequences—admission to or rejection from college. In other words, the judgment is ensured by relatively objective social constraints that are enforced by state authority: A student who secures admission to a rural two-year college but shows up on the first day of classes at Beijing University will be ejected or arrested. By contrast, faith in the judgment of deities necessarily involves a much more subjective, albeit also highly social experience. Worshippers consult with ritual specialists and others to interpret the judgment of the deity, and this judgment may likewise be experienced as having socially enforceable effects. But these effects rarely, if ever, involve state authority. In comparison to belief in the Gaokao, therefore, belief in deities is based more on personal conviction.

Similar to worshippers' attitudes toward deities, however, most participants in the Gaokao believe more or less in the "objectivity" of the result, praising the examination as the "only relatively fair social competition in China." As I suggest above, this conviction actually rests to an underappreciated degree on how people widely associate the Gaokao with the judgements of abstract transcendental powers: The Gaokao is felt to represent the universalistic

judgment of a hypostasized national community, but ultimately also the judgement of the ultimate transcendent power—fate. Indeed, this transcendental category—associated with the workings of the supreme deity, Heaven—is felt to encompass the workings of human effort *and* divine beings.

In sum, meritocratic ideology includes a notion of cosmic reciprocity as a necessary supplement to that of orthodox reciprocity (chapter 1). Cosmic reciprocity is never fully distinguishable from orthodox reciprocity, but always accompanies it as the uncanny but necessary trace of its constitutive incoherence.

Part II: Cosmic Retribution

"Earning Character" and "Using Character": A Euphemized form of Secret Virtue

As a general rule, people do not submit docilely to the prescriptions of "fate." Rather, following in the tradition of ledgers of merit and other popular religious practices, they actively attempt to influence the cosmic powers that they conceive to be guiding their destinies.

As I mention above, the belief that "good reciprocates good" is ubiquitous. This belief gives rise to a variety of practices through which people attempt to tip the karmic scales of secret virtue in their favor. For example, many students actively perform good deeds to accumulate merit in the hope of influencing examination outcomes. To a student's ear, however, the Buddhism-inflected language of "doing good to accumulate merit" (*xingshan jide*) sounds ridiculously old fashioned—something, as one student put it, her mother or grandmother would say. By the same token, such religious language is not really appropriate within the cosmological frame of orthodox secular reciprocity that dominates in everyday high-school life. In contrast to their teachers and parents, most of whom are middle-aged, students have not reached a stage of

life when it is common to seek meaning and comfort in religious practices.[321] They are, moreover, being encouraged on all sides to be maximally diligent and take personal responsibility for their success or failure (chapters 4 and 5). Especially in public settings, therefore, most students adopt an agnostic if not skeptical attitude toward their parents' religiosity, emphasizing that examination success is based not on parent's temple visits but rather on their own diligence.

Privately, however, many students possess well-developed religious faith; many more (the vast majority, if not all) have a strong (if diffidently expressed) belief in the above-described fundamental rules of cosmic reciprocity. Thus students are presented with a dilemma of impression management, even if they are not always overtly conscious of this dilemma: On one hand, the high degree of chanciness that students face in the examination invites, even necessitates, consideration of karmic merit. On the other hand, students are disinclined to open displays of religiosity since religiosity, or "superstitious belief," contradicts both the institutional performance of secularism and the macho ethos of diligent self-mastery; in addition, "traditional" religiosity—associated with the older generations—can appear, as mentioned, quite "uncool."

These constraints have elicited a creative response: In reaction to this tension between the public imperatives of impression management and their private belief in karmic merit, students have created a sanitized or euphemized form of "doing good to accumulate merit," which they term "earning character" (*zan renpin*).

[321] Many adults begin to embrace religious practices with more vigor as they approach middle age. In part, this heightened religious interest results from the heaviness of the burden that middle-aged people shoulder. In middle age, Chinese must care both for their children and their parents. With this dual burden, the domain of events outside the individual's control increases, or at least the individual's subjective experience of his or her limits increases, including a growing awareness of mortality. Particularly middle-aged women seek comfort in religion (the visible majority of worshippers at popular temples are members of this demographic group)—a religious predilection that can probably be explained in part by the relatively subjugated position of mothers within China's patriarchal, patrilineal social arrangements (Sangren 2000).

In ordinary usage, "character" (*renpin*) is a close synonym with "quality" (*suzhi*).[322] In students' usage, however, the term has come to refer to a kind of invisible merit or secret virtue that can be "earned" (*zan*) or "used" (*yong*). During my fieldwork, discussions about "character" were widely popular among high-school and college-aged students and younger teachers, particularly in urban areas. "Character" could be used to explain almost anything. As one teacher said, "if [students] cannot find a reason for something, they just say that their 'character' is bad."

Unlike the usual notion of "accumulating merit," however, "earning character" has humorous connotations. The expression can be used to mock others. More often, however, students self-deprecatingly invoke "earning character" to make fun of themselves or to thwart others' attempts to ridicule them. Thus, for example, a student who works particularly hard will claim that his good test performance is due to "good character" rather than hard work, hoping to avoid being labeled a curve wrecker or "academic overlord" (*xueba*). In short, appeals to "character" constitute one prominent way that diligent students affect the type of happy-go-lucky attitude that is described in chapter 3.

"Character" has other strategic uses. Students who are ridiculed or bullied can defend themselves against such assaults by reminding their attackers that such unmeritorious conduct can cause their persecutors to "lose character," and thus become unlucky. Consider the role that gender frequently plays in such disputes. Girls, in particular, may face ridicule for achieving higher test scores than boys, particularly in subjects in which boys are presumed to possess a "natural advantage"—math and science. By assigning superior test performance to "character," girls can help defuse the aggressive reaction that some boys have to being outperformed by someone of supposedly "inferior logical ability." By the same token, teachers may soften a

[322] However, "character" places relatively great emphasis on elegance of expression—that is, the outward manifestations of quality, such as bearing and eloquence.

criticism by humorously attributing a student's poor test performance to "poor character." For example, they might say, "Why did you get such a simple question wrong? Your character must be awful!" Conversely, teachers may sometimes join students in praising a classmate who suddenly gives an inexplicably good performance on an examination, saying that his or her "character surged" (*renpin baofa chulai*)—an explanation that invariably draws widespread laughter.

Of course, any unexpectedly good test result is described as a "surge" (chapter 4). When people say that someone's "character surged," however, they are not merely commenting on an unexpectedly good performance but also offering an account of it. This account follows the laws of cosmic reciprocity, turning on notions of secret virtue similar to those promulgated in imperial ledger culture: According to the popular lore surrounding "character," this secret virtue follows a "law of conservation": Character can be earned or used but it is never destroyed. One accumulates character not only by doing good deeds but also by falling prey to inauspicious occurrences. Thus, one can console an unfortunate classmate who gets caught cheating or encounters particularly difficult examination questions that he or she has "earned character" for the next test.

The ethos of humorous unseriousness that accompanies invocations of "character" both beg explanation and are belied by the backstage earnestness with which many students strive to accumulate character. Granted, some teachers and even students dismiss the phenomenon, saying that students merely employ "character" as an explanation but do not actually try to "earn character." In fact, however, many students really *do* try to improve their secret virtue, even if they affect an unserious attitude toward such efforts. Despite this cloak of unseriousness, a strong measure of sincerity frequently accompanies "character"-earning activities. As one student

testified, “Of course you have to be kind. Of course you have to be good to other people. If you want character, you definitely have to be sincere in how you treat other people [*zhencheng duidai ta ren*].”

The stereotypical method of earning character consists in performing acts of public virtue (*gongdexing*), for example, as one student said, helping an old lady across the street. Students thus half-humorously associate “earning character” with various volunteer activities, such as those organized by schools as part of a major government campaign during my fieldwork to resuscitate the “spirit of Lei Feng”—an archetypal paragon of moral virtue lionized in public campaigns during the Maoist era. But students also use many other methods to earn character. For example, college students report that various websites on which classmates give advice to one another experience a major uptick in activity before large examinations. This uptick is widely attributed to people’s desire to accumulate character by helping others. Other efforts to earn character seem at odds with public virtue, at least as ordinarily conceived. Describing her efforts to earn character during the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), which students take to qualify for admission to college overseas, one student said that she always went online promptly after taking the TOEFL exam to report all the questions and answers that she could remember. Now largely computer-based, such examinations as the TOEFL draw their questions from a limited pool; thus students’ efforts to publish any exam questions that they remember can be an effective method of helping others cheat. This student considered such mutual aid among students to be a particularly good way to “earn character.” Other students couched more traditional forms of religiosity within the jocular idiom of “earning character.” One Xiamen student, for example, told me—to a chorus of laughter from his classmates—that she had an acquaintance who prayed at a prominent Buddhist temple in Xiamen, Nanputuo

Temple, to earn character. Upon seeing her examination scores improve, this student began to pray at the temple regularly. Eventually, she was waitlisted at a Western university, to which, following further pious prayer, she eventually gained admission. Note, however, that this process, which would ordinarily be described in terms of "submitting a wish" and "repaying a wish," was framed within the rhetoric of "earning character."

In sum, I regard "character" as a sanitized or euphemized idiom of cosmic reciprocity—one that is acceptable in relatively front-stage institutional contexts in high schools and universities. This analysis helps account for the humorous effect that this rhetoric frequently produces: By couching religiosity within an aesthetic form that is acceptable in front-stage contexts, the idiom of "earning character" circumvents the normal strictures of front-stage censorship (chapter 3). Thus "earning character" can be described in terms that are inoffensive to official secularism. Consider, for example, how one college student, who had received the honor of being invited to join the Communist Party, incorporated the rhetoric of earning character into a completely secular, scientific frame: "There is nothing superstitious or supernatural about 'earning character'; you don't have to believe in ghosts and spirits to believe that good comes to good people."

In other words, the rhetoric of earning and using character forms a discursive "edge ball" (chapter 3): This idiom enables people both to pay lip service to official secularism *and* to incorporate explanations from the cosmological frame of cosmic reciprocity. In this case, "official secularism" consists of both "external" and "internal" superegoistic effects (chapter 3). On the one hand, "character" indexes the public enforcement of a secular ethos. On the other hand, this term suggests the resistance that students themselves possess toward acknowledging uncanny "superstitious" beliefs that their socialization as "modern" subjects "ought" to have

surmounted. In deference to “science” and “modernity,” the rhetoric of earning character adopts a “half believing, half doubting” (*ban xin, ban yi*) attitude toward cosmic retribution.

The humorous effect that this rhetoric achieves, however, tells a different story: The jocularity surrounding “character” merely reveals the censored earnestness of such beliefs. The idiom of character taps into a truth that is normally censored from front-stage contexts, namely, the limited explanatory power of diligence, persistence, and composure—orthodox social reciprocity. Recall that teachers ordinarily attempt to suppress this truth in the interest of encouraging students to take personal responsibility for test scores (chapter 4). But the rhetoric of earning character switches the explanatory frame from orthodox reciprocity to cosmic reciprocity in a context where such reversals are normally inappropriate. By performing this reversal in a socially acceptable way, the idiom of character releases some of the tension that results from suppressing the incoherence of meritocratic ideology. This tension is liberated as laughter.

The idiom of character is a relatively recent invention, and may fade quickly along with other fads that are spread through social media. But note that the need for this secularized idiom of cosmic reciprocity is structural to the institution of Chinese high schools: As long as tension exists between backstage and front-stage cosmologies, some form of secularized, sanitized idiom will be required to express deeply held beliefs in cosmic retribution. Thus I predict that even if the idiom of “character” disappears, this idiom will eventually be replaced with a similar one.

Joking about character is mainly an informal and (on the surface) jocular affair. By contrast, other high-school religious practices are officially sponsored and treated with great earnestness. Consider, for example, the official distribution and consumption of sacrificial goods that teachers have obtained during school-sponsored pilgrimages. During such moments,

students become party to the institutions' own official backstage religious practices. Students also greet such occasions with laughter. Bur many admit to seeing such rituals as offering more than mere "psychological comfort." The strictures of orthodox secularism thus shift contextually: As the Gaokao approaches, pragmatism (religious and otherwise) often trumps performance of politically correct ideology.

Front-Stage Custom: Mao's Flowers

In sum, the idiom of "earning character" represents a compromise between the front-stage ideal of orthodox scientific secularism and the back-stage belief in cosmic reciprocity. But the dominance of orthodox cosmology front stage does not completely preclude the performance of magico-religious rituals in front-stage contexts. In many front-stage situations, apotropaic magic is collectively performed without irony. In contrast to the attitude of sincere religiosity that attends backstage official pilgrimages, however, such official front-stage magic tends to be presented in the secular frame of "custom" (*xisu*).

At a high school in Ningzhou, for instance, it is customary for the school to place flowers around a statue of Mao in the school courtyard in a ceremony that is attended by all senior-three students. In the same vein, the same school gives senior-three head teachers a bonus to buy red clothing to wear on exam day. Overall, red is an auspicious color, and no one would ever think of using any other color to publish official slogans exhorting students to examination success. The above-mentioned placement of flowers at the Confucius temple is probably also best categorized as front-stage apotropaic "custom." To the extent that people pause to think about such activities, they rarely consider them to have actual "potency" or "efficacy." That is, people differentiate starkly between such front-stage "customs" and backstage "prayer." Note, however,

that mistakes or problems in the performance of "custom"—whether intentional or unintentional—will be interpreted as a bad omen (*bu hao de zhaotou*). Thus, if the flowers at Mao's statue prematurely wither, people will wonder if divine powers are signaling their disapproval; and if a head teacher wears any color but red on examination day, he or she would be seriously chastised. In short, the strictures of felicitous performance that accompany such front-stage rituals bely people's description of them as "empty."

Backstage Magic: Gambling and Divination

In backstage contexts—among close groups of friends, outside the school, or in private—students feel free to engage in less obliquely expressed forms of magical thinking and religiosity.

Like specialists in other types of fateful event cross-culturally, many students have private apotropaic rituals that they perform before the event to bring themselves good luck. Such rituals include inconspicuous modifications to dress or equipment. For example, many students wear a lucky shirt or pair of shoes. As I describe above, others go to temples to obtain apotropaic amulets or have their examination implements blessed.

Similar to front-stage "customs," such private magical routines are perceived as consequential but not chancy. By contrast, other apotropaic rituals incorporate indeterminacy, which enables people to imbue them with mantic meaning and authority. In particular, I refer here to a spectrum of activities ranging from ostensibly "light-hearted" games of chance (which I address in this section) to "serious" mantic practices conducted at temples (which I cover in the following two sections). All such mantic rituals possess the structure of fateful action, that is, they are perceived to be undetermined *and* consequential. Such activities therefore mimic the fatefulness of the event that they are meant to predict and control—the Gaokao.

The ascription of divinatory significance to games of chance constitutes an important yet understudied element of gambling more generally (Lindner 1950). Gamblers themselves experience success as evidence of virtue and divine favor—a perception that conflicts with front-stage denigration of gambling as "amoral."

As an example of a relatively light-hearted divinatory game of chance, consider various coin-tossing games, similar to Western "wishing wells," which form a familiar sight in temples all over China. For example, people who pray at the Confucius temple in Ningzhou may stop at the statue of Confucius upon exiting the temple to toss coins onto the platform created by the sage's folded arms. Successful attainment of this objective is said to bode well for one's examination performance. A particularly desirable result in this game consists in successfully aiming one's projectile while dislodging those of previous aspirants. The performance of this feat elicits exclamations that the candidate has "killed off" some of his or her competitors. To my knowledge, such games are not officially sponsored by temples; nevertheless, people rationalize participation in these contests as a temple donation that enables them to accumulate karmic merit.

Such divinatory significance is attributed to many if not all games of chance. Of particular significance for the present discussion is the practice of "gambling for mooncakes" (*bo bing*)—a custom in the Minnan region of China with roots in the imperial era. This activity takes place annually around Mid-Autumn Festival (the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month). In gambling for mooncakes, people gather in groups, often organized by friends or employers, to play a dice game for various prizes. Prizes include mooncakes (small sweet pastries), which people all around China exchange during Mid-Autumn Festival, as well as other monetary or material awards. But the real import of "gambling for mooncakes" lies not in winning prizes but

rather in what those prizes signify. Performance is seen to predict one's luck during the coming year.

Gambling for mooncakes actually contains explicit cultural reference to China's imperial civil examination system: The top three results in the game are named after the top three results in the imperial examination—"first-place" (Zhuangyuan); "second-place" (*bangyan*, literally, "eye of the announcement"); and "third overall" (*tanhua*, literally, "scout of flowers"). The metaphorical equivalency that the game thereby establishes between examinations and gambling is considered humorous, but reveals a normally suppressed truth of examinations: The naming of the game's prizes after imperial examination honors constitutes an oblique cultural acknowledgement of the aleatory dimension of exams.[323]

Although the atmosphere around the game is jovial, many participants imbue it with great meaning. At Dragon Gate High School, teachers pool their money to buy prizes, then gather annually at a local restaurant to play. Upon one such occasion, a senior-three head teacher, Mr. Wei, whose own daughter was about to take the Gaokao, became visibly distressed when he experienced bad luck during the game. With both his daughter and his class facing the "final battle," he considered his poor result to be a bad omen. Other participants quarreled fervently about the rules, arguing over whether certain configurations of the dice signified good or bad luck. Toward the end of the night, I rolled six sixes, considered by most to be a particularly auspicious result—Zhuangyuan. Thereafter, however, I found myself the target of ambivalent ire and admiration. In particular, a surly and intoxicated P.E. teacher assured me that the result

[323] In Guangdong (Canton) during the late Qing, a popular lottery game sprang up that was actually based on guessing the surnames of successful candidates on the civil exam. This lottery—called Weixing or, in Cantonese, Vaeseng—threatened to undermine the legitimacy of the examination. For example, an examiner, who could be counted on to "predict" successful examinees with one-hundred percent accuracy, was caught buying tickets through a proxy. Thus, the Qing state cracked down on the lottery, but the game continued in Macau. The Macanese government, which was short on funds, provided lottery organizers with an official monopoly on the game, thereby helping to establish Macau's gambling industry (Pina-Cabral 2002).

actually demonstrated "bad luck." He was somewhat mollified after I donated one of my prizes to him—a cartoon of good cigarettes.

People perceive fateful significance not only in wishing wells and "gambling for mooncakes" but also in a wide range of chanceful recreations ranging from relatively orthodox ones like the state-sponsored lottery or Mahjong to relatively unorthodox ones like illegal lotteries, sports gambling, and back-alley grifts. As suggested, one's performance in such competitions is felt to foreshadow the results of more consequential forms of fateful action, such as the Gaokao. Consider, moreover, how similar fateful significance is attributed to various more "orthodox" chanceful economic activities, such as stock market investment. Indeed, the ubiquitous interest in all such fateful activities may be accounted for in part through people's perception that merit in one brand of fatefulness relates to merit in all others. In this way, fateful occupations provide aggregate evidence of divine favor and secret virtue. In all fateful pursuits, success is felt to provide evidence of merit as judged by a transcendental, universalistic authorities.[324]

In sum, gambling comprises a form of divination, and both gambling and divination constitute trials of merit. The commonality in how people experience all such events can be accounted for through their common structure of fatefulness. In a sense, therefore, examinations can be understood as socially sanctioned forms of high-stakes gambling and mass divination. In this context, recall that Yi divination historically preceded examinations as an elite trial of merit (chapter 1). In short, the differing attitudes toward gambling, divination, and examinations owes more to cultural attitudes, which shift through time and space, than to underlying differences in their basic structure.

[324] See also Festa's (2007) discussion of the construction of merit in Mahjong.

Indeed, the popular-religious descendants of such elite divinatory practices—various forms of fortune telling and divination—continue to constitute an important domain of magical action, particularly around such fateful events as the Gaokao.

Fortune Tellers: Changing Luck by Accumulating Virtue

The category of fortune telling (*suan ming)* incorporates many different practices—including astrology (*suan bazi*), palmistry, face reading, drawing lots, and others. These techniques are pursued by an equally varied array of people, ranging from informal practitioners to full-time professionals. Fortune telling is often practiced informally by private individuals, including students themselves. Full-time fortune tellers gather on the streets outside temples, but more professional grades of fortune teller also exist. Some entrepreneurial occultists even establish shops, renting inconspicuous store fronts on small streets.

Clients consult fortune tellers about a variety of fateful events, including examinations. Students themselves rarely consult professional fortune tellers, but many family members and parents seek out such occult services. To the uninitiated, fortune telling appears to be mostly about prognostication. Clients themselves, however, are usually interested not only in knowing the future but also in changing it. "Changing luck" (*gai yun*) thus forms the goal of many fortune-teller consultations.

To help clients change luck, fortune tellers may suggest a variety of strategies. For example, they may counsel clients on improving the geomantic layout or "fengshui" of their homes on changing a child's name to a more auspicious moniker. But many clients are looking for a personal touch: They hope to achieve objective insight into such subjective domains as

character, family affairs, and interpersonal relationships. Repeat customers develop a therapeutic relationship with their fortune tellers.

But fortune tellers simultaneously cater directly and explicitly to clients' needs for an explanatory frame that transcends orthodox social reciprocity. Parents and students seek out fortune tellers when orthodox explanations based on "diligence" break down. Consider, for example, how one fortune teller—a blind astrologist who set up shop on the street outside the Guanyin Temple in Xiamen—explained the relationship between diligence and luck.

> Luck is like the weather. It changes. … If your luck is bad, it doesn't matter how good your horoscope is. … Diligence is also no good. Under normal circumstances, if you are lucky, you can get, let's say, one buck [*yi kuai*]. If you work hard, you can get two. If you really work hard, you can get three. More work, more return. But if you are unlucky, you won't even get that first buck. … However, you can change luck [*gai yun*] by doing good [*xing shan*]. And merit [*de*] also passes through generations….

As this explanation implies, changing luck frequently involves various strategies for accumulating merit. Fortune tellers may advise clients on officially recognized channels for acquiring secret virtue, such as making temple donations or "freeing captive animals" (*fangsheng*). In keeping with their therapeutic role, however, fortune tellers also advise clients on how to modify interpersonal dynamics in ways that are conducive to the accumulation of virtue. For example, one fortune teller told me how she was approached by a girl who had trouble with her parents and with school (such troubles frequently go together). The fortune teller advised the girl to perform acts of kindness to her mother. Only then could she change her luck on examinations.

Note, moreover, that giving money to fortune tellers can itself constitute a method for accumulating merit. Many professional fortune tellers possess visible disabilities ranging from blindness to industrial injuries. Because of widespread discrimination against the disabled in

China, few other professions are available to such disabled people (Kohrman 2005). But the very quality that forms the pretense for discrimination against the disabled—their "unluckiness"—constitutes a qualified advantage to them in the fortune-telling profession, since such "unluckiness" provides clients with an opportunity for accumulating merit: Donating money to the "unfortunate" is accumulating virtue. Not just any misfortune, however, can provide donors with an opportunity for merit accumulation: To be qualified for merit accumulation, misfortune must be perceived to result from vicissitudes of fate that lie *outside* of the conscious control of the afflicted.

Consider how the same logic applies to beggars, whose social role therefore resembles that of fortune tellers in several respects. Many beggars are similarly disabled, thus their misfortune is obvious. Those who are not visibly disabled take great pains to exhibit—often through explanatory placards written in careful calligraphy—the various blows of fate which, despite their best efforts of diligence, have reduced them to their current fallen state. Such narratives display great variety, but some typical themes include suffering a family illness, falling victim to violence or theft, or possessing unfilial children. Of course, people worry that beggars may be fabricating such narratives—a suspicion that raises the philosophical conundrum of whether real merit can be earned through donating to a counterfeit beggar. The same question can be asked of some temple-donation opportunities, since criminal gangs of counterfeit monks roam many tourist destinations asking travelers for alms.

Casting Divination Blocks and Drawing Lots

Pious pilgrims generally avoid the throngs of fortune tellers who gather outside many temples, preferring instead to accumulate merit through more orthodox forms of worship and prayer. But

prayer itself frequently involves a mantic component. Consider the above-mentioned practice of drawing lots, also termed "asking lots" (*wenqian*). When conducted at a temple, this practice is usually not considered "fortune telling." Rather, it is understood to constitute a form of worship in which temple goers communicate directly with the temple's patron deity.

The process of drawing lots at a temple involves two main components, both of which incorporate an element of indeterminacy.

Typically, worshippers must first ask the deity whether or not a lot can be drawn. They do so by casting divination blocks or "moon blocks"—a pair of kidney-bean shaped dice.[325] Note that the casting of moon blocks may either form the first step toward drawing lots, or itself constitute a self-contained divinatory activity. That is, worshippers may cast moon blocks without drawing lots. If both dice land right side up, the answer is "no." If both land in an inverted position, then the answer is equivalent to a shoulder shrug, meaning "maybe." Any other position indicates "yes." Usually, worshippers continue casting the blocks until their question is answered with certainty (figure 10).

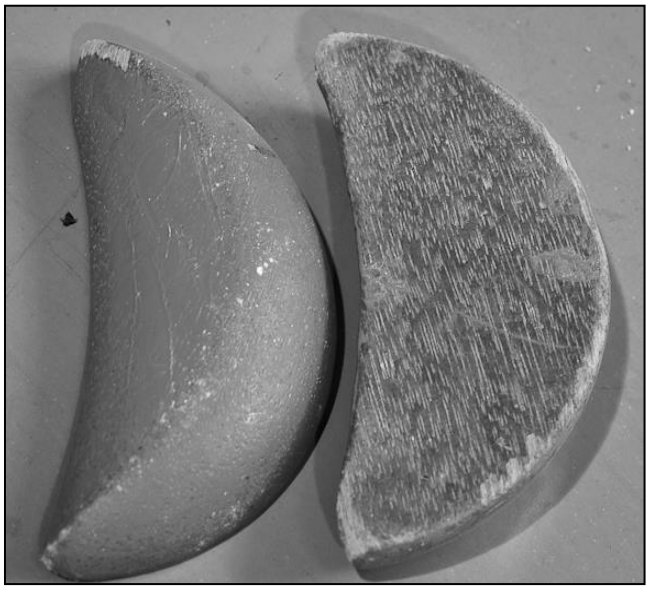

Figure 10: Divination blocks
Source: Photo by Rich J. Matheson.

Note that an answer of "yes" is more than twice as likely as an answer of "no." But as Jordan (1982) reports, worshippers both take account of *and* suspend disbelief in these statistical characteristics: Supplicants often frame their questions in a way that increases their chances of

[325] In the local Hokkien dialect, the name of divination blocks is commonly transliterated as *poe*. Thus this form of divination is sometimes referred to as *poe* divination. See, for example, Jordan (1982).

receiving the results that they desire. Paradoxically, however, these results are understood to express divine will. I suggest that this paradox can be explained through indeterminacy: Despite the statistical manipulation of supplicants, such mantic techniques maintain a strong aleatory element. As I suggest above, this aleatory element undergirds the perception that these techniques reveal the judgements of transcendent powers.

Upon receiving verification that they may draw a lot (they rarely do not), worshippers follow the procedure that I describe in the foregoing: Obtaining a cup of lots at the temple altar (busy temples may have several cups), they shake the cup with both hands in a prayer-like supplicating gesture until one lot sticks out of the cup and falls to the ground. This process produces the uncanny effect of making the selected lot seem to be plucked from the cup by invisible fingers. Following the selection of the lot, the worshipper approaches a temple caretaker or "interpreter of lots," who typically sits at a table near the altar.

The attitude of temple caretakers toward the interpretation of lots varies greatly. Although most Buddhist temples spurn the practice, temples dedicated to the Bodhisattva of Mercy, Guanyin, usually furnish worshippers with lot-drawing equipment. However, temple caretakers—usually monks—privately dismiss the practice, scorning it as a vulgar popular corruption of Buddhist practice. In such temples, standardized interpretations accompany sets of 80 or 100 "Guanyin lots" (*Guanyin qian*), which are the same all over China. These interpretations are typically printed on small slips of paper, which caretakers hand to worshippers. These papers include specific interpretations for each of the five fateful domains that form the object of most inquiries—love, health, business, farming, and, of course, examinations. At such temples, therefore, "interpreting lots" merely involves offering a few

words of encouragement or advice, or, in the case of illiterate worshippers, reading the interpretations aloud.

By contrast, in rural temples—such as Yongning Temple and various other local temples—lots form the unique cultural inheritance of the particular temple. In contrast to Guanyin lots, their interpretation is understood to require great skill, which may be handed down for generations within one village. Each lot corresponds not to a standardized explanation but rather to a highly ambiguous poem, the interpretation of which may change depending on the time of day, the season of the year, or the weather. Even the supplicant's demeanor forms an important factor in interpretation. For instance, "fierceness" (*xiong*) of expression may be inauspicious if the worshipper asks about luck, but the same expression may receive the opposite appraisal if he or she asks about examinations. For all these reasons, such lots are described as "dynamic" or "alive" (*huo*). In comparison to Guanyin lots, therefore, which are perceived as "dead" (*si*), the interpretation of "dynamic" lots is considered, as suggested, to require great experience and perspicacity. The specialized expertise required for the interpretation of such "life" lots lends them a greater aura of objectivity or "accuracy" (*zhun*).

Recall that similar considerations contribute to people's belief in the objectivity of examinations: People attribute greater objectivity to the Gaokao than they do to regional and local practice exams because the design and grading of the Gaokao is presumed to be conducted by universalistic national authorities, whereas the design and grading of local examinations is considered to be affected by guanxi (chapter 1). In other words, people attribute objectivity to national exams because individual examinees cannot exercise undue control over the result. Similarly, worshippers' ascription of "accuracy" (*zhun*) to "dynamic" lots derives in part from worshippers' lack of control over their interpretation. This lack of control heightens worshippers

experience that they are communing directly with divine powers. As I mention above, the interpreter (invariably a man) is considered to be speaking with the voice of the deity.

The close association of mantic practice with worship can be seen in how people use "accuracy" (*zhun*) and "efficacy" (*ling*) interchangeably in many contexts. Saying a temple is "accurate" is tantamount to saying it is "effective." Both qualities testify to the divine power of deities, describing complementary aspects of that power: Deities are understood to possess both great perspicacity *and* the ability to influence life's fateful events. In asking lots, worshippers appeal to both aspects of that power.

In the broader region of Xiamen and Ningzhou, Yongning is considered particularly accurate. Stories about the perspicacity of the Yongning Ancestral Patriarch circulate widely, greatly increasing the temple's reputation. Although lot interpreters generally do not talk about their craft, ordinary temple workers gladly recount such stories. Within the context of examinations, a common theme in such stories consists in how the deity predicts and explains small differences in score that could not possibly be explained in any other way. In short, the deity is able to explain manifestations of chanciness for which orthodox social reciprocity cannot account. This uncanny accuracy is what people admiringly regard as the "mysterious" (*xuan*) quality of successful interpretation. Once, for example, a lot interpreter predicted that a student would "get into university" (*kao shang*), but only by a little. Two months later, the student's parents visited the lot interpreter to express their amazement and gratitude—the student had indeed achieved admission to her desired university and major, but only by 1.5 points. Such stories could be multiplied.

Prediction is almost invariably combined with prayer. On another occasion, for example, a lot interpreter told a student that his examination score would "fall just short of the mark" (*cha*

yi dian dian) on the Gaokao. The lot interpreter advised the examinee to "pledge a wish" (*xuyuan*) to the deity. Following the interpreter's instructions, the boy asked the deity for protection (*baoyou*) while making a small donation to the temple by "lighting an oil lamp"—a form of donation in which the worshipper, for a fee, places a lit candle in a special alcove.[326] The student, who was plagued by examination anxiety, prayed for composure on the examination (*xinqing wending*), promising to return to the temple to "repay the wish" (*huanyuan*) upon successful completion of the exam. When the examination arrived, the student performed better than expected, slightly exceeding the score cutoff for admission to his desired university.

Interpreters of lots may have extended conversations with worshippers, whom they counsel on life choices. For example, when students draw inauspicious lots, the lot interpreter may offer such disappointed diviners both spiritual and practical advice, instructing them on how to enlist the deity's support and exhorting them to be more diligent. Believers feel themselves to be communing directly with the deity, which lend these occasions great psychological force. But even many skeptics adopt a pragmatic attitude toward prayer, remarking that one does not have to believe in the reality of supernatural powers to acknowledge the therapeutic and moralizing effects that temple visits have on worshippers.

Pledging and Repaying Wishes: The God of Examinations, Wenchang

Yongning is only one of many temples that people visit to enlist divine support for examinations, and drawing lots forms only one of many ways to do so. A wide variety of temples, ranging from small local shrines to major Buddhist monasteries, receive visits from examinees and their families. One temple in particular, however, deserves special comment since it specializes in

[326] In many temples, these lights are now electric, temple minders attempting to keep the air inside temples smoke free. But the practice of "lighting oil lamps" derives from an earlier era when temple minders were dependent on the generosity of worshippers for donations of oil to light temples.

examinations, namely, the temple to the God of Examinations, Wenchang Dijun (literally, the "Emperor of Flourishing Culture"), commonly shortened to Wenchang.[327]

The temple to Wenchang in downtown Ningzhou City draws worshipers from all over Ningzhou prefecture and beyond. Not only do worshipers hail from a wide geographical area, but they also represent socially diverse groups, ranging from street sweepers and factory workers to doctors and government officials. Since imperial times, a defining characteristic of the Wenchang cult has consisted in how it attracts supplicants from broad segments of society: Wenchang's natural constituency consists of anyone who is involved in the examination life—a group that includes both the rich and the poor but upwardly mobile (Kleeman 1994). This broad popularity of the deity illustrates the socially cohering effect of national examinations.

During important examinations—the high-school entrance exam, the civil-service exam and, in particular, the Gaokao—the Wenchang temple overcrowds with worshippers, who spill out onto the street. The cult has become so popular that the cultural protection bureau considers the great volume of incense burned at the temple on test days to be a danger to the building, which dates back to the Qing Dynasty. But the temple has not always been so popular. Closed during the Mao era, it was not reopened until 2003, when local volunteers revived the cult

[327] I refer to Wenchang as the God of Examinations since most worshippers understand this deity as such, but the deity is often referred to in English as the God of Culture and Literature. In the imperial era, of course, the study of culture and literature was broadly synonymous with preparation for examinations. Historically, Wenchang is usually considered to be the apotheosis of a military hero of the Sixteen Kingdoms period (304–439 ACE) from the county of Zitong in Sichuan. Today, Zitong is still home to the parent temple of Wenchang, which has produced branch temples (*fenmiao*) all over China, including Ningzhou, which is the home of the first branch temple to Wenchang in Fujian. The God of Culture's association with military valor may seem incongruous. I suggest, however, that the martial origins of Wenchang is not so surprising when one considers the commonality between war and examinations—namely, their common genealogy as forms of fateful action (chapter 1). Commonly, the deity is accompanied by a representation of another deity, Kuixing, who is said to specialize specifically in examinations, and who is worshipped in parallel with and depicted as the associate and servant of Wenchang. See Kleeman (1994) for a book-length treatment of Wenchang. In the Ningzhou temple, Kuixing forms the secondary image to Wenchang, located to the left of the Wenchang effigy. On the right of the Wenchang effigy is an image of Guanyin. In addition, the temple contains two other secondary images—one of a local deity (*Tudigong*) and one of the temple founder.

following a surge of interest in Wenchang. These volunteers—now temple minders—attribute this resurging interest to the expansion of higher education in the early 2000s, but also comment that this period was characterized by reviving interest in cultural protection and popular religion more broadly.

Over the two days of the Gaokao, hundreds of worshippers pack the narrow alley outside the temple and crowd through the temple itself, kowtowing in front of the temple effigies and heaping long tables with such symbolic sacrificial offerings as celery (*qincai*, the first syllable of which is a homonym of the first syllable of "hard-working," or *qinfen*), steamed dumplings (the name for which, *baozi*, reminds people of the word for "preferential admission," *baosong*), and green onions (the second syllable of which, *cong*, is a homonym for intelligent). After being offered to deity, sacrifices are gathered up, taken home, cooked by parents, and consumed by students to incorporate the deity's protection (*baoyou*). During the Gaokao, worshipers are required to burn incense outside. Most burn large sticks of incense, about two feet long, which must be placed in specially constructed metal frames in front of the temple. The custom is to light one stick of incense for each section of the Gaokao—four in all. Requiring a donation of fifty renminbi or about eight U.S. dollars per stick, the purchase of incense forms a significant expense for many families. But the expense is the least of their inconveniences: To be able to light one stick of incense for each section of the exam, worshippers hurry back and forth between the temple and their child's examination hall, running themselves ragged in the scorching summer heat to balance the exigencies of prayer with those of feeding and caring for tired examinees. Worshipers from rural areas of Ningzhou may appoint one parent to worship while the other accompanies the examinee.

Although the temple receives extra visitors on test day, it is busy throughout the year. In the months leading up to the examination, the temple holds several special ceremonies, including exorcisms. During these occasions, families can "pledge a wish" by becoming a "disciple" (*tudi*) of the deity in exchange for a donation. On any day, however, visitors can "pledge a wish" by donating money. For a donation of fifty renminbi, pilgrims can purchase a red cloth banner, which temple minders hang inside the temple to the left of the main altar. Embroidered in golden letters, these banners display messages like "Wishes will be reciprocated" (*you qiu bi ying)* and "Rise to the heights step by step" (*bu bu gao sheng*). For an extra donation, parents can have these encouraging messages embroidered with an individual examinee's name and place of origin.

Following the exam, the families of successful examinees "repay the wish" by donating money to hang a similar banner thanking the deity, this time to the right of the altar. Papering the wall, these banners display both the names of successful examinees and the institutions into which they gained admission. These names are accompanied by such announcements as "Wenchang is effective, studies have succeeded" (*Wenchang lingyan, xueye you cheng*) or "The name has appeared on the golden announcement" (*jinbang timing*). The latter announcement consists of a popular idiom that alludes to the imperial-era practice of using golden lettering to announce the names of "advanced scholars" (*jinshi*)—the highest level of civil-exam distinction. Every year temple minders have to burn piles of banners to make room for new ones.

The institutions named on these banners reflect the socioeconomically diverse constituency of Wenchang, ranging from peripherally located technical institutes to centrally located elite universities and even overseas colleges, like the University of California Berkeley.

This range attests to the broad social variation in what counts as having achieved one's dream of examination success.

Just as the wide range of universities named on these banners indexes the socioeconomic diversity of Wenchang worshippers, the degree and type of involvement of worshipers in temple life varies widely depending on their level of piety and financial ability. Participation in an exorcism costs 200 Chinese Yuan or about 30 U.S. dollars—a fee that most devout parents can afford. More well-heeled worshipers may sponsor a theater performance around the deity's birthday during Chinese New Year—a meritorious deed that can cost several thousand renminbi. People of average means may choose non-monetary forms of service to the deity to express their piety. A middle-aged street peddler, Mr. Deng, whose daughter was finishing high school, regularly performed service at the temple, volunteering to empty the troughs of hot incense ash that accumulated on test day.

The deity is known to reward worshippers not only with unseen help but also with various forms of active assistance. In testimony to the deity's effectiveness, temple minders and worshippers recount various examples of supernatural intervention. In recent years, Wenchang has become especially renowned among temple insiders for "entrusting dreams" (*tuomeng*) to worshippers. In one case, Wenchang appeared to a local medical doctor in a recurring dream. In this dream, the deity complained to the doctor that she did not pray at the temple whereas her husband and child worshipped regularly. The doctor said that she had hesitated to visit the temple because she did not wish to expose it to the spiritual contamination of death and disease from her work. But following the dream, she became a regular temple visitor, and her daughter subsequently achieved an unexpectedly high score on the examination. In another case, the deity appeared to a mother in a dream, telling her exactly how many points her daughter would

score—an occurrence that evokes the uncanny accuracy that is attributed to the predictions of the Yongning lot interpreters, described above.

Just as the mysterious power of deities is expressed in their ability to predict and explain minute score differences, the converse also holds true: Divine assistance can explain miraculous increases in test score for which no alternative explanation can provide an adequate account. One student from Mountain County, whose mother frequently prayed at the temple, missed the score cutoff by 30 points on his last rehearsal exam but beat the cut off by three points on the Gaokao. Another worshipper, whose son was studying in Hong Kong, said that her son's test performance increase miraculously by sixty points after she began praying at the temple.

As with many such accounts, it is difficult to estimate the percentage of temple goers who experience such forms of divine assistance. But the subjective impact of these narratives is evident. Their circulation inspires worshippers and increases the reputation of the deity.

Family Curses and Ancestral Sins: "Materialist" and "Idealist" Explanations

Of course, people may turn to divine powers not only to explain successful examination performances but also to account for bad outcomes. Deities and spirits are understood not only to help people but also sometimes to hinder them. Cosmic reciprocity, in other words, cuts both ways, accounting both for spectacular successes and terrible failures.

In the scales of cosmic reciprocity, moreover, the virtue of one's ancestors is often felt to contribute as much to one's success as the merit accumulated through one's own good deeds in this and past lives. Combining Confucian- and Daoist-inspired notions of ancestral virtue with Buddhist notions of karma, popular understandings of merit take an expansive view of those

karmic scales. Consider how the above-mentioned blind fortune-teller described accumulation of merit over many generations and lives:

> You can do good to accumulate merit [*xingshan jide*], but there is something else too [that affects merit,] namely, [the things that you did in] your past lives, and also the things that your ancestors did. … These explanations combine both Buddhist and Daoists views. There is no contradiction [in them]: The good and bad deeds that you do have two kinds of effects—[such deeds] affect your future lives *and* your descendants.

As this fortuneteller further explained, the reason that "riches and poverty do not pass beyond three generations" (chapter 3) can be elucidated through secret virtue: Rich people tend to "forget the poor," that is, they become greedy, neglecting to perform good deeds. In cosmic retribution for such greed, fate strips rich families of wealth. Similarly, the poor do not remain impoverished beyond three generations because poor people are generally kind.

As a vivid illustration of these principles of cosmic retribution, consider the narrative of Mr. Li—a middle-aged migrant worker and army veteran from Jiangxi Province who was living in Xiamen during my fieldwork: Describing the decline of a prominent family in his village, Mr. Li attributed this decline to "sins" (*zui*) committed by the family patriarch during the Cultural Revolution, retribution for which manifested itself in the disappointing fate of his offspring.

> During the Cultural Revolution, I was very little. I wasn't yet old enough to understand adult affairs [*hai meiyou dong shi*]. But after finishing service in the army, I worked for a while in the in the village committee [*cun weihui*]. This was around 1990 or so, long after collective land had been returned to families. I loved talking to the old men, so I heard lots of stories. During the Cultural Revolution, a village was called a production battalion [*shengchan dadui*]. The battalion leader [*duizhang*] was in charge of the battalion, and he had a lieutenant whose job was to "record points" [*jifen*]. People worked for points. For every day of work, men received ten work points, women eight. Grain was distributed on the basis of these points, plus the population of your household. But if you didn't have a good relationship [*guanxi*] with the battalion leader, he could decide to deduct points [*koufen*]. Then you would get less grain at the end of the month. The leaders took the excess grain for themselves. Everything looked fine from the outside—the village should have had plenty of grain—but in reality people were going hungry.

At this point in his narrative, Mr. Li paused to interject that phenomena in life have two types of explanation—an orthodox "materialist" (*weiwu*) explanation and an unorthodox "idealist" (*weixin*) ones. To use an idealist explanation, Mr. Li said, the leaders had committed a "sin" (*zui*):

> The leaders always had a justification for denying people grain, but having a justification didn't make it right. No matter what the justification, it is wrong to make people starve. But at the time, there was no retribution [*baoying*] for their sins. The retribution came much later. The battalion leader had three sons. One of the sons was disabled [*canji ren*]. He was tormented by all kinds of illnesses. And in his whole family, none of the children were very good looking. They all looked really strange, and didn't do well in school. … Then, when the battalion leader got to be about sixty, he himself started suffering from strange illnesses. So when the old people tell stories like that, even though we haven't experienced [this history] ourselves, the stories will make us think. From an idealist perspective, all this [misfortune] was a form of retribution for his sins. We'll start analyzing them [*fenxi*]. How did the battalion leader's family get to be the way it is? So [cosmic retribution] is real. As they say, 'it is not that there is no reciprocity, but that the time has not yet arrived.' When the time arrives, there is always retribution. In the countryside, there are lots of actualities like this [*nongcun you hen duo zhe zhong xianshi*], lots of similar examples.

Mr. Li's narrative contains at least three points of relevance to the foregoing discussion.

First, note the above-mentioned similarity between the "work point" system of the collective era and other schemes for rationally calculating merit, including ledgers of merit, "quality" audits, and the Gaokao itself. Despite radical changes in political ideology, such schemes seem to be a relatively durable fixture of Chinese life.

Second, consider how Mr. Li uses orthodox Marxian terminology, which he studied in high school and in the military, to differentiate between the cosmological frames of orthodox "materialism" and cosmic "idealism." By so doing, he avoids the term "superstition," which has a pejorative connotation, shifting the footing of the conversation instead to that of a philosophical discussion. In the conclusion to his story, moreover, Mr. Li emphasizes that the cosmological logic of cosmic retribution constitutes "reality" (*xianshi*). Without directly

criticizing orthodox cosmology, therefore, he nevertheless implies that the "materialist" explanation, which ignores the "reality" of cosmic retribution, is the opposite of "real," namely, "empty" and "false." In this respect, Mr. Li's assessment resembles the pragmatic attitude toward popular religion adopted in the institutional backstage of high schools, where teachers and administrators likewise acknowledge the "reality" of cosmic reciprocity: In the same way, Mr. Li reverses the polarity of the usual, unmarked front-stage assessment. In his view, "idealism" describes a higher-level reality than does orthodox materialist ideology.

Third, the reality of cosmic retribution is such that it affects not just the perpetrator of karmic sins but also the offspring of the perpetrator. As in orthodox rational reciprocity, success reflects merit, but the temporal frame for that reciprocal relationship between success and merit expands to include multiple generations.

The Potency of Ancestors: Family Tragedy and Possession

Note that Mr. Li's narrative describes the general principles of cosmic retribution without offering a detailed account of the specific divine agents that were responsible for that retribution—in other words, whether they be ghosts, gods, ancestors, or some other supernatural power. When people feel personally afflicted by misfortune, however, they generally seek to understand its precise mechanism, reasoning that this knowledge will empower them to take evasive or corrective action. For many Chinese, moreover, few greater calamities can occur than the educational failure of a child in whom the family placed great hope. In rural families, the pressure to achieve educational success may be particularly acute for male children, who shoulder the burden of perpetuating the lineage. This pressure is too great for some to bear, resulting in mental or emotional breakdowns and worse. Particularly when male offspring fail in

an unexpected or spectacular fashion, however, it can be difficult for families to account for this blow of fate within the orthodox cosmological frame. Parents may reason that they have exercised every effort of diligence to support their child through twelve years of schooling. Why should his or her fate then suddenly take such a tragic turn?

The rebellion of Ms. Liu's brother, Zehang, forms one poignant example of such a family tragedy. His story illustrates the conundrums that such tragedies present, and the great lengths to which families will go to account for their misfortune.

Recall that Ms. Liu grew up in a village near the seat of a peripheral rural county. Ms. Liu's parents had three children—herself, her little sister, and a baby brother. As is typical of many families, Ms. Liu's parents kept having children until Ms. Liu's mother gave birth to a boy. In this rural milieu, Ms. Liu's father was unremarkable for describing his daughters as "scattered water" because they would marry out to other families (chapter 2). In other respects, however, he was relatively progressive, encouraging his girls to pursue higher education. But he required the girls to become teachers. He reasoned, as many parents do, that his daughters' pursuit of this profession would make them more marriageable and raise the family's status. By contrast, Ms. Liu's father had much higher expectations for his son. He expected Zehang to go to a good college and become an engineer.

During Zehang's senior-three year, however, an unfortunate incident precipitated a family crisis. In an act of rebellion, Zehang handed in an examination paper without doing the Chinese essay. His Chinese teacher called Zehang's father, who came to the school in person, where he chastised the boy in front of his classmates. Zehang found the incident humiliating. In response, he dropped out of school, refusing to take the Gaokao. He lived with his maternal grandparents for a time, eventually sitting for the exam the following year. His score qualified

him for admission to a first-tier university in Sichuan, but he broke off all contact with his natal family, vowing never to speak to his father again. A couple years later, Ms. Li received word that her brother had dropped out of university.

Fearing that Zehang's excommunication of his father would be too much for the man to bear, the rest of the family decided to keep the boy's silence secret from the man. Ms. Liu, her sister, and her mother contrived to give Zehang's father the impression that the boy merely wished to have some time away from the family but was otherwise doing fine. Meanwhile, they frantically attempted to regain contact with him.

The family patriarch was nevertheless highly distraught. He employed several local ritual specialists one after the other in attempts to ascertain the cause of his family's misfortune. Searching the whole house, the first specialist, a Daoist ritualist (*fashi*), found evidence of evil magic—a strange diagram that had been crammed into the wall in his son's room. The second ritualist, a fortune teller (*suanming xiansheng*), produced a more compelling explanation: The spirit of a remote female ancestor was unhappy. This ancestor had possessed the unwitting boy. To propitiate this angry spirit, the family would have to offer sacrifices on the family altar to the spirit on the anniversary of the ancestor's death. A third specialist, a famous and reclusive local fortune teller, recorded Zehang's whole fortune on a cassette tape. This fortune included specific predictions about the fortunes of all people in Ms. Liu's natal household, including the specific dates of her parents' deaths. At this point, Ms. Liu's mother became highly distressed. She complained to her husband that going to so many ritualists was negatively affecting Zehang's and their own longevity. The family decided to stop further inquiries, and the tape, which had upset the whole family, was destroyed.

Part III: Lostness and Confusion

Filiality, Post-Gaokao Disorder, and Economic Slowdown:

China's "Lost and Confused" Generation

The story of Ms. Liu's brother illustrates the great distress that can be caused by a disconnect between parent's expectations and children's ability or willingness to fulfill those expectations. As I describe in Chapter 1, the social and material debts that bond parent and child, which are glossed under the rubric of "filiality" or "filial piety" (*xiao*), form a fundamental motive in Chinese society: Just as parents achieve social recognition and material security through raising filial children, children also receive full social recognition only through discharging their filial obligations, including the obligation to raise the next generation of filial children. In short, subjugating oneself to one's parents and ancestors is producing oneself as a potent social agent worthy of social recognition (Sangren 2000). Ms. Liu's family tragedy, therefore, consists of a double failure: In the eyes of wider society, both father and son have failed to achieve full personhood.[328]

The failure of filial reciprocity between Ms. Liu's brother and father had proximate causes in family relationships. But such failures can frequently also be traced to larger-scale economic pressures. During economic downturns, in particular, the failure to fulfill filial ideals becomes a widespread social problem.

[328] The politics of filiality apply to women as well as to men (chapter 1). In the post-1980 era of population control, shifting gender attitudes, and actual (albeit step-wise) improvements in gender equality have enabled women to perform filial roles in the family that were long reserved for men. In particular, the percentage of women in top-tier colleges now actually outstrips that of men. Girls exceed boys in academic diligence in part because of their desire to rebel against patriarchal perceptions of female inferiority by outdoing boys in filiality (chapter 3). In Ms. Liu's own family, Ms. Liu functions in many respects as a son in her brother's absence: She married only after her husband agreed that the marriage would not interfere with her providing material security to her parents in their old age.

China is composed of many different regions, the economic cycles of which may be out of synch with each other. In the current economic slowdown, individual mega-cities, such as Chongqing and Guangzhou, seem to be bucking the national trend. Nationwide, however, the rapid expansion of higher education in the first decade of the twenty-first century has produced a national glut of college graduates who now face increasing competition in a stagnating job market. The same period has witnessed a rapid increase in the cost of living, particularly in the cost of buying a house. These rising costs have made it harder for young people to start families and take care of elders. Such worsening economic conditions have produced stress fractures in the Party-state's traditional source of legitimacy following Opening and Reform—the dual promise of national greatness and individual opportunity that I term developmentalism (chapter 2).

In response to this crisis of legitimacy, an epidemic of "lostness and confusion" (*mimang*) is said to be gripping young people across China. If young people in their 20s and 30s are asked to describe their lives, this phrase crops up with alarming frequency. "Lost and confused," or *mimang*, is difficult to define, but most basically refers to a general sense of purposeless. In particular, the term is frequently used to describe a feeling of listlessness that follows a period of intense activity. As one person put it, "Being lost and confused is a sense of having lost one's direction [*shiqule fangxiang*]. Normally, life is hurried and busy. Then, when [the frenetic activity] suddenly stops, that's when you feel lost and confused."

For many high-school graduates, feeling "lost and confused" starts right after the Gaokao, but is not initially tied to economic pressures. Students use this term to describe the sense of purposelessness that accompanies the sudden relaxation of discipline after the test. Consider how one teacher vividly described this jarring transition from the pressure of the Gaokao to "normal"

life: “During high school, students are like a bow, strained to the breaking point under the pressure of the examination. After the examination, they are like an arrow—they shoot out of the bow, then fall to the earth. They don’t know what to do with themselves.” For twelve long years, students have only worried about the test. As I describe above, they have had little time to think about their college studies, future occupation, or life outside the examination. After they finish the Gaokao, therefore, many examinees resemble soldiers returning from combat: Facing the absence of fatefulness in “normal” life, they feel a void of existential meaning. In some respects, examination veterans thus also resemble prisoners released from long-term incarceration: They feel overwhelmed by their freedom.

Many students respond to this sudden loss of meaning and regimentation by sinking into depression. Indeed, experiencing a sense of depressive aimlessness after the Gaokao is so common that this affliction has acquired its own name—“post-Gaokao disorder” (*Gaokao houyizhen*). Every year after the Gaokao, mental health professionals and psychologists are widely cited in the media, which discuss various measures to treat this affliction, such as taking children on post-Gaokao vacations or encouraging them to take up a hobby.

Note that such measures focus on the brief interval between high-school graduation and college matriculation. For many, however, the feeling of purposeless actually increases during college. College students widely complain that college education is very “empty” (chapter 5). The Gaokao is the true trial of merit. By contrast, college examinations count for very little. Once admitted to college, students are virtually guaranteed of graduating. Only those who plan to go overseas for graduate school must get good grades.[329] Employment is said to be determined not by college grades but by college ranking and major. Indeed, college ranking and major are

[329] Thus many are happy to get a passing grade—sixty points—on college exams. As the saying goes, “sixty points is felicity; fifty-nine points, a pity!” (*Liushi fen, wan sui; wushijiu fen, cankui!*).

seen to form static aspects of personhood, fixed upon matriculation. Thus people ironically refer to one's alma mater as one's "birth status" (*chusheng*).[330] In contrast to the hopeful expectation of the Gaokao, which people say "can change one's fate," the college years are therefore devoid of any real indeterminacy, and thus seem hollow.

Since college grades matter so little, many students spend their college years preparing for further examinations, such as national or provincial civil-service exams, the graduate-school entrance exam, or various tests required for study abroad. Other college students may actually spend their college years sojourning, seeking employment as migrant workers only to return to college at the end of semesters to take tests. Some start small businesses, selling products from their home town. Still others earn money as "substitute examinees," helping people cheat on the Gaokao (chapter 3).

The majority of students, however, describe large portions of their college experience as "frittering away the time emptily" (*xudu*) by playing video games, seeking amusement with friends, or chatting online. Certainly, exceptions exist: Students at China's top elite colleges are more likely to describe college to be a full and meaningful experience. Similarly, students at military colleges or law-enforcement colleges do not experience any significant relaxation in regimentation upon entering college. But many ordinary college students present their college years as more or less dominated by a feeling of "lostness and confusion."

Neither, moreover, does this feeling of lostness and confusion end with college graduation. Rather, for many this feeling gradually transforms into a more serious existential malaise: Most students have worked their whole lives with the expectation that a high score on the Gaokao will enable them to fulfill their parents' and grandparents' expectations of securing a

[330] This term is an ironic play on Maoist-era practices of dividing people into rigid social categories—for example, "landlord," "rich peasant," "worker," "poor peasant," etc.—based on birth.

good job and leading a stable, white-collar life. Upon graduating, however, young people find themselves confronted with a disappointing reality. Graduates, especially of second- and third-tier universities, are increasingly discovering that the labor market will not reward them with jobs that can fulfill their parents' and relatives' dreams for prosperity and stability. Young college grads from second-rate schools, who are predominantly of rural origin, find themselves working as couriers, masseuses, or farmers after studying finance, marketing, or economics. In big cities, unemployed or underemployed grads concentrate in urban shanty-town settlements that the media dubs "ant towns." People widely agree that it is better to have *guanxi* than a college education (chapter 1).

For these reasons, college graduates in their 20s and 30s often experience a fundamental "disconnect between ideal and reality" (*lixiang yu xianshi tuojie le*). As one recent college graduate said, "I feel like I am constantly pacing back and forth between ideal and reality." Some give up their dreams of making their parents happy, choosing instead to, as they put it, "make themselves happy" (*rang ziji kaixin*). Consider how one twenty-something, Mr. Deng, a salesman for a small electronics company, described the feeling of being "lost and confused":

> You know what makes someone feel lost and confused? Let me tell you. It is this: Singletons [*dusheng zinü*] represent the hopes of a whole family [*daibiao yi ge jiating de qiwang*], but society today is very real [*xianshi*]. When you get out of college, it is extremely hard to make a living [*daxue chulai hen nan shengcun*]. This is the reason for lostness and confusion. There is a large gaps between the hopes of the family and the reality of society [*jiaren de qiwang yu shehui de xianshi you hen da de luocha*]. This [gap] leads to a feeling of failure [*cuobai gan*]. I couldn't buy a house if I wanted to. So I'm just biding my time, waiting for a good opportunity to make money. Until then, I don't see the point in saving my money to reach unattainable goals. So I spend all my money traveling. In the past two years, I have been to Thailand, Cambodia, and Japan.

In sum, "lostness and confusion" starts as a sense of aimlessness after the Gaokao. As young people begin to face the economic pressures of post-college life, this aimlessness

gradually transforms into a full-blown existential malaise. This malaise reflects an overwide gap between expectation and reality—an inability to discharge filial debts, and thus to achieve full personhood.

These problems are exacerbated by employment crisis and economic slowdown. In some respects, however, this existential crisis is structural to the Chinese examination system as it functions in the post-1980s period of labor-market liberalization: The system was designed for an era when every college graduate was assigned a job. As teachers say, therefore, there is a "disconnect" between the Gaokao and the labor market. Before the 1990s (the late 1990s for some fields), passing the Gaokao truly "transformed fate." In an age when only 1 or 2 percent of test-takers achieved admission to college, and subsequently were guaranteed an "iron rice bowl" (*tie fanwan*) for life, this feat constituted the contemporary equivalent of being selected as an official in the imperial-era civil exams. In the present, only an admission letter from one of China's top elite universities "transforms fate" in this way (chapter 1). Consequently, China's elite university graduates do not as a rule suffer from "lostness and confusion" to the same degree as do graduates of ordinary colleges.

A Vacuum of Existential Meaning

In the above section, I discuss how the lostness and confusion of "post-Gaokao disorder" gradually transforms into the existential malaise of post-college life as young people face an insurmountable gap between filial ideals and economic realities. Note, however, that some individuals continue to experience a form of "lostness and confusion" even after achieving success in life by orthodox measures.

Consider, for example, the experience of Jiaxi, an instructor at a Shaanxi Province Party School (*Dangxiao*). Jiaxi was taking a sabbatical from her teaching duties to pursue a doctoral degree at Xiamen University. This break from her normal routine gave her time to reflect on life. Hailing from a peripheral area, Jiaxi was the only person in her high-school class to gain admission to college when she attended university in the late 1990s. Her Gaokao experience had been difficult—she had to retake the examination. At the time, she felt extremely proud of her accomplishment. But now she had her doubts. Many of her high-school classmates—most of them farmers and small-scale entrepreneurs—were doing fine economically, some of them much better than she. Feeling nostalgia for a simpler rural life, she wondered if going to college had been worth it at all. Simultaneously, she felt that all her life decisions—taking the Gaokao, choosing a major, going to college, finding a secure job, getting married, buying a house, having a child—had "been chosen" (*bei xuanze*) for her. Even though in most cases she recalled wanting to do these things, she now questioned the meaningfulness of her choices. This line of thought produced moments of "lostness and confusion." During such moments, she reflected on the many pressures from parents, relatives, and peers to conform with social norms. This conformity seemed to her imprinted in the architecture of the city around her.

> Sometimes I look at the student dormitories in the university or at the apartment buildings around the city, and I think to myself, "If you cut off the side of the buildings, they would look a lot like jails."… I often wonder what it would be like to be a giant looking down on everything. … During those moments, I wonder if life has any real significance [*zhenzheng de yiyi*]

Although they differ in some respects, note that all the forms of lostness and confusion that I describe above possess important points of commonality—they all are, as Jiaxi puts it, a questioning of life's "real significance."

Moments of fatefulness have great existential meaning because they enable people to produce themselves as potent, creative social actors (chapter 1). In such moments, persons ask and answers for themselves—or at least momentarily suspend—the question of whether they created the world or the world created them.

In post-Gaokao syndrome, lostness and confusion ensues after students exit this heightened state of eventfulness, in which one's actions have "real meaning" (*shizai de yiyi*) because they can "change fate" (*gaibian mingyun*). Upon leaving the examination halls, students say that their "lives are just beginning." For many of them, however, their life's greatest trial of merit, and thus, in a sense, its greatest moment of existential significance, has ended. After finishing the test, students enter a workaday reality, in which events may be consequential or undetermined but are rarely both. This uneventfulness defines not only the months after high school but also the "empty" years of college. The desire of students to spend their college and working years preparing for further fateful trials of merit by examination can be partly accounted for by a widespread desire to combat this feeling of empty uneventfulness. In part, at least, similar desires motivate those who help others cheat on the Gaokao. By serving as examination "sharpshooters," such cheats transform their examination athleticism into a profession. Similarly, the many students who lose themselves in the virtual fatefulness of video games are also attempting to introduce fatefulness into a world that seems largely devoid of existential meaning.

This vacuum of existential meaning that defines college experience haunts young people after college in a new guise as the "disconnect" between dreams and reality. In the absence of meaningful opportunity, life is defined by a lack of fatefulness and, thus, meaning. Nothing one does seems to make a difference. Thus, as Mr. Deng says, people "bide their time," waiting for a "chance" to make money.

As Jiaxi's narrative demonstrates, however, even people who achieve the orthodox model of success may question the real significance of the social ideals to which they have devoted their life, especially when changing economic conditions reduce the value of conforming to those ideals. Consider how one high-school teacher described this lack of significance, echoing Jiaxi's feeling that the "emptiness" of conformity is instantiated in urban architecture:

> Everywhere you go [in China], it seems like all the houses and all the lives all follow the same model. Look at how all the apartment buildings look the same. In China, copyability [*fuzhixing*] is very strong. … There are no ideals in China, just realities. … When I see a little Chinese baby, I don't think he is very cute, because I know he is going to have to grow up to take the Gaokao. As teachers, we spend our whole lives either taking the test, preparing people for the test, or preparing our children for the test. It is an endless cycle.

Such observations about the standardization of social ideals—or "realities" as this teacher terms them—lead to doubts about the real significance of conforming to those ideals.[331] For people who question the meaning of life in this way, "lostness and confusion" designates a failure to feel agency or potency; moreover, as Jiaxi points out, this failure derives from a feeling that social ideals have not been chosen *by* one but *for* one. In other words, such people ask themselves the following question: The game can be won, but if the game is always played on other people's terms, then what is its real meaning? In this case, too, therefore, this feeling of "lostness and confusion" derives from a sense of life's lacking fatefulness. In contrast to the frustrations of college grads, this lack derives from a questioning of ideals rather than a simple inability to achieve those ideals.[332]

In all cases, however, "lostness and confusion" represents anxiety over people's inability to achieve existential meaning, and thus to feel fully alive. "Lostness and confusion" is an

[331] These feelings of existential lostness may be particularly acute for women, who, because of their subjugation under China's patriarchal cultural arrangements, experience a relative lack of access to alternative forms of fatefulness, such as nightlife, gambling, or high-stakes risks associated with entrepreneurship or managerial duties.
[332] Of course, the two types of "lostness and confusion" can and do frequently combine.

uncanny listless questioning in which people, consciously or unconsciously, ask themselves whether they are achieving potency as authentically alive persons or whether they are, in fact, the living dead, overwritten by social norms.[333]

In sum, "lostness and confusion" expresses an underlying, often barely articulable anxiety about people's ability to achieve a sense of existential meaning through feeling themselves to be potent, effective social actors. Note, however, that people can follow this anxiety to different ends. Some redouble their efforts to conform to ideals. Others, like Mr. Deng, pursue alternative forms of happiness. Still others, like Jiaxi, question the meaningfulness of life. In short, anxiety can cut both ways, either leading to further conformity or to personal transformation.

Conclusion: Reciprocity and Meaning

The preceding discussion explores how people use the Gaokao to reconcile the "disconnect" between the orthodox ideal of meritocracy (success repays hard work) and the reality of life's contingencies. By "contingency" I mean limits to people's desire for social recognition (chapter 1). Such limits include accidents of "fate" (gender, place of birth, family background) and aleatory aspects of the examination experience itself (test questions, guessing, the college

[333] This discussion of anxiety is influenced by Heidegger ([1927] 2010). I suggest that this underlying anxiety created by having to conform to social ideals may be cross-culturally similar, although those institutional ideals themselves vary greatly. Just as societies differ across space, so do they differ over time. Thus, the precise way in which anxiety manifests itself will have great cross-cultural and historical variation. "Lostness and confusion," therefore, represents a cultural manifestation of anxiety within the contemporary Chinese culture of meritocracy.

As Heidegger points out, anxiety is very uncanny; indeed, anxiety can be described as uncanny in the Freudian ([1919] 2003) sense: Anxiety reminds us of something that we are attempting to suppress or forget—the reality of death, on the one hand, and of our own existential deadness, on the other.

To those who suggest that such existential dilemmas impose a Western or, for that matter, Chinese cultural category on other cultural realities, I reply that we should disaggregate the dialectics of social recognition, which probably represent a transhistorical cross-cultural reality, from specific historical ideologies, such as individualism; even so, however, as I argue above, China has possessed a recognizably modern form of social life for over a 1000 years: The disconnect between social determination and individual potency has a long history in Chinese philosophical thought, although this disconnect manifests itself differently in different historical periods (chapter 1).

selection process). More broadly, however, such limits consist of the cultural and economic conditions of examination competition. These conditions include China's patriarchal family arrangements along with the economic regions and cycles within which those arrangements are embedded. On the one hand, these conditions shape people's desire for social recognition as a filial ideal. On the other hand, such contingencies place limits on the fulfillment of that ideal, rendering it ultimately incoherent.

To cope with the resulting inevitable disconnect between ideal and reality, people produce the backstage cosmological frame of cosmic retribution. They use this frame to supplement orthodox accounts of meritocratic reciprocity by appealing to notions of magic and secret virtue. Pragmatic considerations cause such unorthodox ideas to flourish in the institutional backstage of educational institutions despite these institutions' official secularism: Families, teachers, and administrators alike see religion and magic as an effective way to improve examination performance. Even skeptics reiterate the social and psychological utility of magical beliefs.

As I argue above, however, this backstage cosmological frame is not a side effect of examination competition but rather integral to its social effects: The examination is like an engine for generating belief in magic and fate, which is another way of saying that the ideal of orthodox social reciprocity requires the belief in secret virtue as its necessary supplement. But this belief in magic and fate simultaneously indexes the ultimate incoherence of meritocratic ideology. No magical signifier—"fate," "luck," or "fortune"—can completely contain such incoherence (Siegel 2006). Neither can the examination "scientifically" purify itself of incoherence, which is central to its functioning.

Many succeed in reconciling the meritocratic ideal with the reality of life's contingencies within the fateful moment of the examination competition itself, but it becomes increasingly difficult for them to do so in the months and years following the exam. Moments of fateful action are highly generative of existential meaning—not only in China but cross-culturally. During fateful moments, people feel empowered to shape their destinies and thus experience themselves as fully alive to life's possibilities. After the examination, by contrast, broad sections of the population are never able to recover the meaning that they experience during that fateful event. In this era of educational expansion and economic slowdown, moreover, many young college grads feel cheated by the promise of social reciprocity. They "conquered the Gaokao," but their fate did not, as promised, "change." Many describe the resulting vacuum of existential meaning as "lostness and confusion." As people grow older, this sense of "lostness and confusion" expands to include general questioning of life's significance. Whereas moments of fateful action like the examination imbue life with existential meaning, ordinary uneventfulness produces numb feelings of anxiety—the sense that one's life is not "truly one's own."

Under China's current economic slowdown, the disconnect between ideal and reality is growing, causing such anxious lostness and confusion to increase. The rise in such anxiety helps account for a general surge of interest around China in religion, both popular and institutional (Bregnbaek, forthcoming). To some degree, religiosity can provide a salve for such existential malaise. But when the gap between ideal and reality grows too large, this disconnect can have revolutionary implications. In sum, the constitutive incoherence of meritocratic ideology produces anxiety which, under certain circumstances, can morph into rebellious violence.

CONCLUSION

Chapter 6 analyzes how and why Chinese pragmatically adopt magico-religious practices and explanations in backstage situations in their attempts both to influence examination performance and to account for examination success or failure, even though such "superstitious" or "idealist" perspectives conflict with front-stage secularism.

Despite official secularism, in other words, state actors tolerate and even condone certain religious practices. In particular, religiosity is condoned when it enables people to achieve meaning and coherence within the orthodox meritocratic pursuit of social mobility through various forms of diligent self-cultivation or "calling" (*shiye*). In such meritocratic life projects, moments of fateful action such as high-stakes examinations constitute trials of merit in which people seek evidence of favor from transcendental authorities that they deem to possess objectivity and, ultimately, the divine imprimatur of "fate." Recognizably modern forms of such meritocratic ideology have prevailed in Chinese societies for at least a millennium since the massive social and economic transformations of the Tang–Song transition in the ninth through twelfth centuries CE (chapter 1). These transformations of early modernity produced the conditions for the flowering of the imperial civil exam in the Song Dynasty and onwards. In the twentieth century, this meritocratic ideology has taken the form of developmentalism, which is typified by the belief that "life is getting better all the time" (chapter 2). This strain of meritocratic ideology fuses Marxian-cum-Hegelian notions of teleological development, which Chinese imported in the twentieth century, with long-standing conceptions of the "civilized" center's domination over a "backward" periphery, which have characterized Chinese states since early times.

In the present, the Gaokao forms only one of many culturally significant types of fateful action, which include business deals, stock-market investment, athletic competition, and military combat. Even high-stakes gambling and various forms of "altruistic" self-sacrifice, such as "heroic" volunteerism during natural disasters, constitute fateful trials of merit. All such forms of fatefulness help undergird the meritocratic ideology of developmentalism. Through such fateful moments, people reaffirm the values of the polity and defend the rights of people and nation to greatness and development.

As the preeminent trial of merit around which many people organize their lives, however, the Gaokao plays a crucial role in the Chinese meritocracy. This event socializes wide segments of the population into the social practice and ideology of meritocracy. The exam thereby hitches people's personal wishes for self and social transformation to the cart of social institutions such as the family and state. Through the exam, in other words, people recruit their revolutionary desires into orthodox projects of social reproduction.

The Gaokao constitutes such a perennial source of fascination because people interpret the exam to imbue their lives with existential meaning. They do so because the exam is a fateful rite of passage—a social ritual that is both consequential and undetermined. In this respect, examination competition is similar to other fateful events cross-culturally, including elections, trials, high-stakes market transactions, and various forms of competitive ritual exchange like kula or potlatch. Cross-culturally, such fateful events form the paradigmatic object of fantasy, daydreams, and desire. Through such events, people strive to transcend social and human limits, of which non-being or death is the ultimate symbol and arbiter (chapter 1).

Because the exam is a fateful event, the outcome is felt—in part, at least—to be the creative product of the individual. Through participating in the exam, Chinese personify high

cultural values—diligence, persistence, composure, and divine favor or "luck." Within the context of examination competition, they understand these values to express ethical character—filiality and moral quality. By imbuing the results of the exam with existential meaning, individuals confer legitimacy on social collectivities—family, region, and nation.

Indeterminacy plays an underappreciated role in this process. People's understanding of the examination as undetermined enables them to perceive its result both as a judgement of the social collectivity's transcendental authority and as a manifestation of their personal self-efficacy. This paradoxical amalgamation of submission and agency is captured by the Chinese word for "fortune" (*mingyun*)—a compound of "fate" (*ming*) and "luck" (*yun*). The experience of transcendental authority, more commonly identified with "fate," is associated with the aleatory dimension of indeterminacy (chanciness). The experience of creative self-efficacy, more commonly identified with "luck" (*yun*), is associated with the agonistic dimension of indeterminacy (precariousness). Chanciness—associated with "fate"—is perceived to lie outside human control, whereas precariousness—associated with "luck"—is perceived to lie inside it. But participants in fateful events do not perceive these two aspects of indeterminacy as analytically distinct. The slippage between these two dimensions of indeterminacy enables individuals both to take responsibility for their exam performance and to seal it with the authority of destiny. In this way, people use the exam to attribute their place in society to personal blemishes or virtues *and* to vicissitudes of fate.

Examination performance is indeed subject to chancy ups and downs. Teachers report that students' scores undergo much greater fluctuations than test designers, who aspire for "scientific objectivity," usually care to admit. But recall that the precarious dimension of indeterminacy in the exam is largely fabricated—the result of a state-run confidence game and

participants' own bad faith (chapter 3). Consequently, people continue to see the exam as "China's only relatively fair competition" despite great regional and socioeconomic disparities in examination performance. In other words, the probabilistic opportunity for social advancement represented by the exam is much smaller than most people realize.

People paper over this disconnect between the ideal and reality of the Gaokao by using the exam to objectify various social advantages and disadvantages (place of origin, guanxi, ethnicity, gender) into a charismatic badge of individual merit—the test score. "Diligence" plays an important role in this process, since great efforts of ascetic self-cultivation form a necessary (although not sufficient) condition for exam success (chapter 4). Although examination success requires the diligent self-cultivation of "knowledge," it also requires the heroic individual display of that knowledge within the exam itself. In other words, people prepare for the exam socially, but face it individually. The exam is an individuating moment, in which each person is required to exhibit great "composure" by "nakedly" facing his or her "individual" destiny (chapter 5). Thus the exam constitutes a peculiar form of ritual labor—one in which people attempt to erase the trace of the social labor that prepared them for the fateful event.

This account of individuation and objectification contributes to explaining how the Gaokao—as Benjamin Elman says of the imperial examination—serves as a "cultural gyroscope" for society even in the minds of the millions who fail to achieve their dreams of examination success (Elman 2014: 170). As I observe in the introduction, other scholarly accounts of this phenomenon rightly point out how the exam functions as an instrument of symbolic violence, how examination contents result from a hegemonic negotiation, and how modest degrees of examination success can result in large increases in status (De Weerdt 2007; Chaffee 1995; Elman 1991; Hartwell 1982; Man-Cheong 2004; Rawski 1979). These accounts

draw from approaches to social theory that emphasize how social order gives rise to individual motives and how individuals act strategically in pursuit of their own desires and interests, thereby contributing to reproducing that same social order (Althusser 1994; Bourdieu 1977b; Butler 1997; Gramsci 1971; Willis 1981). However, such approaches are prone to being somewhat mechanistic, displaying what I term an objectivist bias. They tend to overlook how people use the exam to imbue their lives with meaning. By analyzing the exam as a fateful rite of passage, I contribute to such accounts by emphasizing the existential significance of the exam. In so doing, I aim to open up new ethnographic objects for cross-cultural comparison and analysis: Conventional approaches to the study of examinations overlook how examination competition resembles other types of fateful event cross-culturally.

Heterodoxy, Rebellion, and Social Transformation

In particular, the close kinship between examinations and various forms of revolutionary violence helps explain the significance that state actors attribute to examinations in preventing revolutionary social transformation: As I argue above, examinations hitch the horse of revolutionary desire to the carriage of social reproduction. Consequently, breakdowns in the examination have historically heralded periods of social tumult, rebellion, and dynastic change (Jones and Kuhn 1978). As the rural high-school principal Mr. Jian said, “Without the Gaokao there would be social revolution in China.” State actors are well aware of this stabilizing social effect of the exam and actively seek to promote it, for example through their efforts to fabricate and manufacture indeterminacy (chapter 3).

The central role that the Gaokao plays in providing social stability helps explain the pragmatic attitude that state actors take toward people’s attempts to use magic and religion to

predict and control the exam. Indeed, I argue that such magico-religious beliefs form a mainspring of the examination's social efficacy (chapter 6). Thus I liken the exam to an engine for producing belief in fate. For these reasons, front-stage proscriptions on "superstitious" belief are enforced with little earnestness. However, real prohibitions on certain religious activities *do* exist—lines that the state strictly forbids people to cross.

Chinese sometimes refer to these hard prohibitions as "high-tension lines" (*gaoya xian*). Note, moreover, that some of the most sensitive high-tension lines in Chinese society concern the subdomain of religious activity that the state labels "heterodox" (*xie*). As in imperial times, the division between "heterodox" and "orthodox" religion relates not so much to practice but to goal: Whereas, "orthodox" religious practice helps people achieve meaning and coherence within conventional social arrangements, "heterodox" beliefs encourage people to resist those arrangements. In short, if people's religious beliefs call them to pursue alternative forms of fateful action, such as social resistance or rebellion, then the state brands such beliefs "heterodox" and suppresses them with great vigor. Indeed, membership to a so-called "heterodox sect" provides one of the only legal grounds for stripping people of their right to take the Gaokao—a fearsome punishment in a society where the exam is widely understood to provide the only way of "changing fate."

As I suggest in the introduction, the state's fear of such heterodox groups is grounded in Chinese political culture. According to the time-honored Chinese political tradition of the Mandate of Heaven, the people have the right and even the duty to rebel when Heaven signals that the political establishment's declining moral authority has resulted in its loss of the Mandate. In this way, the ideology of meritocracy in China incorporates a template for the transformation of the existing political order through creative revolutionary action. By branding sectarian groups

as “heterodox,” the state attempts to strip them of the moral authority to rebel.

Despite the state’s muscular suppression of heterodox groups, however, they continue to flourish; indeed, much circumstantial evidence suggests that sectarian millenarian movements are currently on the rise. During my fieldwork, local governments in Ningzhou and Xiamen unleashed propaganda campaigns against one such sectarian group, popularly known by the names “Real Spirit” (*Shiji shen*), “All-Powerful Spirit” (*Quanneng shen*) or “Eastern Lightning” (*Dongfang shandian*)—a Christianity-inspired millenarian movement that traces its history back to the early 1990s.[334] An important component of this group’s belief system consists in the worship of a “female Christ.” In some accounts, this figure is identified with a real person who experienced visions following her failure to achieve examination success in the Gaokao (Dunn 2009). Students of Chinese history will note the striking similarity between this account and those of earlier social movements—in particular the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), which I discussed in the introduction.

The Real Spirit has predicted the end of the world (*shijie mori*) several times, most recently in 2012.[335] In Mountain County, groups of believers were rounded up by authorities when they marched up and down the streets of the county seat, preaching the coming apocalypse.[336] On one occassion, students interrupted class discussions to ask me if I believed that the End Days were coming. In Ningzhou and Xiamen, anti-heterodoxy propaganda posters went up in alleyways, apartment complexes, and motels. These messages encouraged people to “Uphold science and oppose heterodox religion” (*chongbai kexue, fandui xiejiao*). The more informative of these posters suggested the existence of a complex ecology of “heterodox”

[334] In English, the group also refers to itself as the Church of the Almighty God.
[335] These 2013 predictions followed upon the popularization by Hollywood films of the belief that 2013 was prophesized by the Mayan calendar to be the end of the world. A general overview of the group, including its earlier prognostications of apocalypse, can be found in Dunn (2015).
[336] I did not witness this event myself, but was told about it by local people, including a prominent local Christian.

sectarian religions, naming around a dozen such groups that citizens should avoid.[337] According to messages posted in Ningzhou, an important symptom of heterodox belief consists of removing children from school.

Direct information about such groups is difficult to obtain. Any attempts to locate and interview practitioners could endanger them, anthropologist, and, by association, other contacts and friends. However, conversion narratives that the Real Spirit posts online suggest some recurring themes.[338] The Real Spirit promotes a vision of the world that in many respects diametrically opposes that of orthodox developmentalist ideology: Science and development are an evil propagated by the Party-state, which the group terms the "Big Red Dragon" (*Da hong long*); the end result of China's current historical trajectory is not the telos of modernity but the End of Days; parents should not send their children to school, which does the work of Satan by inculcating beliefs in science and the Party; rather, people should expend their energy preparing themselves and their children for the ongoing tribulations that anticipate the coming apocalypse. In short, such narratives suggest that everything people ordinarily hold to be "real"—development, science, education, modernity, and the Party—is actually "false," the work of Satan.

This transvaluation of normal values, although representing a fringe view, sheds critical light on the Opening-and-Reform era by constructing a mirror image of normal developmentalist ideology. As others point out, the teleological structure of Marxian-cum-Hegelian

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[337] These religions included, of course, well-known sectarian groups like Eastern Lightning and Falungong. But propaganda posters also named many less well-known groups, such as the Shouters (*Huhan pai* 呼喊派), the Conference of Disciples (*Mentu hui* 门徒会), the Universal Teaching (*Tongyi jiao* 统一教), the Three Grades of Servants (*Sanban puren pai* 三班仆人派), the Guanyin Method (*Guanyin famen* 观音法门), the Religion of Lord God (*Zhushen jiao* 主审教), The Bloody Holy Spirit (*Xueshui shengling* 血水圣灵), the Daughters of the Heavenly Father (*Tianfu de nüer* 天父的女儿), the Congregation of the New Testament (*Xinyue hui* 新月会), and less easy-to-translate sects such as *Lingling jiao* 灵灵教 and *Changshou Jiao* 常受教.

[338] A collection of the group's conversion narratives can be found online at http://www.easternlightning.org/huibian.html (accessed February 15, 2016).

developmentalist thinking is ultimately based on a salvational notion of history—one, I would add, that resonates in many respects with salvationist Neo-Confucian projects (Duara 1995; Gillespie 2008). The step from Marxian/Confucian utopia to millenarian anti-utopia is short—a mere reversal of polarity rather than a fundamental rethinking. As I suggest elsewhere, moreover, such millenarian sentiments merely represent the most extreme manifestation of widespread disaffection with social inequality, environmental degradation, and state corruption (chapter 2). As such problems begin to weigh heavier in people's minds, the disconnect between developmentalist ideal and "apocalyptical" reality looms larger. As this gap grows, so does dissent, even if this dissent remains relatively invisible to outsiders because of state censorship controls.

In everyday conversations, however, ordinary people give voice to relatively potent expressions of dissatisfaction. In candid conversations, many ordinary Chinese suggest that the current popular mood is characterized by "seething resentment" (*minyuan feiteng*). Consider, for example, popular reactions to a Xiamen bus bombing in 2013. Some middle-aged shop owners with whom I regularly drank tea observed without irony that if only the bomber had made it to a government building, he would have been hailed as a popular hero. Such examples of popular discontent could easily be multiplied. Consider, moreover, how ordinary people all over China interpret natural disasters, such as earthquakes, as ominous portents of the declining moral authority of the Communist Party.[339] Meanwhile, both urban and rural elites are quietly acquiring

[339] When an earthquake struck Sichuan in 2012 shortly before the ascension to power of the new president, Xi Jinping, many ordinary people in my field sites openly speculated that the natural disaster expressed Heaven's dissatisfaction with the declining moral legitimacy of the current political system. Consider, for example, how Mr. Qian, a small-shop owner, described this event. Mr. Qian was ordinarily not given to "superstitious" views. (For instance, he mocked temple-sponsored "exorcism" rituals as "exorcisms of hard-earned money.") But the earthquake struck him as a sign that was too large to ignore. "These days," he said, "it seems like every time a new president comes to power, there is an earthquake in Sichuan." I am not sure whether he was alluding to the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, which killed nearly 100,000 people, or to a string of less destructive earthquakes that occurred around

foreign citizenship for themselves or their family members, preparing an exit strategy to protect their wealth from the vicissitudes of political patronage and the possibility of social unrest.

Although the Gaokao largely continues to perform as an effective cultural gyroscope, therefore, such growing expressions of dissatisfaction signal the increasing disconnect between meritocratic ideal and socioeconomic realities. People respond to this disconnect with growing anxiety—feelings of "lostness and confusion." These feelings index a deficit of existential meaning that results from a failure of fatefulness in the examination and Chinese society more broadly (chapter 6). This failure manifests itself differently within different groups: For the dispossessed, the examination no longer seems to offer a real chance for social advancement. The more radically minded members of this group pursue alternative forms of fateful action—"heterodoxy" and rebellion. Even as the dispossessed no longer see the exam as undetermined, the relatively privileged middle classes no longer see it as consequential. Aspiring to compete in an international employment market, this group orients itself toward another alternative form of fatefulness—educational emigration.

In short, those who seek alternative forms of fateful action both through emigration and through dissent are pursuing self and social transformations. Note, however, that both alternatives are less radical than they first appear to be. Neither seems to constitute a fundamental challenge to the ideology of meritocracy. The Chinese elite have merely made Western universities the new acme of their civilizational hierarchy, substituting "quality" for "diligence" as an ideal of personal merit (chapter 3). As I mention in the introduction, moreover, rebels throughout Chinese history have emulated orthodox forms of state control, including examinations. The Real Spirit is no different, copying Communist Party bureaucracy in its

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the ascension of the previous Chinese president, Hu Jintao, in 2002. In any case, Mr. Qian, like many others, formed a clear connection between natural disasters and political legitimacy.

organizational structure (Dunn 2015). If such a group ever manages to achieve power, few students of Chinese history will be surprised if its first act consists in reinstituting national examinations. Over the last millennium in China, every successful rebel group has done precisely that, including the Communist Party.

Action, Indeterminacy, and Existential Meaning

Only time will tell how these social transformations will play out. A crucial factor in these developments will be whether or not relatively marginalized people—like the garbage collector's family that I discuss in the introduction—will persist in their pious conviction in the power of the Gaokao to "transform destiny."

In any event, a central argument of my dissertation will remain relevant: Although it is valuable to analyze the relationships between such phenomena as "power" and "resistance," "structure" and "agency," or "society" and "the individual," we should simultaneously strive to understand how people's own struggles to create existential meaning in moments of fateful action pose many of the same philosophical dilemmas that social thinkers gloss with such concepts. That is to say, both social theorists and participants in fateful events pose questions of existential meaning—the former in theory and the latter in practice. Moreover, specialists in fateful action are theorists of their own practices, just as anthropologists have their own trials of merit (for instance, fieldwork).

This perspective possesses many advantages. First, it helps create the conditions for greater collaboration between anthropologist and informant in social analysis ("co-theorization") without sacrificing a critical vantage. Consider how recent approaches to ethnographic or para-ethnographic "collaboration" tend to grant authority to our informants' "expert knowledge"

without adequately considering how that knowledge forms the product of desiring human subjects (Boyer 2008). By contrast, focusing on humanly common existential dilemmas necessarily involves social-critical reflection by both anthropologist and informants. By concentrating on such shared questions of existential meaning (fatefulness, anxiety, authenticity and so on), the type of collaboration that I propose is less susceptible to becoming a "collaboration" in the negative sense—that is, collaboration with the possessors of power in the subjugation of the oppressed. In other words, carrying out critical social analysis requires that we not only determine how experts produce knowledge—for example, how high-school administrators produce examination statistics—but also that we investigate whose interests such knowledge serves (chapter 3).

Second, attending to existential universals like agency and desire—which I analyze under the rubric of fatefulness—helps bring cultural variations into starker relief (Sangren 2012). In this spirit, I consider Chinese examinations and their accompanying cultures of meritocracy as historically and culturally specific manifestations of fatefulness. Throughout my dissertation, I compare these examinations to fateful trials of merit with earlier historical origins, such as divination, and to other fateful events cross-culturally. I suggest that appreciating the emergence of recognizably modern forms of meritocratic ideology by late imperial times is providing a narrative of the Chinese culture of meritocracy that is neither reductively Eurocentric nor exoticizing, yet also enables us to appreciate historical and cultural difference.

Finally, this attention to the production of existential meaning in fateful action compels us to consider the underappreciated significance of indeterminacy in social life. Attending to indeterminacy—in both its forms as precariousness and chanciness—is opening up social analysis to the unexpected. The unexpected—in its various guises as happenstance, contingency,

and incoherence—serves as the constitutive excess or limit to social reciprocity that enables people both to imbue life with meaning and to change it.

GLOSSARY

The glossary does not include pseudonyms. I also omit names and titles that appear in the references below as well as longer sentences and phrases that I gloss directly in the main text above. See the note on orthography and translation (page xiv) for further discussion of the translation procedures that I follow.

baifumei 白富美
ban xin, ban yi 半信半疑
banhuike 班会课
banji de xuexi fenwei 班级的学习氛围
banzhang 班长
banzhuren 班主任
baochi zhuangtai 保持状态
baofa 爆发
baofa qianli 爆发潜力
baosong 报送
baoxian 保险
baoying 报应
baoyou 保佑
baozhuang 包装
baozhuang ziji 包装自己
baozi 包子
bei 背
bei danci 背单词
bei xuanze 被选择
beijing 背景
beisong 背诵
biao li bu yi 表里不一
biaomian shang 表面上
bieren didang bu zhu 别人抵挡不住
bishi 鄙视
bixu gei laoshi mianzi 必须给老师面子
biyao zhi e 必要之恶
biye zhuangtai 毕业状态
bo bing 博饼
boxue 剥削

bu bu gao sheng 步步高升
bu fu zeren 不负责任
bu hao de zhaotou 不好的兆头
bu jixiang 不吉祥
bu junheng 不均衡
bu kao, bu jiao 补考不教
bu kaopu 不靠谱
bu mai ni de zhang 不买你的帐
bu neng gaibian de keguan yinsu 不能改变的客观因素
bu xiao you san, wu hou wei da 不孝有三，无后为大
bufu xinli 不服心理
bunao 补脑
buxiban 补习班
cai 才
canji ren 残疾人
caobao 草包
chaban 差班
changmianhua 场面话
chaoji zhongxue 超级中学
chedian bingxiao 撤点并校
cheng zhengbi 成正比
chengji 成绩
chi laoben 吃老本
chuangzao ziji de shiye 创造自己的事业
chuangzaoxing 创造性
chuantong 传统
chuantong gengdu de wenhua 传统耕读的文化
cishan shiye 慈善事业
cong 葱
cujin 促进
cun weihui 村委会
cuobai gan 挫败感
cuonan 挫男
da dun 打盹
daibiao yi ge jiating de qiwang 代表一个家庭的期望
danchun 单纯
Dangxing 党性
daode suzhi 道德素质
daonei 岛内
daotong 道统
daowai 岛外

Datong 大同
dazhuan 大专
daziran 大自然
di'er gaibian ming de jihui 第二改变命的机会
diao dao da yu 掉到大鱼
diaosi 吊丝
diguaqiang 地瓜腔
diji xingzheng qu 地级行政区
dingxiang 定向
dingxing 定型
diqu 地区
diwei 地位
dong chuang 东闯
Dongfang shandian 东方闪电
dongyuan da hui 动员大会
duanzhang 段长
duizhang 队长
dujin de dabian 镀金的大便
dusheng zinü 独生子女
fangsheng 放生
Fangyang de nü'er shang Hafo 放养的女儿上哈佛
fankang yali 反抗压力
fashi 法师
fazhi 法治
fenban 分班
fengjian mixin 封建迷信
fenli pinbo 奋力拼搏
fenmiao 分庙
fenpei zhidu 分配制度
fensanhua touzi 分散化投资
fenwei 氛围
fenxi 分析
fu/qiong bu guo san dai 副/穷不过三代
fudu 复读
fukao 复考
fushengji xingzhengqu 副省级行政区
gai yun 改运
gaibian ming 改变命
gaibian mingyun 改变命运
gaishan 改善
gao'er 高二

gaofen dineng 高分低能
gaofushuai 高富帅
Gaokao 高考
Gaokao yimin 高考移民
gaosan 高三
gaoya xian 高压线
gaoyi 高一
gaoyuan fanying 高原反应
gei mianzi 给面子
gei yuanfen yi ge geng hao de pingtai 给缘分一个更好的平台
gemin shiye 革命事业
genfeng 跟风
geng duo zai yu zizhu xuexi 更多在于自主学习
geren de fazhan 个人的发展
gongping 公平
gongzheng 公正
gua yangtou, mai gourou 挂羊头，卖狗肉
guanfang shuofa 官方说法
guangrongbang 光荣榜
guanqiang 官腔
guanshang goujie 官商勾结
guanxi 关系
guanxi sheng 关系生
guanxin 关心
Guanyin qian 观音签
gugu 姑姑
guifanhua 规范化
guo duo 过多
guo xianglu 过香炉
guojia de fazhan 国家的发展
guojia de mingyun 国家的命运
Guokao 国考
guowai 国外
guowai ban 国外班
hai meiyou dong shi 还没有懂事
hao bangyang 好榜样
haoliao 好料
haoyun 好运
hei mu'er 黑木耳
hen touru 很投入
hongyang 弘扬

houniao 候鸟
houtian 后天
huangzi 幌子
huanyuan 还愿
huifu zhuangtai 恢复状态
huji 户籍
hukou 户口
hukou zhidu 户口制度
huo 活
huo de hen fenlie 活得很分裂
huxiang daidong 互相带动
huxiang yilai 互相依赖
jia chou bu dui wai yang 家丑不对外杨
jia chuqu de nüer, po chuqu de shui 嫁出去的女儿，泼出去的水
jiafang 家访
jiafen 加分
jiahua 假话
jian 谏
jianchi 坚持
jianfu 肩负
jiankang 健康
jianzi sheng 尖子生
jiaoxue jilü 教学纪律
jiaoyanzu zuzhang 教研组组长
jiaoyu shiye 教育事业
jiaren de qiwang yu shehui de xianshi you hen da de luocha
家人的期望与社会的现实有很大的落差
jiating huanjing 家庭环境
jiazhang hui 家长会
jide 积德
jiedu 借读
jiedufei 借读费
jieqian shifu 解签师傅
jifa qianli 激发潜力
jifen 积分
jiji 积极
jin zhu zhe chi, jin mo zhe hei 近朱者赤，近墨者黑
jinbang timing 金榜题名
jingzheng jilie 竞争激烈
jinshi 进士
jiqi 机器

jiqing 激情
jiuxiao lianmeng 九校联盟
jiyang 寄养
junshihua 军事化
juren 举人
kaikuo yanjie 开阔眼界
Kao guo gaofushuai, zhansheng guan'erdai! 考过高富帅，战胜官二代！
kao shang 考上
kaochang 考场
kaoshi yingyu 考试英语
keguanti 客观题
kemu laoshi 科目老师
kexue 科学
kongdong 空洞
konghua 空话
kongke cun 空壳村
kongqi mori 空气末日
kongxu 空虚
koucai bu hao 口才不好
koufen 扣分
kuaiban 快板
kuanjin, yanchu 宽进严出
Kuixing 魁星
kuozhao 扩招
kutong 苦痛
laji ban 垃圾版
laobaixing 老百姓
laojia 老家
leng chuli 冷处理
liepin 劣品
like 理科
ling 灵
lixiang yu xianshi tuojie le 理想与现实脱节了
liyilian 利益链
luofen 裸分
luohou 落后
luoji siwei 逻辑思维
luoshi dao shi chu 落实到实处
luqulü 录取率
mamu 麻木
manban 慢班

mei banfa 没办法
mei ji ge 没几个
mei you di 没有底
Mei you Gaokao, ni neng pin de guo fu'er dai ma? 没有高考，你能拼得过富二代吗？
meiyou shenru naojin/xinyan 没有深入脑筋/心眼
menkan kaoshi 门槛考试
ming 命
ming zai ziji de shou shang 命在自己的手上
mingxiao jiu zai menkou, chengjiu xia yi dai jingying 名校就在门口，成就下一代精英
mingyu 名誉
mingyun 命运
minjian shuofa 民间说法
minyuan feiteng 民怨沸腾
nan luoshi dao shichu 难落实到实处
Nanfang zhoumo 南方周末
nanquan zhuyi shehui 男权主义社会
ni de ming ni ziji zhangwo 你的命你自己掌握
nianduan 年段
ning wei feng wei, bu wei ji tou 宁为凤尾，不为鸡头
nongcun you hen duo zhe zhong xianshi 农村有很多这种现实
nongmin jiaoshou 农民教授
nongmingong 农民工
nuli 努力
nuli hai bu ru zhao yi ge hao laogong 努力还不如找一个好老公
nuli yu chenggong bu hui cheng zhengbi 努力与成功不会成正比
ouranxing limian de biranxing 偶然性里面的必然性
pianke 偏科
pin die 拼爹
pin die shidai 拼爹时代
pinbo 拼搏
pindou 拼斗
ping zhicheng 评职称
pingtai 平台
pingxing ban 平行班
pinli 拼力
pinming 拼命
Putonghua 普通话
qiang 抢
qianjun wanma guo du muqiao 千军万马过独木桥
qianyi mohua 潜移默化
qifen 气氛

qincai 芹菜
qinfen 勤奋
qing de qi jia jiao 请得起家教
Qingmingjie 清明节
qiongcuo'ai 穷挫矮
quanli yi fu zhan Gaokao 全力以赴战高考
Quanneng shen 全能神
quefa xinli suzhi 缺乏心理素质
quyu de chengshihua 区域的城市化
rang ziji kaixin 让自己开心
renkou de chengshihua 人口的城市化
renkou duo, dizi bao 人口多，底子薄
renli ziyuan 人力资源
renming 认命
renpin 人品
renpin baofa chulai 人品爆发出来
renqing 人情
rentong 认同
renzhen 认真
ruanjian 软件
Rulin waishi 儒林外史
sanhao xuesheng 三好学生
secai 色彩
shan you shan bao, e you e bao, bu shi bu bao, shihou weidao
善有善报，恶有恶报, 不是不报，时候未到
shang you lao, xia you xiao 上游老，下有小
shangmen nüxu 上门女婿
she wo qi shei 舍我其谁
shehui zhuyi de xinao 社会注意的洗脑
shehuizhuyi xiandaihua jianshe 社会主义现代化建设
shenfenzheng 身份证
shengchan dadui 生产大队
shenghuo shuiping de tigao 生活水平的提高
shenghuo yue lai yue hao 生活越来越好
shengming 生命
shengnü 剩女
shengyuan ["licentiate"] 生员
shengyuan ["student resources"] 生源
shengzhijian 省质检
shenti suzhi 身体素质
shi ["city/municipality"] 市

shi [“real”]　实
shi nian chuang xia　十年窗下
shi yao san fen du　是药三分毒
shihua　实话
shiji　实际
shiji nengli　实际能力
shiji shang　实际上
shiji xiaoguo　实际效果
shijie mori　世界末日
shiqule fangxiang　失去了方向
shishi dahui　誓师大会
shiyan ban　实验班
shiye　事业
shiyuan　师源
shizai　实在
shizai de yiyi　实在的意义
shizhijian　市质检
shu zai qipaoxian　输在起跑线
shui wang dichu liu, ren wang gaochu zou　水往低处流，人往高处走
shuiping di　水平低
shuli hao bangyang　树立好榜样
shuxiang mendi　书香门第
si dang, wu luo　四当五落
siji yingbei　死记硬背
siren sixiang　私人思想
Sishu wujing 四书五经
songxie　松懈
suan bazi　算八字
suan ming　算命
suanming xiansheng　算命先生
suoyou de xinzi fang zai xuexi shang　所有的心子放在学习上
suzhi　素质
suzhi jiaoyu　素质教育
suzhi jiaoyu gaige　素质教育改革
taijiao　胎教
tashi　踏实
techang　特长
tekuai ban　特快班
Tian　天
Tian dao chou qin, bu lao wu huo　天道酬勤，不劳无货
tianbao zhiyuan　填报志愿

tiancai 天才
Tiangong 天宫
Tianming 天命
tiansheng 天生
tiansuchun 甜素纯
tiao chu nongmen 跳出农门
tiaozheng 调整
tigao 提高
tigao xiaolü 提高效率
tigao zonghe suzhi 提高综合素质
tizhi nei 体制内
tongban yali 同伴压力
tongku 痛苦
tonglingren yali 同龄人压力
tongxingzheng 通行证
touru 投入
tu 土
tubie 土鳖
tudi 土地
Tudigong 土地公
tuojie 脱节
tuomeng 托梦
tupo dian 突破点
wa 挖
waiguoyu xuexiao 外国语学校
waijie 外界
Wei le die, niang, weile ziji, pinle! 为了爹、娘，为了自己，拼了！
weifan suzhi jiaoyu de jiben yuanze 违反素质教育的基本原则
weiqu he paichi de taidu 委屈和排斥的态度
weiwang 威望
weiwu zhuyi 唯物主义
weixianpin 危险品
weixin 唯心
weixin zhuyi 唯心主义
weiyi xiangdui gongping de jingzhen 唯一相对公平的竞争
Wenchang Dijun 文昌帝君
Wenchang lingyan, xueye you cheng 文昌灵验，学业有成
wending 稳定
wenhua huanjing 文化环境
wenhua jichu 文化基础
wenke 文科

wenqian 问签
wenzong 文综
Wo ba shi Li Gang shijian 我爸是李刚事件
Liushi fen, wan sui; wushijiu fen, cankui! 六十分，万岁；五十九分，惭愧!
Xi jin Nan xia 西进南下
xia tihai 下题海
Xiamen shi jiaoyu kexue yanjiu yuan 厦门市教育科学研究院
xian 县
xiandaihua 现代化
xiangxia 乡下
xianjin 先进
xianshi 现实
xiantian 先天
xiao 孝
xiaoshun 孝顺
xiaozai 消灾
xiaozhang 嚣张
xibao 喜报
xie 邪
xiechangfa 写长发
xiejiao 邪教
xieshou bingjin 携手并进
xietiao 协调
Xifang 西方
xin cheng ze ling 心诚则灵
xin you yu, li bu zu 心有余，力不足
xin ze ling 信则灵
xingshan jide 行善积德
xingshihua 形式化
xinkegai 新课改
xinku 辛苦
xinli anwei 心理安慰
xinli suzhi 心理素质
xinqing wending 心情稳定
xintai 心态
xintai jueding yiqie 心态决定一切
xisu 习俗
xixun 喜讯
xu 虚
xu zhong you shi, shi zhong you xu 虚中有实，实中有虚
xuan 玄

xudu 虚度
xue 学
xue hao wu li hua, bu ru you ge hao baba 学好物理化，不如有个好爸爸
xujia 虚假
xuntao 熏陶
xurong 虚荣
xuwei 虚伪
yanbaojian 眼保健
yanjin kuanchu 严进宽出
yao ganshang Xifang 要赶上西方
yi kao ding zhong sheng 一考定终生
yiben yuanxiao 一本院校
yiji dabiao xuexiao 一级达标学校
yijin huanxiang 衣锦还乡
yingfu kaoshi 应付考试
yingjian 硬件
yingshi jiaoyu 应试教育
yiqi 义气
yiqian hen pianpi 以前很偏僻
yishi 意识
yongduo diyi 勇夺第一
you qiu bi ying 有求必应
you shiji xiaoguo 有实际效果
youdengpin 优等品
yousheng 优生
youshengxue 优生学
youxing 游行
youyou de wan xiaqu 悠悠地玩下去
youyuegan 优越感
yuanfen hai meiyou dao 缘分还没有到
yuanfen shi yi zhong yundong 缘分是一种运动
yugan 语感
yuke ban 预科班
yunqi 运气
yuxuan 预选
zan renpin 攒人品
zao zixiu 早自修
zaodu 早读
zaolian 早恋
zenme neng shengcun 怎么能生存
zhencheng duidai ta ren 真诚对待他人

zhengfu Gaokao 征服高考
zhengji 政绩
zhengtong 正统
zhenshi 真实
zhenshi de renqing 真实的人情
zhenzheng de gongzuo 真正的工作
zhenzheng de renqing 真正的人情
zhenzheng de yiyi 真正的意义
zhihuibang 指挥棒
zhili 智力
zhishi de jilei 知识的积累
zhongdian ban 重点班
zhongdian daxue 重点大学
Zhonghua minzu weida fuxing 中华民族伟大复兴
Zhonghua renmin gongheguo putong gaodeng xuexiao zhaosheng quanguo tongyi kaoshi 中华人民共和国普通高等学校招生全国统一考试
Zhongkao 中考
zhongnan qingnü 重男轻女
zhongzu 种族
zhouyu 咒语
zhua de hen yan 抓得很严
zhuangyuan 状元
zhuguan he keguan de yinsu 主管和客观因素
zhuguanti 主观题
zhuiqiu shiji liyi 追求实际利益
zhun 准
zi ru qi ren 字如其人
ziji de shili 自己的势力
zilü 自律
zishen 自身
zixin 自信
zizhu zhaosheng 自主招生
zizhu zhaosheng kaoshi 自主招生考试
zonghe pingjia tixi 综合评价体系
zonghe pingjia zhaosheng 综合评价招生
zonghe suzhi 综合素质
zonghe suzhi pingjia 综合素质评价
zou jianghu 走江湖
zui 罪
zuihou yi zhan 最后一战
zuo yuezi 坐月子

zuojia 作假
zuoren 做人
zuoxiu 作秀

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