

Is it Possible to Incorporate Comprehensive Evaluation into College Admissions System in China? An Analysis with a Historical Perspective

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Abstract—This paper focused on the history of Chinese College Entrance Examination. We found that the college enrollment system in China relies heavily on standardized assessment as a single admission criteria, which has resulted in many unintended educational and social consequences. Over the past 30 years since Gaokao was reinstated, China has been trying to incorporate comprehensive evaluation into college admissions system. However, the new enrollment practices, such as unripe system, independent-enrollment system, and comprehensive evaluation, have been questioned for educational equality and fairness. From a historical and comparative perspective, whether comprehensive evaluation is able to play an important role in college admissions depends on that the right to education and equality of education are guaranteed and that the rule of law is well established and implemented.

Keywords-National College Entrance Exam (Gaokao); examination; comprehensive evaluation; rule of law

I. INTRODUCTION

The National College Entrance Examination (commonly known as Gaokao) was resumed as a solution to the college admission during the Cultural Revolution which was mainly based on subjective recommendation. Using score as a single criterion for admission is considered by the Chinese society-at-large as being fair and equitable to some extent. However, written exam as the only way to evaluate the candidates is very limited and leads to exam-oriented education that shows aggravated issues such as the rote learning, the narrowing of the curriculum, and extreme academic pressure. Over the thirty years, Chinese government and universities have been exploring the way to take comprehensive evaluation into college admissions system. The main concern and difficulty of the reform, which is also the main cause of many ineffective reform, is to ensure the right to education, and to maintain educational equality. This article intends to review the reform history of China's college admission system as from single exam to comprehensive evaluation, and to reflect on the problems and issues in the process.

II. UNIFIED RECRUITMENT AND SINGLE EXAM

When Gaokao was reinstated in 1977, the Ministry of Education stated in the 'About 1977 college enrollment Opinions' that candidates must have a high school diploma or the equivalent level of education, chosen according to unified tests.

Test subjects were divided into two categories. Students major in literature and history need to take politics, language, mathematics, history, geography, and foreign languages. While students major in engineering, agriculture, and medicine need to take language, mathematics, physics, chemistry, and foreign languages. Starting from 1978, the examination was uniformly designed by the Ministry of Education, and were administrated and graded individually within the provinces. The initial goal of Gaokao was to select those who are morally, academically, and physically eligible. Though using written exam score as admission criterion as a result of unified exam is able to ensure the fairness, the single dimension of evaluation might be lacking of rationality and validity. The form of Gaokao has evolved slightly since then. Considering the extremely low admission rate, Heilongjiang Province started to hold a exam beforehand pre-selecting candidate students for Gaokao in 1978. Under the approval and support of the Ministry of Education, a number of provinces followed the same path as Heilongjiang Province by holding additional exam for pre-selection. In 1983, the Ministry of Education issued 'Opinions on further improvement of the quality of education in regular schools,' proposing 'graduation exams and entrance exams to be conducted separately, the proposition of high school graduation exams to be based on textbooks. In 1985, Shanghai and Zhejiang Province took the lead in the reform of graduation exams and entrance exams. Meanwhile, Shanghai was also allowed to employ an independent exam, which was the beginning of provincial proposition.

Starting from 1999, the Ministry of Education "3+X" examination system as a pilot examination system in order to promote education system reform, in which "3" refers to compulsory subjects, including "Chinese, Mathematics and English", and "X" means that students can choose, according to their own interests, one subject from either Social Sciences

(including Politics, History and Geography), or Natural Sciences (including Physics, Chemistry and Biology). Starting from 2000, some area such as Beijing and Anhui Province started to hold examinations twice a year and the extra one is called the Spring Entrance Examination. Authorized by the Minister of Education in 2002, Guangxi Province made the first attempt to design and administrate the exams separately for application to colleges at undergraduate level, and to colleges at vocational and technical level. In the same year, Beijing was also granted independent proposition of the three compulsory subjects, Chinese, Mathematics and English. In 2004, the Ministry of Education accelerated implementation of 'national exam, provincial proposition' reform, joined by 9 more provinces. By 2008, 16 provinces have adopted independent proposition.

This series of reforms didn't run away from the unified entrance examination that use standard exam as primary admission criterion to ensure equity. While holding onto the unified national exam, various adjustment has been made to address the issues caused single evaluation such as the provincial proposition adopted to improve exam administration, the curriculum reform employed to reduce the academic burden on students, and the general examination (a qualified test for high school diploma) in order to alleviate the pressure of Gaokao.

Proposition for a unified national organization working to improve the examination carried out with sub-provinces proposition; adjust the test subjects in order to reduce the academic burden on students conducted; baton college entrance examination system in order to reduce the role carried out. To some extent, equality and equity of college enrollment is pursued at the expense of validity by using exam score as the only admission criterion.

III. PARTIAL REFORM AND COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION

In 1985, former State Education Commission initiated unripe system at 70 colleges and universities such as Beijing Normal University and Shandong Mining Institute to recruited students exempted from standardized exams. In 1988, 'Interim Provisions for students recommended for admission at colleges and universities' was issued, clearly stating the conditions of the high schools that recommend students for admission, qualifications of recommendation, and the procedures for recruiting recommended students (R. L. Zheng, 2002). In 1998, to screen qualified recommendation, the Ministry of Education issued 'notice on the college recruitment of recommended students in 1998', clearly specifying that, except for those who won the first prize of province division in the national high school discipline Olympic competition, all the other recommended students must participate in a unified comprehensive ability test administrated by the Ministry of Education, and admission is mainly based on the test performance.

College enrollment rate reached 1 by 1.2 every summer, which increased the autonomy of university admissions. The limited power of enrollment granted to the colleges encouraged them to select students based on comprehensive evaluation. However, this limited power can hardly play a role under the pressure of "every mark counts" and various interference. As a

result, a candidate with lower test score but exceptional performance in non-academic fields could still lose his admission opportunity to someone just scores 1 mark higher.

In 2003, 22 colleges and universities made the attempt of "independent-recruitment" such that the pilot colleges and universities conducted a comprehensive evaluation on high school candidates based on public standards and assessment methods, coupled with interviews, before making the admission decision. The number of pilot colleges and universities implementing "independent-recruitment" increased to 28 in 2004, and the enrollment expanded as well. The way of recommendation shifted from designated area and university only recommendation to "a combination of self-recommendation and high school-recommendation". What is more significant, not only the key high school students but also the general secondary school students can sign up for the self-recommendation if they think they have the strength (H. Wang, 2004). The qualification exams organized by schools intends to select candidate students, which were in various forms such as summer camp and written exam. Most written examinations designed by colleges and universities were based on academic subject. Though various forms of interview were conducted, the proportion of admission through which was low. In fact, the interview was more considered as a way to better know the candidates. By 2009, the number of colleges and universities practicing independent-recruitment has reached 76.

In 2006, Fudan University and Shanghai Jiao Tong University carried out independent recruitment. The admission procedure adopted by Fudan University included three stages, comprehensive exam, interview, and unified examination within the municipality (D. G. Yang, 2007). The comprehensive exam refers to the screening test for the second round of exam, which is proposed by the school and lasts for 3 hours. The exam which is all in multiple choice format covers 10 subjects, including Chinese, math, English, politics, history, geography, physics, chemistry, biology and computer. Before the interview, the student must provided required application materials, including a personal information table, a statement of purpose, an official high school transcript, two recommendation letters written by teachers, and all possible supplementary materials to show the achievement or specialty. The interview will determine the final admission results. The student who has been pre-admitted still need to participate in the unified exam (i.e., the independent college entrance examination in Shanghai). Though the exam score is not the main factor that influence the admission decision, it impacts students' the scholarship application and major selection. In the same year, Fudan university recruited 300 students from independent-enrollment, accounting for nearly 10% of the total enrollment of the year. Specifically, 1208 students were selected for interview based on comprehensive exam results. After all required materials were submitted and reviewed, a 15-minute interview was given to each candidate by 5 experts respectively. The purpose of the interview was to assess student s personal characteristics such as outlook on life and the values, worldview, moral integrity, learning and research ability, potential, perseverance, specialty, and personality. The decision on admission was made by summarizing 5 experts' evaluation given on four grade level (X.P. Zhang, 2007).

Shanghai Jiao Tong University independently recruited no more than 300 high school graduates, whose academic achievement and interview performance were used as primary criteria for admission. Unlike Fudan University, qualification test was not required, instead, high schools recommend (within the recommendation quota) students who made the applications to Jiao Tong University. Students were able to make self-recommendation to Jiao Tong University after having their own school review and sign the application materials. Then the qualifications of all the applicants were evaluated by subject-matter experts, and about 1200 applicants were selected for interview.

IV. NEW PROGRAM OF GAOKAO AND COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION

Starting from 2004, four provinces, Hainan, Ningxia, Guangdong, and Shandong, carried out curriculum reform in high school. Then, several other provinces, including Jiangsu, Fujian, Anhui, Liaoning, Zhejiang, and Tianjin joined them. Since 2007, corresponding new college entrance examination reforms have been introduced. Although these new programs had their own characteristics, the common trend was the shift from single exam to multiple evaluation, using comprehensive quality evaluation as the reference for college admission. In January 2008, the Ministry of Education issued the Guiding Opinions for the Reform of college admissions system, clearly stating that the primary task is to 'establish and improve high school students' comprehensive evaluation system, and to gradually bring it into the system of college admissions evaluation.' Comprehensive evaluation system includes two parts, one is the academic proficiency test system, and the other is the comprehensive quality evaluation system. The academic proficiency test is based on the general examination, the focus of which is still on scholastic aptitude. Provinces carry out comprehensive quality evaluation in various ways. Among the four pilot provinces that conducted curriculum reform, Shandong Province included additional test of basic ability test as part of the college entrance examination, which assessed the most basic knowledge and ability that a high school graduate should have to adapt to the social life, such as the abilities of observing social life, appreciating artistic, and expressing feelings. The exam content covered technology, sports and health, art, integrated practice, and the ability to solve practical problems in real life using learned knowledge. The college entrance examination plan made in Guangdong Province in 2007 stipulated that "when colleges and universities make decision on admission, students' comprehensive quality evaluation should be carefully reviewed and considered as one of the factors influencing admission. The unified standards of comprehensive quality evaluation are established by the Provincial Department of Education, and the implementation is carried out by high schools. The comprehensive quality evaluation includes academic achievement on various subjects, performance and awards in the fields of art, sports, health, and integrated practice activity. The content of the evaluation should be realistic and documented as electronic archive." The college entrance examination reform enacted in Ningxia Province in 2007 stated that "students' comprehensive quality evaluation should be made by high schools, and the indicators should include technology, sports and health, art, and

integrated practice activity. The evaluation is written down and documented electronically as a reference for college admission". In the same year, Hainan Province also used graduates' comprehensive evaluation results (i.e., moral integrity, learning ability, practical ability, sports and health, and aesthetics and representation) as college admission reference. Though in these four provinces, the comprehensive quality evaluation is still in its exploration stage, the direction of college admission reform has been shown.

The comprehensive evaluation introduced in Jiangsu in 2008 summarize is based on students' portfolio. By systematically collecting and compiling related material, student work and achievement can be presented visually. For the first time, schools evaluate the students in the following six aspects: moral integrity, citizenship, learning ability, communication and cooperation, sports and health, aesthetics and representation. Several provinces, such as Fujian, Liaoning, Anhui, and Zhejiang, followed steps of Jiangsu and successively released similar Gaokao policies in 2009, using comprehensive evaluation as the reference for college admission.

V. DISCUSSION

These college enrollment reforms, such as unripe system and independent-recruitment system, are all experimental cases that attempt to take non-academic factor into consideration, to select candidates with high overall qualities, and to achieve valid enrollment. However when non-academic factors is brought into the evaluation system, confounding factors and other illegal activities may come along. Often with power, money, and favor involved, unripe system has to resort to a unified exam. Although the independent-enrollment system has similar problems, its evaluation system is mainly based on scores while considering non-academic factors as well, which is a more reliable mechanism. On the other hand, great effort has been made to regulate the admission process, and valuable experience has been gained in the process.

The 'Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020)' issued by China's State Council in 2010 requires that China's college entrance examination needs to shift gradually from a single exam to comprehensive evaluation. In September 2014, the State Council released the 'Opinions on deepening the reform of the examination enrollment system' (hereinafter referred to as 'the opinions'), also requesting comprehensive evaluation and diverse enrollment to promote education fairness in the reform. As a result of the introduction of a series of policies of college admission, increasing attention to and emphasis on the comprehensive evaluation is expected. However, we've learned from the history that, the comprehensive evaluation can not be implemented effectively and serve its purpose unless equity and equality have been achieved. In other words, a well developed law-abiding society in which citizens' right to education is fully protected without being trampled, is the prerequisite of carrying out comprehensive evaluation such that the subjective evaluation mechanism is able to select eligible candidates for the universities without compromising the education equity. That is a consensus the Chinese community should share.

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