



GAOKAO: FAR MORE THAN AN EXAM

GAOKAO: MUITO MAIS DO QUE UM EXAME

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ABSTRACT

China has an education system of hundreds of millions of students, notable regional and economic differences, and cultural factors that greatly influence the social roles of teacher and student, and the way society views education. All these have shaped a unique education system in which written examinations played a vital role. Based on a review of the current literature on this topic and interviews with students of Portuguese at Sun-Yat Sen University in Guangdong Province, this study addresses the influence of *gaokao* (National College Entrance Examination) on the profile of Chinese students and aims to contribute to bring to light this determinant feature of the Chinese education system. The Chinese education system consists of a succession of exams, the best known of which is *gaokao*. The demands of *gaokao* have a huge influence on the social and academic profile of Chinese college students and affect the way they face the school and university. In the short term it seems challenging to change the burden of *gaokao* in Chinese schooling due to population density, teaching methods and socio-cultural issues.

KEYWORDS: China; Chinese students; National College Entrance Examination (*gaokao*); Portuguese as a Foreign Language.

RESUMO

A China possui um sistema de educação composto por dezenas de milhões de estudantes, por marcadas assimetrias regionais e econômicas e por questões culturais que influenciam muito os papéis sociais do professor e do aluno e no modo como a sociedade encara a educação. Todas essas características refletem na existência de um sistema de avaliação pouco flexível no qual os exames escritos assumem uma enorme importância. Com base na revisão da

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literatura atual sobre esse tema e em entrevistas aos estudantes de Português da Universidade de Sun-Yat Sen, situada na província de Cantão, este estudo aborda a influência do *gaokao* no perfil dos estudantes chineses e pretende contribuir para trazer à luz esta particularidade incontornável do sistema de educação chinês. O sistema de educação chinês é constituído por uma sucessão de exames, cujo mais conhecido é o *gaokao*. As exigências do *gaokao* têm uma influência enorme no perfil social e acadêmico dos estudantes universitários e moldam a forma de os alunos chineses encararem a escola e a universidade. A curto prazo, parece difícil mudar o peso do *gaokao* na escolaridade chinesa devido a questões relacionadas com a densidade populacional, com os métodos de ensino e com os traços socioculturais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: China; estudantes chineses; exame nacional de acesso à universidade (*gaokao*); Português Língua Estrangeira.

Introduction

One key element of Chinese education system which greatly restricts the speed with which a more communicative language-teaching method is implemented in the country is the significance attached to exams (JIN; CORTAZZI 1997; 2006; WANG; HUANG; SCHNELL, 2013; ZHANG; LI; WANG 2013; CHEN, 2016). The most crucial one among these exams, beyond dispute, comes as *gaokao*, the National College Entrance Examination, which is probably one of the most difficult exams all over the world. What makes it far more than an exam is its role as an origin of stress as well as an absolutely decisive turning point in young Chinese students' life (JIN; CORTAZZI, 2006; KAI, 2012; WANG; HUANG; SCHNELL, 2013; TSEGAY; ASHRAF, 2016; HEGER, 2017).

After *gaokao* was restored in 1977 as one outcome of educational reform as the government had recognized how important higher education means to modernization of the country (TSEGAY; ASHRAF, 2016), citizens regained the opportunity to elevate their social status through education, which in turn contributed to social and economic development (HEGER, 2017).

According to Tsegay e Ashraf (2016), every year millions of high school students will attend this exam that lasts for two days. Those with higher marks will gain the access to better universities, approach better jobs and eventually become those successive personages amid the prosperity of Chinese economy. Yet it is considered to be the root of intensive pressure since the future of candidates is indelibly linked with their performance in this exam.

A study conducted by Wang, Huang e Schnell (2013) about the risks of stress associated with this exam reveals that many secondary schools in China are assessed by the result of *gaokao*. Besides, how teachers are rewarded depends on the marks of students they teach. Consequently, many people refer to this system as the culprit of current conservative educational practices for apart from inducing excessive level of pressure and competition, it literally turns students into “test machines” with their creativity development limited.

In a study of Zhao, Selman e Haste (2015), where they propose a program to curb academic stress in China, it is referred that while people in the United States talk about American students' mediocre performance among international rankings, in China what is discussed by the authority are the causes and preventions of the stress which students, families and schools suffer, especially that provoked by National College Entrance Examination. Chinese educators and students are confronted with high levels of stress related to an exam-oriented education system, which, affecting psychological, social, moral and civic development of Chinese young people while at school, has become a huge social problem. Zhao, Selmon e Haste also affirm that numerous studies has proved a higher risk of suicidal mentality as well as attempts among Chinese adolescents. The negative impact that academic stress brings about is not merely limited in individual psychological health, but also extends to students' social relationship with their colleagues and their attitudes towards the whole society. As a result of intense competition, sentiment including jealous, distrust and animosity grows among peers. One's intimate friends can be frequently regarded at the same time as their rivals or enemies in academic competition. These authors argue that these problems derive from various political and socio-cultural factors. First and foremost, due to apprehension about children's future and traditional culture which emphasizes academic record, Chinese parents always hold a resistant attitude towards new potential policies about college entrance. What's more, cultural factors make it habitual for individuals to be judged or compared with others in from daily life to personnel-recruitment market, while an impressive degree is exactly a symbol of distinction. Finally, the rigorously applied one-child policy since 1979 have made many youngsters only-children who are expected to shoulder the responsibility alone for attending to their parents when they become senior. Because of these reasons, they defend that it is difficult to change this college entrance system in depth insofar as China is fighting with an education system still highly vulnerable to institutional corruption. Hence *gaokao* is considered by the majority of Chinese to be a selection mechanism relatively fair and objective.

In conclusion, using *gaokao* as the only criteria on admission to university, the education system of China has continued to define academic success according to external judgement, which, with focus on test results, imposes a high level of stress (on schools, parents and students) and ends up with producing students with low self-confidence and creativity. Under this system, passing *gaokao* and enter a great faculty is compared to a "paved road, not the steep, bumpy and uncertain one—if there even is a bumpy one rather than a dead end—that awaits those who fail to slay the Gaokao" (ZHAO; SELMON; HASTE, 2016, p. 7).

Implications of *Gaokao* in chinese society

In a research to explore how Chinese students relate *gaokao* with the access to university, Heger (2017, p. 120) mentions that students' account conveys a clear message that effort to enter university is a very glorious topic in their mind. From the moment they pass the exam on,

this experience will keep being recalled in great detail. This can match my own experience in my class when sometimes hearing my students say “Today is the first or second anniversary of my *gaokao*”, telling how alive is that experience in their minds.

Beside this argument, this same author tells that the entrance to university is described in different ways as a turning point in students’ life. Being admitted to university is something that someone can take substantial pride in since many others can not manage to do so. With their whole adolescence immersed in pressure and competition, young people associate studying in university with a new type of liberty regardless of some requirements on their courses. The same notion of liberty is also cited by Jin e Cortazzi (1997) in a study about the communicative approach in foreign language teaching China. Involving students from Chinese universities, it reveals that after going through the “hell of exams” and fierce competition, students feel that university provides them with more tranquility and leisure compared with their former academic journey. In other words, in spite of all the new challenges, life in university is seen as a period where there exists less pressure than before, especially in contrast with their past years in high school where the pressure and competition of going to university reach the peak.

Some of my students as well as other friends not in academic institutions share with me their similar experience of the final months approaching their *gaokao* from time to time. Stories are repeatedly told that they did not leave their senior secondary school for months to work diligently; slept little over this period; studied hard till mid-night on their beds with light of cellphone on when light of dormitory had been turned off after a day filled by classes (in some cases holding cellphone is prohibited, too); seldom contacted their families and friends, doing nothing anything but study for months. For those who come from a distinctive educational culture, it could be difficult to understand the extent of hard-work that Chinese students demonstrate to succeed in this exam.

Some of this kind of effort are reported by Larmer (2015) in *The Washington Post* in an article describing days at a high school in Shanghai anteceding *gaokao*. He interviews some students who share their sacrifice in this phase. One of them claims that in the final three years, they have classes from 6 a.m. to 20 p.m. everyday including weekends and that he did not do anything apart from studying. He also tells that if all the test sheets over three years are collected, they can “wrap all the way around the world” (LARMER, 2015, p. 13). Other students compare the memorization of materials during preparation for *gaokao* to the trainings for the Olympic Games “You have to keep up the momentum. Skip a day or two, and you can get off form” (LARMER, 2015, p. 15) The report indicates that cases of suicide tend to increase when the exam is close and a viral photo online taken by a student years before this report is put to exemplify, a scene of a classroom full of students having intravenous drips which seem to be whey to offer them strength to work hard. Larmer also points out other problems such as prohibition of some school on using telephones or computers and ban on puppy love. Namely, it is forbidden or opposed to date someone in high schools. Some students constantly talk about

this, recounting that being found dating will lead to students' parents called by the director at school and suspension or even expulsion in case of recurrence.

Besides, the report written by Larmer discuss the burden of some students from the periphery of Shanghai and struggle of their parents, those who mainly work in agriculture or civil construction. They pump all their earnings into their children's education for the concern that their young generation might eventually end up with the same profession as themselves without achieving a positive result in *gaokao*. In these cases, it is evident that all the sacrifice and endeavor made by the young people and their relatives are to help outshine other millions of candidates.

According to Heger (2017), among all the important challenges during the race towards higher education, what comes first is *zhongkao*, the middle or intermediate exam to select students into three-year high school before *gaokao*. This exam decides whether a student is able to acquire admission to regular high school, where education is oriented toward *gaokao*, or just vocational high school, a stigmatized option whose sole advantage is the access permitted directly to the job market, although limited only in occupations considered to be inferior. In fact, only half of teenagers in China are able to obtain seats in high school.

As is stated by Wang, Huang e Schnell (2013) since the second that students step into high schools for their last three years followed by university, they have been connected with education aimed at *gaokao*, which summarizes their former academic journey by only one evaluation event. Regarding the entry to higher education, those scholars make a comparison between China and the United States where multiple criteria are taken into consideration including aptitude tests, the average of grades over high schools, extracurricular activities and life experiences.

Through this comparison it is possible to understand how requirements on chance of higher education can play such a significant role in not only teenagers' school life but also their personal development and social skills. On the one hand, for students, a system with more than scores of tests taken into account asks for different types of capabilities besides learning in classroom, which help to promote their participation in community and get accustomed to other social roles flexibly aside from students. On the other hand, a system that loads all the pressure of going to university on only one exam severely aggregates individuals' struggle and competition, only confining teenagers' life to school.

The reason why *gaokao* is a source of competition and stress lies not only in the fact that it roughly judges students' effort within just a few hours, but the whole atmosphere of intensive studying and pressure from society and family to be successful.

According to Heger (2017) this exam defines far more than an avenue to university itself. On top of that, a prestiged university will enhance the possibility of obtaining a pleasing job, too. Another factor of stress concerning *gaokao* is the inconsistency between the meritocracy

represented theoretically by the exam and the actual inequality that shows when it is carried out. Since the access to university and respective degrees are based purely on results of an exam, *gaokao* owns a meritocratic connotation. Nevertheless, in practice, the system is unequal to a large extent out of different regional requirements on access to university. The Ministry of Education of the PRC established a quota system which assigns every province the number of students that an university can enroll. The Ministry also determinates the lowest mark a student must achieve in different provinces to go to a certain university. In provinces more prosperous, the minimum passing score to enjoy higher education is less demanding. Given that better high schools are located always in provinces also with high-quality universities, local teenagers has less difficulty to be accepted by local universities. These regional and social-economic imbalance are hence “perpetuated throughout all levels of education” (HEGER, 2017, p. 116).

Albeit the massification of higher education across China, the gap to study at universities among different areas has long been widening due to the system of regional quotas. In a study on problems of *gaokao* in China, Liu (2016) tells that the system of regional quotas consists in a series of policies stipulating quotas for every province. Under this system, every university has a fixed number of students that it can accept in different provinces, with a larger percentage from the province where that university is situated in. Even though there have been attempts to guarantee social and educational equality, it is frequently criticized for its inherent inequity. In contrast to other regions, the situation seems more unfavorable for students from central and western China, “especially for those provinces with over 500,000 applicants” (LIU, 2016, p. 11). C. Liu explains, emphasizing that there are 26 higher education institutions in Beijing and 10 in Shanghai. Together, they are more than the total of the central and western regions of China. Quite different from Beijing and Shanghai, each of most underdeveloped provinces only has one university counted as high-level in China. As the regional quotas are distributed in accordance with geographical distribution of higher education institutions, students resident in major urban centers own more convenience in terms of being accepted by a university more prominent. For instance, the opportunity to enter Peking University for candidates taking *gaokao* in Beijing is “is 31 times of that for students in Henan” (LIU, 2016, p. 11).

With regard to this aspect, a study of Liu (2013) about the meritocracy of *gaokao* indicates an association between educational conditions provided by parents and the socio-demography of families, which greatly affects the result of *gaokao*. The author then comes to a conclusion that socio-demographic factors seem to play a more considerable role than socio-economic statue when it comes to opportunities of higher education (LIU, 2013).

Some parents with better economic conditions, to overcome all the obstacles and secure the social position of their family through higher education of their children, will try to avoid *gaokao* by sending their children abroad to attend foreign universities (JIN; CORTAZZI, 2006), while others opt for buy houses in provinces, which guarantees their children more advantages to be admitted by universities. Families who change their place of residence in

order to win the opportunity for better universities like this are called “migrants of *gaokao*” (HEGER, 2017, p. 127).

Kan (2013) also touch this issue in his study about the challenges faced by the current young generation in China when discussing an education system that “systematically reproduces disparity between generations” (p. 67). She is sure that in contemporary China, the socio-economic status and registered permanent residence (*hukou*) of a family to which the underage pertain is decisive for their access to better education so long as schools in rural provinces maintain underfunded. In rural areas, the lack of high-quality education make young people there lag far behind urban students, and there are still few mechanisms to rectify such disadvantages. As Kan (2013) stated, in addition to these disadvantages, those better universities are known to show preference for local students, accepting local urban candidates with much lower scores at the sacrifice of those scored higher but from countryside. Like so, local students who have already enjoyed better teaching resources are expected to face challenges in university better and hence are further favored by top universities.

Kan (2013) points out that another great conflict tied to regional differences in Chinese education is relevant to migrants who move from rural areas to major cities in pursuit of plentiful job opportunities and better life conditions. However, those from other places always have restrictions when it comes to permissions and social welfare. In this way, achieving access to decent education is a rather tough task for children whose parents are these migrant workers. Neither these children have local *hukou*, nor are they included in the government budget for public education. On this account urban schools continue imposing heavy financial burden on migrant parents through temporary accommodation for students, compensation payment and taxes of school selection. Even with some measures to remove these loads and exempt taxes, migrant parents who normally only have inferior jobs with lower salary have to keep dealing with exorbitant expenses compared with families with local *hukou*. Many children of migrant workers have no choice but to stay in their place of birth, distant from their parents, and when they try to accompany their parents, usually for chance of higher education they are forced to return to their original province since not allowed to attend local *gaokao* without *hukou*. For some of these teenagers, this not only means separation from parents and adaptation to a new environment on their own, but also retrogression to schools with worse teaching resources. Some teenagers simply choose to leave off their study, others turn to polytechnics and professional schools run by local governments or private companies, while their peers with urban *hukou* step into prestige universities with abundant subsidies and greater convenience rendered.

The social position of parents has an apparent preponderance during race of *gaokao* and admission to universities. Outstanding academic performance can be attributed to parents who manage to guarantee their children success in exams (BIGGS, 1998; LIU, 2016; KAI, 2012; LIU, 2016; YU, 2017), dedicating all their energy and income into one objective. In some cases

mothers will resign to entirely support their children during the phase while those teenagers are absorbed in preparation for *gaokao*.

However, support like this might also bring about a contrary effect with parents pushing youngsters too hard and “making decisions on behalf of their children” rather than guiding them to face their own paths in life (HEGER, 2017, p. 123). Heger gives an example of a student participating in his research whose major was decided not to her delight but by her parents.

Throughout my experience in Sun Yat-Sen University, I have noticed that it is common for students to follow the blueprint of their parents. When asked about why they chose the current major, students usually start with “because my parents think...”. This can be extended from the general major to the motivation to learn Portuguese or their participation in exchange programs including choices of countries (Brazil or Portugal), cities and universities. Accustomed to respond with opinions of their parents, sometimes they are not even sure what is they own thought and decisions. This is recurrently happening given that Chinese parents are authoritative during the decision-making process of their children (HEGER, 2017).

As demonstrated by a research conducted by Liu (2016) about international mobility of Chinese students, the momentousness that families attach to children’s scholastic triumph is intimately related to some particularities intrinsic in Chinese culture, specifically, the culture of giving priority to education of juniors and of thrift. Liu (2016) reckons that in China the values of putting education of children in the first place makes Chinese parents try their utmost to find the best educational options for their children. In parallel, the traditional virtue of thrift contributes to accumulation and allocation of resources for education. Accordingly, they seek to send their children to the best public schools, which stimulate the rising of real estate prices surrounding those schools. W. Liu argues that if parents do not buy a house at the catchment area, they have to pay for high taxes for an eligible school, albeit with their residence far from the district of the school. In the matter of universities, parents prefer those with more reputation, especially in Beijing or Shanghai. Providing there is enough financial capability, a common practice is to send their offspring to study abroad, “preferably to the US”, because “Higher education abroad is generally understood as better” than in China (LIU, 2016, p. 56). Such sacrifice that parents are willing to make as well as pressure they impose on their children over their school days are summarized by Liu as follow:

Chinese parents might be unique in the extent of the sacrifices they are willing to make so that their children can get the best education possible, irrespective of the return. The Chinese education-first culture is partly rooted in a highly competitive social structure, the result of a large population and scarce educational resources. Chinese parents tend to push their children as hard as they can, so that they can exhaust their intellectual potential in their schooling. (LIU, 2016, p. 54).

Salili (1996) also connects the Chinese values of collectivism with academic performance

of Chinese students whose personal achievement is also viewed as honor of their families, influencing their social life and their families' satisfaction. Under this mode, students' endeavor, not just limited to their individual ability, is counted in Chinese culture as a "key to academic success" (SALILI, 1996, p. 102). These characteristics are allied to the absence of parents' praise and their elevated expectation, generating strong incentives for students to always do better at school but meanwhile exerting huge pressure. Consequently, the purposes of intense effort that students make to succeed are not only to be academically accomplished but to obtain recognition from their parents and hence the glory of their families at a social level. The author further points out that although under pressure, what happens in such public education might not be expedient in development of "creative or critical thinking" of Chinese students (SALILI, 1996, p. 102).

In respect of the role of teachers and its impact on students' grade in *gaokao*, according to teachers will take strategies such as repetition of exams taken in previous years, homework and in-class exercises to guide their students while checking whether students are well-prepared for *gaokao*. Teachers have to carefully come up with similar test questions and set numerous tests to evaluate students' progress. The authors refer that as far as students are concerned, a teacher's encouragement also profoundly affect their result of *gaokao*. Students stress that one thing that helps them stay motivated is inspiration and confidence delivered by teachers. Mainly for those whose parents are distant from them, teachers become their "main source of motivation" (TSEGAY; ASHRAF, 2016, p. 73). This phenomenon can also be interpreted from Chinese educational culture where a teacher is usually regarded as a paternal figure (JIN; CORTAZZI, 1998, 2006; RAO, 2002; ZHANG; LI; WANG, 2013). Based on this definition of teachers, Tsegay e Ashraf (2016, p. 74) add that teacher also serve as a model for students to achieve impressive marks in *gaokao* – a model not only entrusted with the mission to teach and inspect students, but also to convey support, motivation and advice to accompany students to go through this exigent period of life. Nonetheless, it is also possible to hear students admit that regardless of all the encouragement, severity and sometimes punishment also come from teachers (WANG; HUANG; SCHNELL, 2013; LARMER, 2015).

The problem of *gaokao* goes beyond the question of passing it or not. Achieving higher marks means to be ranked among the tops and therefore to enter better universities. For this reason, the exam should be "difficult enough to distinguish the excellent students" (GUO et al., 2017, p. 111). In most provinces, *gaokao* has a "3+X" structure, namely three basic subjects (Chinese, Mathematics and a foreign language, normally English) plus a subject (X) chosen by students themselves on fields they study. The total mark is 750 with every basic subjects of 150 and the subject "X" of 300 (TSEGAY; ASHRAF, 2016, p. 68).

For Heger the objective of students is to pass the exam with a best potential score to be accepted by more reputable universities. For some students, failing to go to an elite university involves disillusion and even loss of face, so some of them will take a risk. For example,

sometimes they will apply for a less popular major to increase the possibility of entering a prestige university – then endeavor to change their majors after the first year. This means to study a major they are not interested in for a year but fight to stay among the best 10% of students, who are given the qualification to change major. After this they also have to pass an internal exam of admission to the new major applied for. Any failure in the processes mentioned above will end up with being “imprisoned” in the original major for four years. (HEGER, 2017). Moreover, the desire for a diploma awarded by a prestige university becomes even stronger given that upon graduating young people have to face current tough employment situation — where many of them might only find low-skilled jobs. These problems are touched in dozens of recent researches (KAN, 2013; POSTIGLIONE, 2014; HEGER, 2017; YU, 2017).

In accordance with a study of Postiglione (2014) about reforms of *gaokao*, the fact that many post-graduates might only find a job far below expectation or demanding less professional competence than cultivated is quite disturbing. As Postiglione finds out, in rural district families generally make greater sacrifice to pay for youngsters, only to perplexedly find that when a student who passes the grueling national examination and attends university, their children cannot find a good job. This risk of instability concerning personal career create even more anxiety about access to universities. In this sense, the *gaokao* is also a “barometer of the challenges facing China’s economic rise and its breakneck expansion of higher education” (POSTIGLIONE, 2014, p. 17).

About the reforms of *gaokao*, Postiglione (2014) tells that Chinese government intends to divide this system into two exams, one for access to professional-technical education to satisfy growing demand for workforce with qualified technical skills and another for traditional academic areas. However, this is not thought highly of given the inferior social status represented by the former degree, which is normally considered to lead to a less promising future. Moreover, this divided system might even deepen the educational and cultural gap between areas and social classes with different economic conditions.

Regarding the way students cope with the exam, Heger’s (2017) study revealed that students are aware of all the problems about system of *gaokao* but simply think it as a less serious and something that all have to accept and get used to, which kind of suggest the logic of a Portuguese idiom “if you can’t beat them, join them”. Students often mentioned their origins to illustrate the obstacles and the chances they had to get a place in higher education, however, no one has addressed these issues as unfair or unequal, but as a *fait accompli* which they have to deal with. In their point of view it is the reality that everyone must try to confront with rather than protest against. The students adapt themselves to the present situation, doing their best and devising their own strategies to tackle this challenge (HEGER, 2017). To comprehend this attitude, the demographic and social conditions of China must be taken into account: students fight with all their strength for a position in higher education, which promises them brilliant work prospects and, in many cases, social mobility. *Gaokao*, in this way, is thought to be

comparatively proper for current national conditions considering that the results of the exam remain insusceptible to corruption. For another, its efficiency also get widely acknowledged since millions of candidates get selected by just one event. All these explain why “calls to abolish or fundamentally reform the system have failed so far” (HEGER, 2017, p. 116) for all the attempted measures.

For all the setbacks, the way that individuals try to overcome the intrinsic collective difficulties in their pursuit to higher education presents a reason for which, surprisingly, “never has been a collective effort spanning all social strata to change the status quo”, even though “reports regarding the problems and inequalities in college admission appear in media every year” (HEGER, 2017, p. 128).

By analyzing researches on this topic it is possible to spot two pertinent questions on *gaokao*. The first one is linked with what passing or failing the exam actually indicates. Between these two circumstances exists a sort of chasm, showing two disparate world, which is even more noticeable for the young generation from peripheral provinces or underprivileged classes. Not passing the exam seems to unavoidably reduce career opportunities and send them to a less optimistic future; while being able to stand out in the exam means not only better jobs, but also social mobility for those with an unsatisfactory background. The other question is the prevalent idea that as a rigid system sometimes unfair, *gaokao* is an inevitability that has no alternative with the same degree of efficiency and public acceptance.

This part of the article aims at giving an outlook of particularities of Chinese education system, which, along with its effects are mostly partial or totally unknown to Western countries. It results in personal, family and social competition yet the pursuit of a pleasing result of the exam might actually pose great difficulty to widely implement communicative methods in teaching-learning process. We must not forget that practically the whole schooling is affected by this exam. We can say that *gaokao* is a product peculiar to Chinese society with increasing students at all levels of education, regional, social and economic asymmetries as well as representative cultural traditions. However it is meanwhile an institution reinforcing these features. This forms a cycle seemingly without feasible solution so that every family and student make all efforts to reach a place in a good university.

To fully understand the significance of *gaokao* to Chinese society and its impact on personal and academic experience of undergraduates is fundamental for foreign teachers who teach Chinese. Knowledge about *gaokao* helps to perceive what their students have (or have not) gone through before university as well as the way students embrace their future. When discussing this topic, my students always told me that it is hard to explain all this to a foreigner: the efforts, the pressure, and the sacrifice that *gaokao* represents. I believe it will be difficult to describe these feelings in words, while what is even harder is to depict the context entailing *gaokao* to someone who comes from another educational and socio-cultural background

Same youth as others', but with *Gaokao* as a principal task

After reviewing the literature about *gaokao*, I find it essential to discuss what I have figured out about the influence of this exam on Chinese education system and adolescents' life with some students at Sun Yat-Sen University. The purpose is to discuss how those students feel about the conclusions collated. Although having exchanged my opinions with my students in class occasionally, I decided to gather students native in Canton to confront the main ideas presented by those literature. To this end, I invited five seniors who major in English with Portuguese as their minor. The data used for this study was acquired by means of semi-structured, qualitative interviews conducted with five undergraduate students from SYSU in Zhuhai, Guangdong Province in the fall of 2018. A round table was provided so that students can openly conveyed their viewpoints on topics including the pressure to prepare for the exam, the roles of parents and teachers, their relationship with classmates, and lastly, differences between rural and urban zones together with the issue of provincial quotas set for universities. To make interviewees freely make comments without straying from the point, all the questions follow the guidance of a semi-structured interview (SOUSA; BAPTISTA, 2000, p. 80), which is a method to collect main opinions of an individual or a small group “without time limits and a broad freedom to state their views” (SOUSA; BAPTISTA, 2000, p. 81).

Although some students were more participative, there was agreement on the arguments and personal accounts they presented to a larger extent.

These students affirmed that of three years in high school, the first two years are spent on studying while the final year is entirely for preparation for the exam. As is mentioned by Heger (2017), the planning of going to university begins from *zhongkao*, the exam for high school entrance. Nevertheless, the students said that the preparation along with pressure for college entrance actually starts since primary school because pupils have to take an exam in the final year of primary school to get access to junior secondary school. Candidates with higher marks also have better choices of schools. In this sense, the direct link between performance in exams and possibility of attend better schools has successively existed since the beginning of primary school, which will become the most apparent in *gaokao* and the entry to university.

When it comes to tension associated with *gaokao*, these students conceded being stressed out and pointed out a rise in suicide rate with *gaokao* approaching. One of them recalled that a few years ago she heard of a piece of news that a young student committed suicide at home after being forced by his parents to study hard time and again. They acknowledged feeling exhausted in face of pressure exerted by both parents and teachers, explaining that parents want their children to have a brighter future and save the whole family's face through succeeding in the exam. Therefore there is a widespread saying that *gaokao* is an exam for parents rather than students. Similar opinions can be found in researches of Kan (2013) and Heger (2017).

The students also agreed that pressure of teachers is acute owing to the correlation between their salaries as well as positions and the note of the class under their charge. Questions about whether there is penalty prescribed by professors as described in reports of Larmer (2015) and Ash (2016) are answered affirmatively. For example, if not getting a mark required, students had to do more exercise and tests than others. Besides, teachers usually asked their students to add morning jogging in routine. Those who refused to do so would face more homework and exercises. When asked about activities beside studying, those students said they only have life consisted of studying and sleeping, adding that their teachers prohibited them from reading books unrelated to exam content and any other activities having nothing to do with *gaokao*. But a student offered a fun fact that teachers impose exercise for students to work out and relax. However this is only restricted to jogging or strolling while collective sports like football and basketball are objected to for its risk of causing injuries and hence interrupting preparation for the exam. One of the student recounted that for many times she and her classmates did not want to jog simply out of unwillingness but had to do so, especially in the morning, for otherwise they would be punished. In other words, although physical exercise is supposed to release students' stress, making it mandatory ends to be paradoxical with its benefits. And so, the only activity which is "not studying" also owns an compulsory character.

Another aspect in *gaokao* to take into account is the anxiety that students demonstrate about how their answers in exams will be scored. For example, I once helped a middle school student who was preparing for *zhongkao*. One day she was pretty upset about getting 96% in the English test. Then she showed me his answer sheet and explained to me that the loss of 4% resulted from his unclear handwriting of the letter "v" in "above", which might be misread as a "u". Personally, I did not find any mistake. But the fact was that girl was truly frustrated (with herself) for she had not obtained the maximum note. I told this experience to my interviewees. They considered it to be common and told me that teachers will pay special attention to clear orthography. The clean presentation of answer sheet is vital because every teacher will correct a great amount of sheets. A letter not perfectly legible will take teachers more time to tell, and annoyance like this might influence how they score the answer, sometimes subtracting scores. Preparation for *gaokao* is thoroughly combined with the skill to present answers in a best manner, either in terms of content or format, to delight teachers correcting papers. That is to say, the bother is not merely about writing a text as better as one can, but also the prediction of teachers' correction. It is also for this reason that some authors refer to some students as machines to take exams (WANG; HUANG; SCHNELL, 2013; LARMER, 2015; ASH, 2016).

Concerning the relationship with their colleagues, those students admitted that teachers will encourage students to compete with others. One shared that she had a teacher who kept repeating that "To enter a university you don't have to be the best, but you have to be better than your classmates". Other teachers also reminded the class from time to time that only 20% of them would have the chance to a great university and so everyone must exert their utmost

efforts. Competition among peers is also acknowledged to be normal and one student even said that “friends can be enemies at the same time”. All these opinions are in accordance with studies conducted by Kai (2012), Wang; Huang; Schnell, (2013) and Zhao; Selman; Haste, (2015) on severe pressure induced by *gaokao*.

Then about the exam per se, these students discussed the obligation to conquer the exam of Mathematics even when their aptitudes are for Humanities and Social Sciences. About the regional gap, they approved that major cities do offer greater facility to enter well-acknowledged universities and it is increasingly common to find other ways to access the university, just as Tsegay; Ashraf (2016) and Kan (2013) find out. For more affluent families, this means to study at universities overseas or private faculty whose tuition, according to students, is far more expensive since they are not funded by government. The students highlighted that this is more common in metropolitan city like Canton where better-off families will not necessarily bother about *gaokao* that much. They also said that in major cities there are a variety of contests organized by municipal government on subjects such as Physics, Chemistry, English or Mathematics. Students take part in these contests just to make their admission to universities go more smoothly because winning these contests offers bonus points in *gaokao*. Another significant disparity among different regions referred to is about logistics installed in high schools: urban high schools has Physical and Chemical laboratories, advanced technological equipment and more qualified teachers. A student took her own experience as an example: in a Physics exam she encountered a question on LED illumination, a term which students living in rural villages might not even see in their life.

The poor oral capability of English teachers in rural schools is also mentioned by these students. All factors combined, apart from relative difficulty caused by the quota system in access to university, in most cases, youngsters from countryside also face disadvantages in quality of teachers and lack of sufficient technological support at schools. Still, in favor of what Heger (2017) concludes in her study, these five students thought it hard to find a better solution impervious to corruption dealing with talent selection for higher education. Reasons given for this conclusion is the fierce competition among increasing candidates and the fact that this exam is equal for everyone. Consequently, millions of young Chinese have no alternative but to strive for better, believing that along with the day they pass *gaokao* will come the liberty.

Conclusions

The main conclusions extracted from relevant studies are corroborated by students with more examples of pressure they are subject to, the function of parents and teachers and the regional discrepancy, which metaphorically reflects a race like Formula 1: race tracks are the same for all drivers, they may even have the same skills as drivers, but the quality and investment made by the race teams in the cars they drive make them take a clear advantage over

others. To be specific, while all the racing teams share the same rules, some drivers enjoy an evidently advantage with respect to investment and quality of the team they belong to. Out of all the extrinsic factors, students in rural areas perseveringly work hard to reach a podium finish and prove that they are excellent racers.

My home is right situated in front of a junior secondary school where I can regularly see students smoking around the corner, buying snacks or dating in cafes. After all, they are just like young people as in so many other parts of the world. Considering the Chinese cultural principles and values which involve education and the image of students, the duty to pass *gaokao* (with high scores) does pose unmeasurable impact on life of young Chinese students. It is by no means a pure coincidence that when asked about how they felt after their *gaokao* came to an end, they unanimously described it as “an escape from prison” or “termination of captivity”.

Chinese students’ capability or dedication to study have been well-presented and won recognition among professors home and abroad. However, for many times, foreign teachers remark that Chinese students depend too much on textbooks or they are not good at teamwork (Doyle, 2005, Li, 1999). But in fact they are just accustomed to view their colleagues not as mates or partners but someone who they have to forcefully rival with. *Gaokao* has affected teaching methods and the way students learn (Liu, 2016) undeniably through not only what it demands but also what it criticizes and forbids. Probably foreign teachers have heard of the word “*gaokao*”. Still, there may be a considerable need of understanding about how it influence students in various aspects. To study the particularities of Chinese students’ learning pattern compared with those from western countries and analyze communicative approach in language teaching in China, we should not ignore the decisive role of *gaokao* – the most emblematic one among countless exams over their academic journey and likely the most influential element in Chinese education system.

So frequently have we discussed cultural differences, we still sometimes tend to forget practical or logistic issues for each country. There are about 70 million of senior secondary school students in China (Ministry of Education of the PRC, 2017), overall more than the population of most European countries. In recent years, articles about the success of Chinese students frequently grab headlines all over the world. It is by highlighting personal hard-work that China manage to enhance quality and equality in different levels of education nationwide. This vast country is perseveringly trying to figure out these long-existing problems every day aware that life is a long run, as Confucius taught.

Lastly, it is worthwhile reflecting on following questions: Is there a better and more impartial method to qualify students for university in countries with territory so broad and a population so large? Assuming that most youngsters in Western countries have to devote all their adolescence to prepare for a college entrance exam which neglects everything beside study, their academic progress driven by fierce competition and consecutive tests, will the way

they lead their personal and academic life be so different from Eastern students?

In the future, other questions may be asked and other answers may be sought regarding the Chinese students' schooling background, bearing in mind that before making comparisons it is necessary to know and understand the intrinsic issues of each culture.

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