

Education Review

Reseñas Educativas



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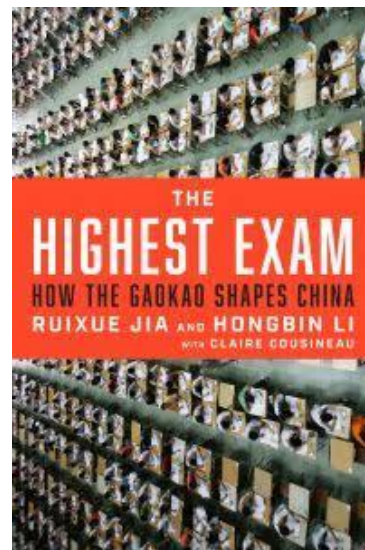
Jia, R., & Li, H., with Cousineau, C. (2025). *The highest exam: How the gaokao shapes China*. Harvard University Press.

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“Are kings, dukes, generals, and ministers born to their station?” Two thousand years ago, Chen Sheng’s question tore a hole in the legitimacy of inherited privilege. In the centuries since, Chinese society has answered that question in different ways: through the imperial examination system, through the radical educational expansions of the 1950s and 1960s that brought working-class and peasant children into elite universities, and through the gaokao that continues to function for millions of families as the last remaining channel for social advancement.



In *The Highest Exam*, the authors have produced a landmark contribution to the study of Chinese education and its global reverberations. Drawing on decades of empirical research and their own lived experiences of the gaokao gauntlet, the authors offer the first book-length, data-driven account for a general audience of China’s national college entrance examination. The book’s organising framework—that China’s education system operates as a “centralized hierarchical tournament”—is both analytically powerful and narratively compelling, transforming a sprawling subject into a coherent structure (p. 7). The volume is extremely timely, arriving as US-China technological competition mounts, American universities reconsider admissions, and the global debate over meritocracy, standardised testing, and affirmative action intensifies. Its interdisciplinary ambition—bridging economics, political science, sociology and education—opens valuable avenues for future research. The book will undoubtedly become essential reading for scholars of comparative education, political economy, and contemporary Chinese society. But if Chen Sheng’s question remains open, so too does the question of whether the book’s own framework fully captures the answers China has given it.

The authors' empirical contribution is substantial. Through quasi-experimental methods and large-scale administrative data—including the Chinese College Student Survey and the China Employer-Employee Survey—they demonstrate that the gaokao is far from the meritocratic equaliser it is popularly understood to be (pp. 20, 60–66). Regional quotas and the hukou system advantage urban students long before they sit for the examination. They illuminate the rational foundations of what appears to outsiders as “obsessive” behaviour: the financial and social benefits of an elite education are so vast that families are behaving perfectly rationally when they devote immense resources to the pursuit of a high score (pp. 40–43). Drawing on twin studies, they show that 70 per cent of the return to education in China comes from selection effects rather than human capital accumulation (pp. 82–84); using a regression discontinuity design, they find that one point above the cut-off for an elite college generates a 40 per cent wage premium (pp. 84–85). They demonstrate that the Chinese elite college access gap between the wealthiest and poorest quintiles is 2.3-fold, whereas the equivalent figure in the United States is 11-fold (p. 72). Equally telling is what this apparatus leaves untouched: Bourdieu, the natural interlocutor for any account of educational consecration, appears only once in the book, in a footnote (p. 97, n. 3). The dialogue with *The State Nobility* that the book's own findings invite—what is a “signal” that follows its bearer for decades, if not a consecration mechanism?—never takes place. These are significant contributions that will inform scholarship for years to come.

Yet for all its considerable strengths, *The Highest Exam* invites a more searching engagement with several of its foundational assumptions. The book's data affirm its efficiency—PISA scores, social mobility—yet the text frames this efficiency as pathological—as “obsession” or a “zero-sum tournament”—implying that such efficiency is purchased at the cost of collective pathology, that the Chinese have, in effect, chosen pathology for measurable mobility. What is lost in this framing is any recognition that this “obsession” might be a historically contingent response to a specific opportunity structure. The authors' lexicon exhibits this asymmetry. China is diagnosed with “weak institutions” and “obsession” (p. 13), whereas the United States is described through “holistic” and “intangible” measures (pp. 14, 196). Framing is never neutral (Simons, 1994): it invites the reader to see the Chinese system as pathological and the American system as refined. This asymmetry serves a larger purpose: to frame the gaokao less as a cultural institution with its own historical logic and more as an instrument of state control.

The authors' contention that the gaokao serves the ruler—“in today's day and age, the CCP”—as “a powerful political tool” (p. 111) is, while analytically coherent, only part of a more complex story. To be fair, the authors do acknowledge—if only in passing—that the system “secures buy-in from the masses year after year” and that rulers “must carefully weigh the repercussions” of any change, since education is the one arena in which China's people reliably protest (pp. 110–111). Yet this recognition remains undertheorised. The cultural depth of the examination—its imperial roots,

its resonance with Confucian values about learning and self-cultivation, its function as a site of meaning rather than merely a mechanism of control—deserves more attention (pp. 23–25, 31–36, 97–100). For hundreds of millions of Chinese families, the gaokao is not experienced—at least not primarily—as a directive from Beijing; it is experienced as a personal and communal rite of passage, a rare ladder of hope in a changing society. To reduce this cultural inheritance to a tool of the Party is to mistake the shadow for the substance. This reductive framing carries analytic weight; nowhere are its consequences more visible than in the authors’ treatment of the hukou system.

The authors present the hukou system as a fixed pillar of institutional deficiency (pp. 60–66). Yet the system has undergone successive reforms aimed at loosening the link between social services and hukou status. By treating the hukou as a static pathology, the authors’ framework locks China into a narrative of institutional failure that their own evidence—including findings on rising social mobility—does not fully sustain.

The same methodological problems recur in the authors’ treatment of history and comparison. The book traces the imperial examination system carefully (pp. 31–36, 97–100), yet this historical consciousness abruptly ceases when the analysis turns to the contemporary period. The authors do not ask two important questions. What different historical tasks did China’s pre-1977 admissions system serve? How do those tasks differ from the post-1977 gaokao? Consider the documentary record. In 1952, worker-peasant children constituted just over 20 per cent of new university enrolments; by 1965, that figure had risen to more than 70 per cent (Liang et al., 2012; Yang, 2003). These figures belong to a history the book invokes but does not interrogate. If fairness is understood as the historical realisation of particular groups’ interests under specific conditions, then the 1965 admissions system was, for worker-peasant families, eminently fair. But if fairness is decontextualised competition at any given moment, the same system was profoundly unfair to former elites. The authors adopt the latter framework without acknowledging that it is a choice, and a choice that carries specific normative commitments. When they judge China by an individualist yardstick (psychological strain, familial anxiety) and America by a class-structural one (legacy advantage, wealth effect), they are applying two different criteria without informing the reader that a shift has occurred. Both yardsticks are legitimate; but their unannounced alternation leaves the reader uncertain whether the comparison is about efficiency, humanity, or something else entirely.

The same analytical narrowing proves far more problematic in the book’s treatment of the internal plurality of Chinese public discourse. The authors frame the domestic debate largely in the register of rational adaptation, compressing a fractious national conversation into a single register. Three voices—two from outside the book, one from within—together constitute a far richer picture than the tournament frame allows. Zhang Xuefeng, an education influencer, built his following on the claim that

the gaokao's fairness ends at the score, and that inequality begins with the "information wall"—the opaque maze of admissions and career data that confounds ordinary families (*The New York Times*, 2026). In contrast, Bai Yansong, a CCTV veteran, in a well-known 2011 speech, defends the gaokao as the last fair channel for social advancement: "Without the gaokao, can you compete with the children of the rich?" Between these poles lies the figure of the "xiaozhen zuotijia"—the "small-town swot" (pp. 57–58), a figure that through Jia's narrative, functions as personal testimony rather than as structural critique. The swot's discovery registers as individual dislocation, not systemic indictment—a question the book does not fully ask: what happens when a systemic failure is systematically misrecognised as an individual one? The "swot" finds a distant echo in Paul Willis's (1977) "lads"—working-class schoolboys who rejected schooling yet arrived at the same reproduction of class through the very mechanism that promised escape. Together, these three voices reveal a society divided over what the gaokao means as lived experience, not just as policy. The authors' analytical lens would benefit from fuller engagement with this internal plurality.

What this book ultimately invites—perhaps unintentionally—is a rethinking of what we mean by "equality" in educational contexts. The authors' own evidence—that China's elite college access gap is 2.3-fold compared with 11-fold in the United States, further underscored by Chetty et al.'s (2017) finding that the top 1 per cent of children are 77 times more likely to attend an Ivy-Plus college than those from the bottom quintile—suggests that, by a distributive measure, the Chinese system is more equal than its American counterpart. But the authors' rhetorical apparatus consistently frames this advantage as a form of "pathological efficiency." They do not reconcile these two judgments; they let them sit in unresolved tension. This tension is not a failure of scholarship; it is, rather, the book's most revealing contribution. It exposes that the pursuit of educational fairness, however noble, may ultimately be a pursuit of a more palatable inequality, rather than equality itself. The Chinese system makes inequality palatable through transparency; the American through inclusion. Both are devices for rendering inequality acceptable. Neither delivers what it promises. This is where the authors' own sensibility of '悲天悯人' (beitian minren)—a disposition, deeply rooted in the Chinese literati tradition, to bear the world's sorrow before enjoying its comforts—becomes both its moral strength and its analytical limitation. The authors are themselves products of the system they dissect: Li moved from a factory floor to Stanford; Jia travelled from a rural village to a California faculty position. Their success makes them acutely sensitive to the system's cruelty. Yet this survivor's conscience also constitutes a cognitive limitation: it allows them to see the tears of the "losers" while blurring the face of those for whom the system once opened doors—the worker-peasant cohorts of 1952–1965 among them.

The Highest Exam succeeds admirably in drawing scholarly attention to one of the world's most consequential educational institutions. It is precisely because the book is so thought-provoking that it invites such careful

engagement with its assumptions. Future work might build on this solid foundation to ask more difficult questions about fairness, power, and the future of meritocracy itself—questions that require a broader comparative lens and closer attention to the voices the tournament frame excludes.

Two thousand years on, Chen Sheng's question—“Are kings, dukes, generals, and ministers born to their station?”—reverberates still. It returns to each generation not because an answer has not been found, but because the question itself is the point: not arriving at justice but insisting on asking.

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About the Reviewer

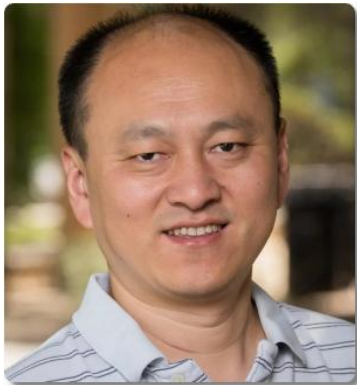
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