

EDUCATION

Pencils up More than 12,000 students take exams on the playground of a school in the Chinese city of Baoji last November

CHINA'S BIG TEST

CHEATING ALLEGATIONS DOG CHINESE STUDENTS APPLYING TO U.S. COLLEGES—BUT THE REALITY IS MORE COMPLEX **BY EMILY RAUHALA/BEIJING**





Quiz show From left: A Chinese officer monitors an exam room; equipment used for cheating; Chinese students rally before taking the gaokao

XU QING DID EVERYTHING YOU are supposed to do if you're a mainland Chinese student who wants to get into a U.S. university. The 18-year-old former figure skater made it into one of the best public high schools in Beijing and kept her grades up. She spent hours streaming episodes of the teen drama *Gossip Girl* so that her American accent would be prep-school-perfect when she landed at her dream school, New York City's Barnard College. When it came time for the SAT, she studied "like crazy," took the test on Oct. 11, 2014, and waited anxiously for her scores.

For Xu and many others, it would be a long wait. In October of last year, the College Board, the U.S. nonprofit that runs the SAT, and its administrator and security provider, Educational Testing Service (ETS), confirmed what the rumor mill had suspected: the Board was withholding the scores of all those in China and South Korea who took the Oct. 11 SAT. In an email that started "Dear Test Taker," the College Board told the students that their SAT results would be "delayed because they are under administrative review."

The Board did not say exactly how long the delay would last or how many students were affected—but the specter of cheating soon appeared. In an email reply to an

interview request from TIME, ETS spokesman Thomas Ewing declined to share specific information about what went wrong in October. "As organizations and individuals attempt new ways of illegally obtaining and sharing test materials for their own profit or benefit, we consistently enhance our test security measures," he wrote. "The information we obtain from investigations and administrative reviews is critical to preventing future security breaches."

With early admissions or "early action" deadlines for many elite colleges just around the corner, Chinese students were left in the dark, wondering if their scores would make it to their top-choice schools before application decisions were made. Assurances from ETS that the scores would be released as quickly as possible did little to calm nerves among parents, students and the small army of tutors and test-prep firms devoted to getting foreign applicants into U.S. schools. Said Nancy Li, a senior manager at New Oriental, one of China's biggest test-prep outfits: "Everyone is stressed."

Stressed is an understatement. The SAT cheating scandal landed in the middle of a roiling debate about the growing number of international students—and particularly students from mainland China—applying to U.S. schools. Thanks to rising incomes and tight competition for spots

at top Chinese universities, and the belief that an elite U.S. education opens doors around the world, the total number of Chinese students in the U.S. reached more than 270,000 in 2013–14, up 16.5% year on year. Chinese students now account for 31% of foreign students in the U.S.—the largest group by far. Even as China's top leaders denounce "Western values" in education, they are quietly sending their own kids abroad: President Xi Jinping's daughter attended Harvard.

In general, U.S. institutions stand to gain. A broader applicant pool gives admissions officers more choice and schools more diversity. And there are the mercenary benefits—international students tend to pay higher tuition than their American peers. Chinese students in U.S. colleges and universities contributed about \$8 billion to the U.S. economy last year, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce.

But with U.S. college admissions more competitive than ever—Harvard admitted just 5.9% of applicants for the class of 2018—there is a perception that wealthy Chinese students are somehow taking the rightful place of American applicants. The sentiment echoes the panic in the 1980s about supposedly superior Japanese students, says Yong Zhao, an education expert and the author of *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Dragon? Why China Has the Best (and Worst)*

Education System in the World. "There's always been an uneasy relationship with East Asia," he says. "Parents and students are worried it is somehow not fair."

Stories of cheating in China only add to those suspicions. The College Board has acknowledged instances of fraud on SAT and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) exams, and admissions officers have found examples of fake transcripts and evidence of ghostwritten letters of reference. Shady agents typically use one of two methods to game the system, according to people in the industry: Some take advantage of time-zone differences by sending test takers to sit the exam in, say, Sydney. They memorize the questions and then send them electronically to those taking the test in Seoul or Hong Kong. Others avail themselves of a loophole experts say is created by the ETS's alleged use of tests previously employed in the U.S.

These are real problems that are challenging admissions officers and educators alike, especially as the number of Chinese applicants continues to soar each year. But U.S. admissions experts say fraud is the exception, not the rule. "The vast majority of Chinese students never cheat," says Eddie West, director of international initiatives for the U.S.-based National Association for College Admission Counseling, an industry group with some 14,000 members from

around the world. "And they are rightly worried about being unfairly implicated."

For all the concern that Chinese students are somehow getting an undue edge on college admissions, it's wrong to tar them all as cheaters. There needs to be a conversation about how to best select, welcome and support students from abroad, says Peter Briggs, an international-education expert who retired in 2014 as director of the Office for International Students and Scholars at Michigan State University. "Yes, there are challenges, but there are also opportunities, and the U.S.-China relationship is one of the most important in the world."

Testing Times

YOU DON'T HAVE TO LOOK HARD TO FIND stories of test fraud in China. Tales of cheating rings—and the upright local officials who inevitably bust them—are regular features in the local press. Last fall, some 2,440 pharmacy students were caught in a sophisticated answer-buying scheme that involved wireless earpieces and "electronic erasers" designed to transmit information to test takers. After last year's national college-entrance exam, known as the *gaokao*, local media published a slide show of the most spy-worthy gear, prompting headlines about devices—like a pen that can photograph and trans-

mit questions to an outside party—that "put the KGB to shame."

Within this cheaters' hall of fame—or shame—the story of Zhongxiang, a city in central Hubei province, has become legendary. For years, the town had a reputation for good scores on the *gaokao*—suspiciously good scores. Skeptical officials brought in nonlocal proctors to watch over the 2013 test, which ended up sparking a riot. Outraged at the special supervision, more than 2,000 people, mostly parents, gathered near the exam hall, trapping investigators inside. Their rallying cry: "It's not fair unless we cheat." Parents were so desperate for high scores, and so convinced that everyone else was cheating, that they saw fraud as the only way to level the playing field.

The parents had a point. Standardized testing has a long history in China. For some 2,000 years, jobs in the highly regarded civil service were awarded to those who performed best on nationwide exams. The tests were faulted for promoting a narrow type of learning but had the benefit of being fairly meritocratic. In theory, they offered students the chance to improve their lives.

The *gaokao* offers the same elusive promise but with even higher stakes. China is much richer today, and because of China's one-child policy, a family's chance to change its fortune often rests on

PREVIOUS PAGES: CHINA/FOOTPRESS/GETTY IMAGES; THESE PAGES: FROM LEFT: QAO BOYUAN—IMAGINECHINA/AP; REUTERS; RAN NAN—IMAGINECHINA/AP

the shoulders of a single child. Prepping for the vital test starts early and dominates most of a child's education. While U.S. colleges gauge several factors when evaluating candidates—grades, essays, letters of recommendation, extracurricular activities—Chinese universities usually admit students based solely on *gaokao* results.

That might sound fairer, but the *gaokao* is not exactly an equalizer. The quality of education in China varies widely by region, and from city to countryside. Students at better schools have a better shot at success. Elite institutions like Beijing's Peking and Tsinghua universities reserve more spaces for applicants from the capital, putting candidates from the provinces at a further disadvantage. In 2014, Peking admitted 0.28%, or 200, of Beijing's 70,500 high school students, but only 0.02%, or 143, from the nearby province of Shandong's 657,000-strong graduating class.

A Chinese student's entire life can ride on test results alone. "It is a legacy of the old imperial exams—that it's not about what you can do but about the piece of paper that says you can do it," says Yong Zhao, the educator and author. In what Zhao calls an "authoritarian" system, it's not surprising that the option of cheating would be so tempting.

But to American parents worried about Common Core tests and students anxious over their AP scores, the U.S. system—and how teachers and students respond to it—may not seem so different. In 2012, about 70 students were forced to withdraw from Harvard for a year after they were caught cheating on a take-home exam. On April 1, 11 former Atlanta public school employees were found guilty for their role in a major cheating scandal that involved changing answers on standardized tests to boost student scores. "Here was a case of rampant cheating by adults," says Zhao. "It's not a Chinese thing. It's about the system."

The Admissions Arms Race

ON THE OFFICE WALLS OF THE CHINESE test-prep and admissions company Tiandao hang eight colorful pennants, for Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Brown and the University of Pennsylvania. When families first arrive, they often know little more about colleges in the U.S. than the names on those flags and the group those schools belong to: the Ivy League, which is the families' end goal.

For families with no experience outside China's single-criterion admissions system, the U.S. college-application process is daunting. Test-prep coaches help bridge the gap, teaching families about the different types of colleges and universities and impressing upon them that admission to U.S. schools is not just about SAT results but about crafting a multifaceted pitch, including extracurricular activities like sports, hobbies and volunteer work.

It's not always easy to translate—literally. Eric Xiao, assistant to the president of Tiandao, uses recommendation letters as an illustration. For U.S. students, recommendation letters are standard practice, and teachers, guidance counselors and coaches are usually happy to oblige. Chinese high school teachers are not always so keen. When students ask, teachers often demur, saying they are not sure what to write. Quite often, the student writes a letter and simply has the teacher sign it. "It's a different process," says Xiao. "But most students want to get it right."

And so, of course, do their parents. Like their U.S. peers, a growing number of Chinese families are willing to pay dearly for top-flight admissions help. Services range from test-prep companies not unlike, say, Princeton Review to private tutors charging rates comparable to top firms in New York. (Think hundreds of dollars per hour.) The most elite coaches work with families for years at a time, plotting a course of study and extracurricular activities, even accompanying families on tours of U.S. college campuses. They sometimes charge tens of thousands of dollars.

One test-prep firm, U.S.-based ArborBridge, recently launched a partnership with ChaseFuture, an admissions outfit based in China. The venture aims to switch the emphasis from "hacking the test" to learning skills that will carry students through the SAT and into college, says ArborBridge co-founder Andrew Finn. "If you get into a school you shouldn't get into, you are not going to do well, and it's not going to be a good experience. But you work your way in, when you go to school, and things are hard, you will know you can do it."

Not all admissions companies play fair. The industry is fast-growing and largely unregulated. For every few first-rate advisers, there's a crook. Nancy Li, the manager at New Oriental, says some self-proclaimed admissions coaches are scam artists look-



Cross culture
Niu, now studying at Columbia University, helped launch a web series about Chinese college students

ing to make a quick buck. They promise good SAT scores or admittance to a top school in exchange for cash. If they don't run off with the money—it happens—they deliver results by helping students cheat on tests or forge transcripts. Pulling out her phone, she flips through images of text messages and emails that her students have received from test-prep fraudsters promising answers in advance and guaranteeing too-good-to-be-true scores.

"My students work so hard, and others cheat," she says. "It makes me so angry."

Making the Grade

CECILIA MIAO IS ONE OF THOSE HONEST, hardworking Chinese students. When she boarded her flight to the U.S., she was ready for a challenge. Raised by newly middle-class parents in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou, Miao was looking for an education that could open doors for her entire family. She wanted full immersion into what she imagined was the real American college experience: a small city, cold weather and campus pride. She found

all three at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where she landed in 2009.

Even for an adventurer like Miao, American college life was a shock. Her English scores were excellent, but her classmates used words that they don't teach at TOEFL prep and spoke so quickly that it was hard to keep up at first. In Chinese high schools, she says, the teacher talked and students listened and memorized. Her social-science classes at Madison were all about crafting arguments and participating in debate.

With help from a friendly roommate and dedicated teaching assistants, Miao quickly got up to speed socially and academically. But other Chinese classmates continued to struggle, and she noticed a distance between them and their U.S.-born peers, so much so that she and two friends started a web series, Channel C, aimed at exploring what it's like to be a mainland Chinese student at a U.S. college.

Co-founder Isabelle Niu, a Shanghai native who is now studying journalism at Columbia University, says the goal is to

start a conversation between Chinese and U.S. students—to get some awkward questions out of the way. In one video, "Why Don't Chinese Students Speak English?," Cecilia and her co-founders talk candidly about the challenge of conversing in a second (or third or fourth) language and working through the politics of foreign culture in a U.S. university setting. (Example: if you speak a different language in an elevator, everyone will assume you are talking about them.) The video struck a chord. It has been watched some 250,000 times and generated a comment thread of more than a thousand posts.

The video is precisely what U.S. colleges need, says Briggs, the retired director of Michigan State's office for international students. Though the number of fraudulent or suspicious test scores from China seems to be on the rise, the total number of cases is still proportionately small, he says. Lost in the panic over fraudulent tests are more challenging questions about the growing internationalization of U.S. universities. Schools and their administrators need to

remember that international students are more than just sources of money: "This is a development that should be prized."

Settling Scores

WHEN NEWS OF LAST OCTOBER'S SAT scandal broke, people across the industry pledged that the allegations would be investigated fairly. West, of the National Association for College Admission Counseling, said his message to admissions officers was to "extend flexibility" to make sure no Chinese or South Korean students were disadvantaged. ETS says it released most scores as quickly as possible.

That's good news for this year's college hopefuls. But stopping another admissions scandal may prove tough. The scores of an unknown number of international students who took the January 2015 test were also withheld, due to what ETS called a "potential security violation." Spokesperson Ewing again declined to discuss the nature of the security breach and did not address questions about whether or not ETS reused U.S. tests in East Asia, as those in the test-prep industry allege.

With Chinese authorities focused on administering their own national entrance exam—mainland Chinese students have to take the SATs outside the country—U.S. admissions officers need to do a better job of verifying the information they're getting from foreign applicants. Some schools are taking advantage of video conferencing to carry out informal interviews rather than merely taking note of a student's SAT and English-proficiency scores. That discourages fraud and rewards the applicants who have the skills needed to make it in a U.S. university. "More and more are looking seriously at ways to verify English standards and are getting to know Chinese high schools," says West. "In the future, they will be relying on professional judgment, not just tests."

U.S. colleges can help by emphasizing to parents and students that there is more to education than scores. "When Chinese students apply to U.S. universities, they have false illusions—they think admission is the final objective," says Xiong Bingqi, vice president of 21st Century Education Research Center, a Chinese think tank. "In fact that is the beginning."

And speaking of new beginnings: Xu Qing eventually got her score, and it was good. She'll start at Barnard in the fall. —WITH REPORTING BY GU YONGQIANG/BEIJING ■