How has the recommendation (bao song) system changed the perception of the objective of education among Chinese upper middle school students seeking admission to universities?

Shin Yuan Tan, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
How has the recommendation (bao song) system changed the perception of the objective of education among Chinese upper middle school students seeking admission to universities?
INTRODUCTION

The institution of the household registration (hukou) system in 1958, with the initial intention to curb urban-rural migration within China, has caused stratification of the society as it appears inevitable that one’s origins remains decisive in determining one’s path in life. The host of benefits available to those who have access to a wide range of services make the urban hukou remain attractive to people who seek to liberate themselves from the poverty cycle of having a rural hukou. Throughout the past several decades, as education has become an increasingly important mobility channel, higher education has remained one of the few direct channels whereby rural people could obtain an urban hukou.

Even though the National College Entrance Examinations is widely accepted as an adequate and objective tool to select students for university admission, there had been intense debates over the effectiveness of these examinations at capturing academic talents. The abundant studies conducted by scholars to discuss its inherent weaknesses largely focused on how the examinations have created disparities among upper middle school students from different cities and provinces within China and how the education reforms of 1999 have failed to bridge these disparities, and proposed alternative methods to better determine academic talents. Wang (2010) captured and summarized the issues surrounding the fairness of the National College Entrance Examinations very well by analyzing and thereafter concluding that despite all these debates, objective tests are still fair in the sense that it supports equal rights to higher education even though policies designed to benefit the public rather than the individual have not been effectively implemented. Indeed, the National College Entrance Examinations have managed to stay largely intact over the few decades since its re-implementation in 1977.
The re-implementation of the National College Entrance Examinations has led scholars to harbor high hopes of it being able to resolve disparities within China. Few have realized that the disparities these examinations were thought to be able to resolve are a product of the hukou system instead. In 1986, the recommendation (bao song) system was re-launched with the initial intention of providing an alternative route for admission to universities other than through the National College Entrance Examinations. However, the frequent abuses by those who leverage on the undying features of the Chinese civilization of guanxi and personal connections, especially after the 1999 education reform which many scholars have condemned as one that has exacerbated the disparities within China, has meant that the recommendation system has rarely been studied from an objective point of view with regards to how it has changed the perception of the importance of education.
THE RECOMMENDATION SYSTEM OF DIRECT UNIVERSITY ADMISSION

The Weaknesses of the National College Entrance Examinations

The main complaints of the National College Entrance Examinations can be widely classified into two categories. The more important issue that has attracted a lot of attention over the years is the disparity in terms of college entrance scores. The entrance score for upper middle school graduates to get admitted to the same university can differ quite a lot as it is based on one’s hukou. In her case study of China’s College Admission criteria, Wang (2005) included a table of the different admission scores for upper middle school graduates from different provinces in China and compared these scores with the national average in her discussion of the strong hukou-based discrimination in China’s college admissions. College admission scores for upper middle school graduates from heavily populated coastal provinces such as Hebei, Zhejiang and Shandong and interior provinces such as Hunan, Jiangxi and Henan can be as much as 30% higher than for other provinces. The admission scores for students from the autonomous regions that are heavily populated by minority groups are lower than the national average for political reasons rather than to make access to higher education easier for these students. However, a more interesting observation is that students from the four metropolises enjoy such ‘discounts’ to their college admission scores as well. This is in addition to the biasness in quota allocation that clearly favours these major urban centres. This has led scholars such as Zhen (1993) to stress on the need for a general admission examination for colleges and universities with uniform criteria across all regions and provinces in China. The circumstances surrounding the case of three upper middle school graduates from Shandong province who sued the Ministry of Education for such discrimination as narrated by Zhang (2010) also serves as a classic reminder to the state that there ought to be fairness without any regards to one’s hukou in the system.
Another concern that has served to justify the need for alternative routes for admission to universities is the overemphasis on the National College Entrance Examinations. Modeled after the imperial civil-service examination (keju) system before 1906, the chance to obtain a college degree and the economic and social advancement that follows, in addition to the urban hukou for students from the rural and less developed areas if one manages to eventually graduate from a state-accredited college, makes the National Entrance Examination a precious ticket to social mobility. An annual event of a scale comparable to the mass movement of people during the Lunar New Year, it is no wonder these examinations have attracted nationwide concern. The importance of this precious ticket for young Chinese upper middle school graduates to gain upward mobility in a stratified society cannot be understated and is thus a topic of much debate and concern. The wide range of subjects these applicants have to do sufficiently well in during these examinations in order to be considered for college admission is similar to those in other countries, but the impact of the examination scores on the future of individuals and their families in a nation marked with social inequality means that these examinations cannot be taken lightly.

The weaknesses in the National College Entrance Examinations has led many scholars to conduct research into its in/effectiveness at selecting academically outstanding students for admission to prestigious universities in the major cities such as the municipalities of Beijing and Shanghai and the sub-provincial city of Nanjing. Liu and Wu (2006) gave a balanced view of these examinations by analyzing both the positive and negative consequences from the educational as well as from the societal perspectives. In their study, social differences within China were found to be the basis upon which a testing and competitive culture is built on, and despite all the feedback about the weaknesses of such examinations, they have been providing a reliable and objective tool for selection of the most
academically outstanding students for admission to universities in the absence of any better yardstick.

According to various scholars, the Chinese college expansion in 1999, which aimed to encourage spending on higher education by reducing subsidies, not only did not solve the issues inherent within the system of National College Entrance Examinations but have worsened inequality. Yang (2007) believed that the dilemma in attempting to apply a capitalistic form of governance into a socialist system shows that there is a need to focus on local policies instead of being steered solely by globalization, while the head-to-toe analysis of the situation provided by Chan and Ngok (2011) acknowledges the decentralization of funding responsibility to local governments has not only impoverished the students financially but has also reproduced social inequality instead of promoting social mobility since it has not managed to improve access to the good universities. Yang (2010) and Wang (2011) both recognized the impact of the expansion on increasing gross college enrolment to higher education but stressed that such an expansion has doing nothing to bridge regional disparities, socioeconomic inequalities and the rural and urban divide. The latter even went on to highlight its impact on improving higher education opportunities for the minority groups and female students on one hand and its tendency to localize university enrolment and provide heightened opportunities for advantaged social classes on the other.

Has the National College Entrance Examination Changed the True Significance of Education?

But where does the significance in excelling these examinable subjects lie? The aim of a ten or twelve year compulsory education is to expose students to a wide range of subjects so as to uncover their interest and/or strength in a particular subject area. Higher education beyond it is more about ‘depth’ than ‘width’, and the wide range of subjects in the National
College Entrance Examinations gives the system no credit by discouraging learning and specialization, summarized implicitly and appropriately by Liao (1993) in his paper: ‘what students learn depends on what teachers teach, and what teachers teach depends on what is in the National College Entrance Examinations’. On learning, the examinations do not comprise any element of continual assessment which learning should be primarily concerned with. Students who consistently do well in monthly tests and annual examinations and are attentive during class are not credited with their consistent effort as the National College Entrance Examinations is a stand-alone assessment. Even though this may appear to be a minor concern, the ‘once-a-year’ nature of the National College Entrance Examinations that is capable of affecting many families’ future makes it almost like a one-in-a-lifetime event, which undermines the primary aim of education to satisfy the thirst for knowledge and encourage lifetime learning rather than pre-examination cramming of textbook information.

On specialization, the wide range of subjects college applicants must do well in to put them up for consideration for college admission has little relation to what they choose to specialize once they are admitted. At the upper middle school level, many of the examinable subjects still focuses very much on fundamental knowledge and has little relevance to working as well as everyday life. This goes to provide a plausible explanation to the concerns of recent Chinese graduates who cannot find jobs in which they can put the knowledge and talents they possess to good use. The overemphasis on textbook knowledge at this level of learning, with little or no weight on implementation, practicality and social relations, rather than on independent learning instead whereby teachers and professors provide guidance for further research than spoon-feed students with knowledge that is already known, may be a consequence of the parochial rural environment from which Chinese modern society came about and has resulted in the general lack of creativity not only in Chinese manufactured products but in Chinese society as a whole as well.
All in all, the structure of education leading up to the annual National College Entrance Examinations and beyond have major roles to play in accounting for the millions of college degrees handed out to graduates which are hardly recognized in other parts of the world. Besides those who found their way to the really prestigious universities in China through the use of connections, upper middle school graduates who eventually make it to these institutions are either truly smart (and industrious) or intelligent enough to make use of the inherent weaknesses in the National College Entrance Examinations (as mentioned above) to achieve their aims of getting themselves admitted.

The Recommendation System as an Alternative

Initially introduced to provide an alternative route to university, the recommendation system seeks to facilitate the admission of two main groups of students who are unlikely to excel in the present structure of the National College Entrance Examinations as a result of its fundamental weaknesses – those who have shown plenty of promise, passion and academic excellence in a particular narrow field of study but who are not well-rounded enough to obtain high scores at the National College Entrance Examinations, and those who are conscientious in their schoolwork and attentive during class but somehow, for one reason or another, do not perform up to expectations when being assessed in an objective manner. The weaknesses of the recommendation system have been consistently exploited by schools and the well-off. Li ‘s (2008) article mentioned that the unquantifiable nature of criteria for students to be recommended for direct admission to institutes of higher learning have made the system subjected to abuse by both well-off and well-connected parents who leverage on their official positions in the county or positions in the upper middle schools to send their academically much weaker children to prestigious universities in Beijing. On the other hand, upper middle schools have taken advantage of the weaknesses within the system to recommend ‘second-rate’ students for direct admission to universities. By treating the upper
middle schools as business entities, the best students would be sent to take the National College Entrance Examinations as a marketing ploy to attract more parents to send their children to these schools to pursue high-school education. Not only would this give an impression that these upper middle schools have many students who are good enough to be considered for direct university admission through the recommendation system, the status of the upper middle school would be glorified further by the potentially excellent results their best students would obtain from the National College Entrance Examinations. The response from the Ministry of Education to include specified and quantified criteria for recommending students for direct admission to universities have been met with skepticism as it is no different to the National College Entrance Examinations due to its reliance on a scoring mechanism.

This initiative has made more academically excellent but unconfident upper middle school students decide not to take the risk of putting their hopes on the annual National College Entrance Examinations. Instead they have acceded to the requirements of the recommendation system by taking part in numerous competitions and contests to accumulate titles such as ‘The Winner at a Mathematics Olympiad’ in order to enhance their status and standing to boost their chances of being selected for direct admission to universities. It is probably understandable that these students would prefer to take the low-risk but tedious route to get admitted to universities, but taking into consideration the manner in which these upper middle schools have abused the recommendation system, it appears that many of these academically excellent students have somehow taken up the entitlements of those students who are genuinely passionate about a particular area of study and would willingly take part in such academic competitions and contests but may not score well in the National College Entrance Examinations.
CONCLUSION

Despite all the debates over the weaknesses within the National College Entrance Examinations and the recommendation system, the study conducted by Bai, C.-E., Chi, W. & Qian, X. (2013) with data obtained from two universities in China found that both systems have largely met their expectations of producing undergraduates with high GPA. The results of this study seem to have managed to paper over the cracks within the systems in terms of how they have changed the perceptions and motivations of upper middle school students by producing good academic results.

Through interviews with current undergraduates studying in prestigious universities in Beijing who have benefitted from the recommendation system, this paper seeks to uncover the intentions and motivations behind these students choosing such a route to get admitted into universities. The unintended consequences these interviews try to uncover are: has competition in the National College Entrance Examinations made the recommendation system of gaining direct admission to universities so appealing that they have changed their area of interest? As a consequence, has their perception of the true value of education changed as well?

The interview seeks to answer the following questions that could help us assess if the unintended consequences have taken place: have these students changed their area of interest in order to get a better chance for admission into the universities? Of the entire cohort, how many students thought of doing so and actually did it? Could the chances of not performing to expectations in the National College Entrance Examinations and the feeling of letting down their supportive parents made them choose to do so? On the flip side, how many students of the cohort really have passion in their area of interest since a very young age and were willing to adjust their learning habits and even lifestyles in order to fulfill the criteria so
that they can be considered for university admission through the recommendation system?

The results of the interview could be used for future studies to determine the unintended ways in which the Chinese culture of examinations has transformed the society.
REFERENCES


