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JUSTIFYING MERITOCRACY: CRITERIA OF FAIRNESS IN CHINA'S NATIONAL COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMINATION (*GAOKAO*)

ABSTRACT

The theoretical aim of this paper is to articulate a novel analytical framework that makes sense of our interlocutors' apparently conflicting claims about the reality of meritocracy in China. The theoretical argument is rooted in ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a Chinese high school, where teachers and working-class students live under the shadows of the demanding and high-stakes university entrance exam (the *gaokao*). How is it possible to preserve the outwardly inconsistent positions (1) that the *gaokao* is egalitarian and, thus, fair and (2) that students' much wealthier counterparts have significantly higher probabilities of success when compared to poorer students? This article argues for the possibility of dynamism in epistemic standards, suggesting that belief in structural systems like meritocracy might be founded in cognitive attempts to maintain the aims of ethical life.

Keywords: China, epistemology, ethics, meritocracy, metacognition

In June 2021, I watched as hundreds of teenagers marched toward the gates of a high school near my rented apartment, which had been temporarily transformed into a fortified testing ground. Police cars and motorcycles were parked by the entrance, as officers redirected incoming traffic. In the teenagers' hands were transparent document holders and pencil cases with their identity cards inside. Before entering the grounds, these items were inspected by security guards, who waved handheld metal detectors in search of concealed phones. The LED signs over roads instructed drivers not to honk and to avoid noise. Inside this impenetrable fortress, students were to sit a two-day-long exam under the watchful eye of human invigilators and '360-degree surveillance cameras', as a teacher told me. Indeed, this was the scene of the National College Entrance Exam (NCEE), or *gaokao*, taken across mainland China in near identical testing sites yearly, assessing pupils' knowledge of the high school curriculum. For my young interlocutors, whom I shall introduce shortly, this meant three core subjects—math, English, and Chinese—in addition to either a set of humanities electives (*wenke*) comprising history, geography, and politics, or a set of science electives (*like*), comprising physics, biology, and chemistry.

In this paper, meritocracy is conceptualised as a form of societal organisation where privileges were conferred to individuals based on 'ability' (*cf.* Allen 2011; Young 1994). Under the assumption that everyone had an equal shot at success on the rigorously guarded exam, parents and teachers often reasoned that those who attained actual examination success have done so on the basis of individual 'superior abilities' (*you benshi*) compared to competitors and, thus, deserved the benefits that followed (see Howlett 2022a: 163). While my interlocutors did not use the term 'meritocracy', I employ it as theoretical shorthand to encapsulate their understanding of the *gaokao* and their conflicting claims about the criteria of fairness in China.

In this article, I describe two opposing positions: the abovementioned majority of interlocutors who believed in meritocracy and defended the fairness of the examination system, and the minority who believed it was a sham. Building upon recent research, I observe how some interlocutors upheld both prongs of the dilemma, justifying the reality of meritocracy and the fairness of the *gaokao*, despite acknowledging factors such as the backdoors exploited by the rich and powerful. Contributing to the growing ethnography on the epistemic positions of Chinese citizens, I explore the logics of counterfactual reasoning in a manner that shifts away from the epistemologies of 'chanciness' or probabilistic notions like luck. I argue that, for some, perceptions of *gaokao* fairness were tied to an ethical conception of vocation.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TESTING

Since the turn of the century, there has been much scholarly attention on 'education for quality' (*suzhi jiaoyu*) initiatives mandated from above, which emphasised the importance of non-*gaokao* subjects like art and physical education. These initiatives intended to turn Chinese education away from rigorous testing towards holistic assessment in an effort to produce modern citizens at the turn of the century (see Anagnost 2004; Lin 2017; Pang et al. 2020). Nevertheless, in the field, teachers and students openly neglected these efforts, which were mostly for show—a photo opportunity for the school's newsletter to be distributed to parents and 'higher-ups'. As I shall describe, the primary role of non-*gaokao* subjects was to provide a break between *gaokao* subjects.

The neglect of non-*gaokao* subjects was perceived as necessary due to the volume of information students were expected to memorise, which, according to Teresa Kuan (2015: 55), 'is simply unimaginable to anyone who did not come of age in this system'. When I asked students in Chinese secondary schools how they would prepare, everyone replied 'swip[ing] through more questions' (*shuati*). Still, teachers admitted, the knowledge that one accumulated in preparation for the *gaokao* was largely irrelevant to 'real life' despite the tremendous effort students exerted in accruing it. With the exception of Chinese teachers, few adult interlocutors could recite the classical poetry they had all memorised long ago for the *gaokao*, for instance.

More important was the *gaokao* score itself, which students received less than a month after the exam. Adult interlocutors recalled this number with ease and precision even decades later. A single digit point difference might drastically alter the trajectory of the test-taker's life. These days, unlike in other parts of the world like the United States, Chinese students across the country uniformly applied to universities upon completing high school after receiving their *gaokao* score (*cf.* Yamada 2021:

59–60). Unless students had exceptional talents, as exemplified through success on international academic competitions or athletic achievements, for instance, they relied exclusively on this score to enter university. With about 11 million people competing for admission into China's 2000 universities (Gierczyk and Diao 2021), interlocutors were aware that every point mattered. As my landlord in the field put it, 'What difference does one point make? A whole field of people between you and me.'

The transformative powers of a good score were evident to my landlord first-hand. His son had enrolled in a fully funded chemistry PhD programme in the United States after attending one of China's most prestigious universities following a triumphant *gaokao*. Even for interlocutors with no ambitions to study abroad, a good score yielded invaluable benefits. Research into the recruiting practices of elite domestic firms suggests that the prestige of one's *alma mater* far outweighed the minutiae of university transcripts (Ren 2022). For my young interlocutors, this score determined where they would go to university and, consequently, work.

My focus on the urban as opposed to the rural test-takers was contingent upon the type of access I secured. Admittedly, it was a decision made by chance. As others have recently argued, reflective of the increasing inequalities between urban and rural attainment, many rural citizens have become increasingly jaded by the supposed meritocratic nature of the educational system (see Chen 2022: 216; Howlett 2022b: 450). Consequently, it is prudent to qualify my findings as characteristically 'urban'.

In short, the way that entire cities were expected to accommodate the exam across the country reflected the significance that the *gaokao* still held in parts of the Chinese public imagination. Citizens were expected to bear the various inconveniences during the two days for the sake of students' futures. Meanwhile, the security apparatus employed at testing grounds to prevent cheating, with which I opened this article, furthered the impression that the examination's fairness was unimpeachable. Before turning to my arguments, I shall now introduce my field site, and consider some methodological challenges that I encountered during fieldwork.

FIELDWORK IN SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL NO. 99

The ethnographic data this article draws upon were collected during the 2020–2021 school year at senior high school no. 99[1] in Hohhot, the capital of the Inner Mongolia region, in the northmost part of China. While Hohhot had an urban population of approximately 3 million people—equivalent to Chicago—students in senior high school no. 99 pejoratively referred to the city as a 'village' (*cun*). More politely, interlocutors described their hometown as 'third-tier' (*sanxian*). Not only was Hohhot peripheral to the metropoles of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, constituting 'tier one', it also lagged behind more developed southern cities where many of my young interlocutors hoped to go for university.

Aside from the limited visual urban hallmarks of Chinese modernity like skyscrapers and extensive subway networks, the perception of the city's backwardness was additionally due to its lack of educational prestige. Everyone cited the absence of '985 Project' universities in the city. This project was introduced by then Party leader Jiang Zemin in 1998 with the ambition of improving the standing of Chinese institutions on the global stage through increased investment (see Zhang et al. 2013: 765). The '985s' were often professed as the best

in the nation, even after the project concluded in 2016. In this context, it is unsurprising why students associated educational success with leaving. In comparison, there were eight Beijing universities included in the '985 Project'. Unfortunately, in the hierarchy of high schools in the city, no. 99 was just 'average' (*yiban*). The majority of no. 99 graduates made it into university, although never the top ones.

As I learned through fieldwork, the meritocratic ideals exemplified by the Chinese exam cut across a deeply hierarchical vision of Chinese society in which one's status depended upon the circumstances of their birth. The vast majority of the student body came from working-class backgrounds, with parents who often worked as cashiers and physical labourers in construction. Meanwhile, the impression that one's future was in one's own hands existed against the backdrop of regional disparities.

Today, China's top universities continue to employ provincial quotas for admissions disadvantaging populous yet poorer provinces (see Hamnett et al. 2019). In 2016, 1.2% of students in Henan, the third-most populated province with nearly 100 million residents, were enrolled in 985 universities, compared to 5.6% from Shanghai (Qin and Buchanan 2021: 885). As my interlocutors acknowledged, due to the low population of Inner Mongolia, *gaokao* competitiveness in Hohhot was much lower than elsewhere; still, students complained they were not conferred privileges like residents of Beijing (Howlett 2022c: 221). However, these provincial disproportions were seldom brought up by interlocutors when assessing the fairness of the exam.

The Chinese system comprises twelve years of schooling, the first nine of which are compulsory. This timeline was based on the student intake, with each stage having its own admissions procedures. Students went through six years of primary school (*xiaoxue*), followed by three years of junior high (*chuzhong*), hopefully followed by three years of senior high school (*gaozhong*). I say 'hopefully' because it has become difficult to advance from junior to senior high school, as I shall describe below.

In Hohhot, entry into public primary schools was not based on individual performance. The expectation was for students to attend elementary school locally, defined by catchment areas. As expected, the demand for desirable schools outnumbered available places, a nationwide phenomenon exacerbated by parents purchasing homes in catchment areas motivated by gaining admissions into specific schools for the children (e.g., Wu et al. 2016). Consequently, in Hohhot, a lottery system has been introduced to allocate the limited number of admissions slots for the most in-demand schools. Parents within the catchment area who sought admissions for their children registered their candidacy online, and a list of the incoming class is then computer-generated. For 2021 entry, 350 students from 2578 candidates were admitted into the city's most desirable primary school. As one moved up to junior high school, however, the importance of the catchment area decreased. Lottery eligibility for desirable junior high schools were based on much larger 'municipal districts' (*shiqu*). By the time of senior high school, admission was based on tests, much like the *gaokao* itself. According to publicly available admissions data disseminated digitally by local news accounts, for the 2021 admissions cycle, no. 99 was right in the middle in terms of selectivity out of the 42 senior high schools listed in the city.

Consequently, by the time pupils sat for the *gaokao*, they had become well accustomed to the examination regime, having passed the increasingly competitive senior high school entry exam (*zhongkao*), which half failed. This

intensifying competition stemmed from recent policies, which have sought to funnel students into occupational training (e.g., Fan 2020; Ling 2015; Woronov 2016). Compare these statistics to those cited by Andrew Kipnis (2011: 40), whose fieldwork took place in 2005–2006 with updates in 2007 and 2009, when 80% of students would attend senior high school. Despite the intensifying challenges of the senior high school entry exam, however, the *gaokao* remained in the popular imagination a life-changing event in a capacity that *zhongkao* was not (yet). Hence, my focus on the former.

During my time in the field, I conducted sit-down semi-structured interviews with over two dozen students and ten teachers, all on multiple occasions, supplemented by countless 'chats' (*liaotian*) of varying lengths. My interlocutors at no. 99 came from the first year of senior high school, comprising six classes of students, mostly aged 16. This decision was made following the 'suggestion' of Principal Zhu. As he told me, students in the upper years were under stress preparing for the *gaokao*, and I should not 'add more problems for them' (*gei tamen tian mafan*).

On a daily basis, I sat in on lessons from all six classes for Year 1 students, as both a participant observer helping out with lessons, and as a silent observer. Almost always, the *gaokao* classes consisted of silent observation alone. Students in *gaokao* classes were to remain quiet until called upon, making participation impossible. As mentioned, all students were tested on mathematics, Chinese, and English, worth 150 points each; science students completed additional exams on physics, chemistry, and biology, which were worth 300 points in total; and humanities students were tested on politics, geography, and history, also worth 300 points in total. In contrast, during non-*gaokao* classes, I freely interacted with students. These classes for first-year students included music, computers, psychology, art, and physical education. At no. 99, students decided which track they entered—science or humanities—after first-term examinations in the first year. At this point, they were assigned to a class with a head teacher, who led them for the remainder of their three years in senior high.

Abstractly, the object of ethnographic investigation in this paper is a 'frame of mind'. This required a methodological sensitivity to not only what my interlocutor articulated, but the factors implicit in the background of our interactions, including the context of discussion, as well as an awareness of how claims fit into lived experiences and narratives. Accordingly, I have grounded my ethnographic analysis on the interlocutors with whom I was best acquainted. As shall be clear, this paper heavily discusses the nature of probability and the role it has on subjective perceptions of their social and cultural context. Still, while annual statistics about student results were shared with me at the end of the school year, my access to past attainment results were limited and requests for trends were cordially brushed off. These limitations become particularly salient in my discussion of subjective credence and partial access to hard statistics towards the end of the paper.

Finally, despite its name, Inner Mongolia comprises a Han majority with less than 20% of its 25-million population being ethnically Mongolian.[2] During the summer of 2020, prior to my arrival, the decision to replace Mongolian with Mandarin in 'language and literature', moral education, and history drew opposition from ethnic Mongolians in the region, leading to protests and police crackdowns.[3] Principal Zhu brought up these events, however, only to inform me that no. 99 was entirely unaffected by these upheavals because there were few

Mongolians in the school. I got the sense that he was hinting to me that this was a point of controversy best avoided.

During my fieldwork, a Mongolian presence in the student body was never emphasised by any staff or students. Most ethnic Mongolians in no. 99, although not all, also had sinicised names; thus, it was not possible to identify them through class lists alone. Nevertheless, all Mongolian students at no. 99 were categorised as 'minorities who test Han' (*minkaohan*), meaning they *did not* write the *gaokao* in their Indigenous language (see Yamada 2021: 70–72). Thus, I acknowledge the methodological limitations of my research, which focusses on Han Chinese settlers. Properly speaking, the epistemic framework discussed is from a uniquely Han point of view.

RELEVANCE TO CHINESE LIFE AND BEYOND: BETWEEN 'LYING FLAT' AND 'THE GOOD LIFE'

To recap, the theoretical focus of this article is on probabilistic and non-probabilistic reasoning, and how these cognitive notions related to people's conceptions of ethical life. Probabilistic and non-probabilistic reasoning are not issues front and centre in the anthropological mainstream. Nevertheless, I propose that they are essential if we hope to better understand the broader social trends that have developed in China in recent years, particularly the rise of nihilistic tendencies that have captured the public imagination.

Consider 'lying flat' (*tangping*), for example—a term coined by netizens in spring 2021. The term is somewhat self-explanatory: the favouring of a life of leisure over a life of labour. Toward the end of May 2021, Luo Huazhong, an unemployed blogger, published a post with the title 'Lying Flat Is Justice'. In it, he recounted his experiences as a factory worker and praised his subsequent decision to do nothing as cathartic, attracting the attention of censors (see Lin and Gullotta 2022). Chinese netizens have predominately sought to connect 'lying flat' to 'involution' (*neijuan*) mostly in terms of career advancement. Amongst them, the anthropological concept of 'involution' was applied (*cf*. Geertz 1963: 82) by anthropologist Biao Xiang to the intensifying competition individuals faced in academic admissions and employment, marked by increasing demands for ever-higher qualifications.[4] To netizens, lying flat was conceived of as a passive response to the burdens of increased activity.

In recognising these social trends, this article aims to also lay the theoretical groundwork necessary for future research by presenting the epistemic realm of high school students' lives as one possible avenue for exploring the genesis of such nihilistic social trends. Why do some continue to work toward the aims of a perceived good life despite numerous setbacks? And why do others give up, lie flat, and adopt nihilistic attitudes? The philosophers Jennifer Morton and Sarah Paul have anticipated many of the conceptual issues that I examine in this paper through their discussion of individual capacities for perseverance, what they call 'grit'. They argue that equally rational thinkers might 'differ in the policies that govern their evidential thresholds', which result in the divergent behaviours (Morton and Paul 2018: 191). In this respect, the purpose of this paper is to investigate ethnographically the various policies that my interlocutors employed when it came to governing evidential thresholds in reflexive assessment. In plainer language, taking the *gaokao* as the primary ethnographic focus, I discuss why different individuals making identical observations about the test come to

nonidentical conclusions, and the implications of such conclusions in their lives.

As I shall argue, for my young working-class interlocutors and the adults around them, the prospects of attaining the aims of their conceived good life both affect and, in turn, are affected by the mode of reasoning that they embrace. Expectedly, the conceived possibility and probability of living the good life is a function of the relational complex between abstract epistemic tenets and concrete observations regarding the world. The ethnographic work undertaken here reveals the specific operations of this nebulous relationship, which I insist offers insight into more prominent general trends in contemporary China.

FAIR OR NOT

In the cold of February, I sat in on a non-*gaokao* 'art class' (*meishu ban*) taught by Teacher Fang, a man in his 40s, who alone constituted the fine art department at no. 99. As the sun began to set in the late afternoon, some dozed off. Others scrambled to finish their Chinese or English homework. I sat in the back, watching Teacher Fang talk with seemingly at nobody about his slideshow of artworks. These pupils composed Year 1–Class 5, the top science class of the year. However, their behaviour during this lesson was nothing like their behaviour in, for instance, physics, where they all sat upright with their books out. The lack of disciplinary action undertaken by teachers in these classes was equally surprising. 'Did these non-*gaokao* teachers just not care?', I thought to myself.

After class, I stopped Teacher Fang for an interview. He took me next door to the studio, a dimly lit room with concrete floors and easels. He seemed to have anticipated my questions. Teacher Fang said he was not at all offended by those napping. Despite being an 'art teacher', he was aware that his job was not 'to teach art'. He implied that the points allocation on the *gaokao* was indeed an appropriate standard to rank the value of classes. For Year 1–Class 5, art was worth zero points. One could hardly expect students to treat it in the same way as, say, mathematics, worth 150 points. According to him, those subjects like math and physics on the *gaokao* were more important. A significant part of the reason why they were so important was that they contributed to the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to compete with wealthier students on an even playing field, writing the same exam.

Although there was an 'art' pathway in the *gaokao* for students wishing to obtain a Bachelor of Fine Arts, Teacher Fang informed me that admission into prestigious destinations like Tsinghua or the Central Academy—both in Beijing—demanded training outside of school from private tutors inaccessible to most. He explained how becoming an artist required cultivating an appreciation of artworks by seeing art, which also required money. In contrast, Teacher Fang said that, 'even if your dad was a high ranking official', there were no privileges when it came to the traditional *gaokao*-assessed subjects. The *gaokao*—excluding athletes and artists—was, thus, 'absolutely fair'.

Working in the Chinese context, I would be remiss not to consider the behind-the-scenes discourse of Chinese life vis-à-vis what is presented to the researcher. As Zachary Howlett (2021: 199) recognised in his fieldwork also on meritocracy in Chinese education, at low-performing schools, higher-ups sometimes admitted outside official contexts that the examination performance of students in these schools was 'inconsequential' to their futures, while upholding the orthodox meritocratic position elsewhere. Could it be that Teacher Fang was simply justifying his inability to control his class thorough the logic of

a supposedly meritocratic *gaokao*? Anticipating my argument concerning the relationship between vocation and the criteria of fairness, I want to compare Teacher Fang's understanding of the *gaokao* and his role as a teacher to some of his even more experienced colleagues.

Given the limitations of fieldwork, I could not track teacher-interlocutors over the course of their careers with regards to how their vocational aims developed over time. However, I did observe that older and more experienced teachers towards the tail-end of their careers often did not place as much emphasis on *gaokao* success as their more junior counterparts. Consider Teacher Tang, a woman in her 60s who was no longer teaching any classes at no. 99, having been relegated to an administrative role to make room for younger newcomers. As a former Chinese teacher, although the subject she taught was one of the 'big three' subjects, Teacher Tang admitted to me in private that neither she nor her students defined their time together retrospectively by *gaokao* scores. According to Teacher Tang, when she was a head teacher, at the end of each three-year cycle, students would often write her letters thanking her, not for her abilities as a Chinese teacher, but, rather, the work she did to help them 'be a person' (*zuoren*) (see Yan 2017).

In my view, Teacher Tang exemplified a case of what Erving Goffman (1990) has called 'role distance', where expectations of one's role and the performance of it become disjointed. Goffman (1990: 103) cites two different means of establishing role distance: first, one might isolate himself from the situation, projecting a sense of reluctance or necessity; or, second, one could withdraw from the scenario through satire or childishness. Here, we might add yet another case where one does not seek to disengage from the role, but, rather, to reinterpret it in light of the success and feasibility of the aims of the role, challenging the expectations of the role itself. Unlike Teacher Fang, she did not mention anything about scores or student attainment, perhaps due to the limited success of her students on the *gaokao*. Here is a possibility for what Robert Merton's (1957: 112) conceived as role-conflict. This is understood not as the comparatively simple idea that people embrace multiple roles with normative expectations that might come into contradiction, but, rather, that with particular roles, 'there is always a *potential* for differing and sometimes conflicting expectations of the conduct appropriate to a status occupant (…)'. Not coincidentally, the example Merton gives is the teacher whose own expectations might differ from others in the education system.

In this vein, similar to Teacher Tang, it is conceivable that Teacher Fang might one day accept and recognise a 'role distance' between his day-to-day job and his professed vocational aims. Thus, one possibility is that Teacher Fang might ostensibly change his mind regarding the meritocratic nature of the exam, which he upheld externally to me at the time. Another possibility is that Teacher Fang had already come to recognise the various backdoors within the system, but was unwilling to concede to me, the much younger and foreign ethnographer, perhaps fearing a 'loss of face' (*diulian*), unable to maintain his authority over his class (see, e.g., Hu 1944).[5]

Whatever the case might have been, my point here is not to speculate about Teacher Fang's psychology, but, rather, to emphasise how, even amongst my interlocutors who defend the existence of meritocracy, their judgments on the matter could be other than apodictic. In other words, it is conceivable that Teacher Fang might endorse his claims about the meritocratic nature of the system, *not* because of his accumulation of justifying empirical evidence in support of

his belief—indeed, as we shall see the evidence is stacked against him. Instead, he endorses those claims because it would be better for him if *it were true*, a realisation possibly providing motivation for his defence of the position. Looking ahead, this idea—that one's beliefs might be affected by one's practical goals in life—shall be greatly expanded in the sections below. Still, in contrast to the potential motivations behind Teacher Fang's promotion of the orthodox position, many of my student-interlocutors at no. 99 dissented by citing first-person experiences and direct knowledge of the corruptions that persist. As I now describe, for many student-interlocutors, the fraudulence of meritocracy was proven by the impurities of the system and the backdoors available.

Consider Laolang, a student from Year 1–Class 5, the top humanities class, who earned praise from his head teacher at the end-of-year parent-teacher meeting for being a 'virtuous child' (*haohaizi*). He was a flag bearer at assemblies and intent on joining the Party as an adult. Although he was probably the best English speaker in the year, attributing his talents to his love of American videogames and films, he was lacklustre in the English exercises of the *gaokao*. Unfortunately, having underperformed in the mock *gaokaos* in the early summer, his grades dropped to the bottom quartile. Finding me in the hallways during the afternoon recess, as he often did to practice English, he expressed his frustration with the system to me for the first time. He complained that, despite the government's efforts, backdoors remained. While nobody denied that the test was 'fair' in the sense that everyone wrote the same one, students were aware of the advantages conferred to the wealthy when it came to laying the groundwork for success.

Most prominently, Laolang complained how top public high schools in China kept a separate class for the 'international' pathway. He called out no. 102, which was the best senior high school in Hohhot, measured by both the sheer number and proportion of graduates who attend top universities. In addition to consistently producing Inner Mongolia's top scorers on the *gaokao* each year, the school also maintained a fee-charging international division, which nominally prepared students to take foreign examinations.

The problem, Laolang implied, was that not everyone in the international division anticipated going abroad. He insinuated that some enrolled in these divisions because the bar for fee-payers in international classes was much lower compared to regular students. Notably, the school's *zhongkao* cut-off score did not apply to the international division. Laolang lamented that students could buy their way into the best schools with the best teachers, equipment, and learning environments, and then outperform students like himself on the *gaokao*—even if they similarly failed to get into the best high schools through the examination three years previously. I initially suspected that Laolang was exaggerating the prevalence of this phenomenon; nonetheless, there is ethnographic evidence that, in some regions of the country, only half of 'study abroad' classes actually attend foreign universities with the other half taking the *gaokao* as usual (Howlett 2021: 113).

Perhaps one could imagine Laolang being in no. 102 if his parents had more money; however, Laolang's father was a truck driver and his mother was a cashier, neither of whom had gone to university. He told me the price tag was out of reach for 'average families' (*putong jiating*) like his. As some scholars have argued, these international divisions described by Laolang are, in many ways, a 'privatisation' of Chinese public education, since international division tuition fees typically ranged from 60 000 to 120 000

RMB [about US$8000 to US$16 000] a year (Liu 2018: 204–205). Laolang was irritated that this back door remained, despite the crackdown in recent years on bribes and donations for admissions under Xi Jinping's rule (*cf.* Ruan 2017: 11–35).

FAIRNESS AND THE LIMITS OF CRITIQUE

Teacher Fang and Laolang's explicit positions map two distinctive ideas of fairness that Howlett recently described in his analysis on the meritocratic ideals of Chinese education: procedural and structural fairness. As he explains, procedural fairness referred to how '[the *gaokao*] result is determined by individual merit front stage', in the sense that the score is determined by the number of questions answered correctly with everyone answering the same questions; meanwhile, structural fairness referred to 'equality of opportunity (…) to cultivate the qualities needed to succeed' (Howlett 2021: 82). In juxtaposing Teacher Fang next to Laolang, I first develop a point pertaining to the limits of social critique regarding the Chinese education system. Expanding Howlett's analysis, I suggest that even Laolang's complaints preserve the crux of meritocracy, thereby demonstrating yet another way 'individual merit' remained all-pervasive in Chinese epistemic life. This forms the basis for my analysis of my third interlocutor, a teacher who held both Teacher Fang and Laolang's positions in tandem.

On the one hand, since a uniform criterion was used to measure one's academic capacities, Teacher Fang implied that the unprivileged and privileged were indistinguishable when it came to the test, and, thus, the test was fair. On the other hand, Laolang denied the exam's *structural* fairness, emphasising how the wealthy were afforded opportunities to improve their chances of success on the *gaokao* within the education system leading up to the exam.

This jargon of fairness derives from liberal philosophy, specifically John Rawls' idea of procedural justice in *A Theory of Justice*, §14 (2005: 83–90). There, the Rawlsian distinction between the different types of procedural justice—perfect, impure, and pure—is drawn. Understanding this distinction helps connect Howlett's analysis to my ethnographic data. In the perfect case, there is an independent and substantive account of what justice or fairness looks like, and an actionable procedure to attain that result with certainty. The example Rawls (2005: 85) gives is cutting a cake. We wish to divide the cake evenly and assign to the person cutting it the last piece. The implication here is that, since the cutter ideally wants to have as much cake as possible, he is incentivised to follow the 'fair' procedure of ensuring each piece is the same size. If he were to cut them 'unfairly' (i.e., into different sizes), the bigger pieces would be eaten first by others selecting before him, leaving him worse off. In the impure case, by contrast, Rawls (2005: 85–86) cites the example of the criminal justice system. The independent criterion is that those who commit crimes are found guilty; however, the legal procedures of the system leave open the possibility of a miscarriage of justice. Simply put, judges and juries are just humans, and humans make mistakes. Although everyone would agree that it would be a gross injustice for an innocent person to be found guilty, nobody can put forward procedures to ensure that such mistaken results do not occur, unlike with the cake example. And, finally, in the pure case, there is no independently substantive account of the right result at all. Any conception of such justice cannot be disentangled from the procedures that led to it (Rawls 2005: 86–87). One example might be roulettes. So long as nobody cheated,

the results are fair. More bluntly, it does not make sense here to say of the winner who played by the rules that he ought not to have won. If one does insist that the legitimate winner did not deserve it, these complaints would have to be made from criteria external to the activity itself, such as, he is evil, already rich, or that we simply dislike him.

Howlett (2021: 83) argues that the distinction between what he calls structural fairness and procedural fairness is a heuristic that breaks down, since it is not possible to adjudicate what one deserved at an individual level, since 'individual merit always involves structural biases'. I take this line further, suggesting that one analytic advantage of Howlett's framework lies in its ability to recognise how Laolang's critique remained limited in its attribution of injustice. To be sure, Laolang's complaints are nothing like Howlett's.

Reframing Howlett's analysis through Rawls, we might say Laolang differed from Teacher Fang, but only insofar as Laolang took the *gaokao* to be an *impure* case of procedural justice, whereas Teacher Fang took it to be *pure*. To echo the point, in the pure case, merit was conferred exclusively based on the procedure, that is, the test. One deserved it if one fared well, and did not deserve it if otherwise. This is what Laolang denied when he considered the preparation leading up to the exam, which could be gamed by the privileged.

As Rawls iterates, the impure case of procedural justice depended upon the existence of a criterion to adjudicate fairness that could be conceived externally to the procedure. According to Laolang, the more 'meritorious', in the sense of more hardworking, more talented or whatever, *ought* to be conferred the privileges of society via the procedure. This is a belief he *shared* with Teacher Fang. Their disagreement comes only from Laolang opening up the possibility for the procedure to misfire. Laolang never stopped to interrogate the notion of 'ability' itself. Rather, Laolang's primary complaint was about those he perceived to have neither worked as hard as he did, nor have been as talented as he was, reaping the benefits he did not. Thus, even in his critique, Laolang perpetuated basic tenets of the same myth as Teacher Fang.

CHANCES OF SUCCESS

Recognising deeply entrenched beliefs concerning individual merit, the next step is to inquire into their origins. Recent attempts have focussed on the perceived indeterminacy of perceived life-changing events like the *gaokao*, which present to individuals higher-than-actual possibilities of success. Consider again Howlett (2022a: 154), who described the exam as 'consequential', that is, life-changing, and 'chancy', that is, undetermined. As Howlett's (2022a: 160) research conveys, in cases of perceived indeterminacy, differences in results were conceived of as a function of personal virtues or even as divine intervention (e.g., Howlett 2022b: 453). Such a conception circularly reinforced perceptions of indeterminacy by giving test takers a sense that they might change their prospects through cultivating such virtues or seeking transcendental assistance. This myopic focus on individuals consequently ignores structural issues like access inequality.

While I am largely sympathetic to this explanation, as much of it cohered with my ethnographic data, I suggest Howlett's employment of 'chanciness' can be extended through a discussion of 'credence'. The relevance of credence becomes clearer once we consider the origins of Howlett's term. In anticipation of my argument below, I note that 'chanciness' is also derived from Goffman (2006: 227), who

in 'Where the Action Is' defines the pursuit of an activity as 'chancy' if and only if the actor 'is in a position (or forced into one) to let go of his hold and control on the situation'. Both 'credence' and 'chanciness' are derived from the context of gambling, and the importance of this context is thoroughly relevant when grasping the difference between my third interlocutor and the previous two.

Remarkably, at the time of my fieldwork, Laolang had not written the *gaokao* yet. Nor did his fee-paying peer admitted into the better school. So why did Laolang assume that he was getting short-changed? My emphasis here is on what Goffman (2006: 228) calls the 'determination phase' of the chancy action. Unlike with flipping a coin or other betting games, the actor in most contexts of life involving chanciness does not get to perceive the outcome nearly instantaneously (Goffman 2006: 229). This gives time to the actor to speculate on the outcome.

From my perspective, no actual injustice had been committed. The wealthier peer had not received a higher *gaokao* (yet). Moreover, the performance of higher-ranked high school the wealthier peer bought his way into could have been attributed less to the teaching environment and more to the higher entry requirements, which created a self-selecting group of overachievers in the regular student body. To me, nothing seemed to guarantee that the rich fraudulent international student would succeed simply by attending the better school.

Suggesting this to Laolang was unlikely to assuage his frustrations, however. Laolang's implication had been that his peer's chances of success have increased relative to his own, probabilistically. Since there were a limited number of places available, Laolang viewed the *gaokao* as a zero-sum game of losers and winners (see Kajanus 2019). In principle, I understood Laolang's probabilistic reasoning to be a case of when the reasoner decides between two alternatives by assigning a credence value (the likelihood of m happening in n times, m/n) to the varied outcomes. In this respect, Laolang reasoned that attending a better school increased the likelihood of getting a good *gaokao* score. Grasping what a credence value is, or more specifically does, is straightforward, even if calculating a precise credence value can be difficult.

The clearest and most concise exposition of credence is by Frank Ramsey. In 'Truth and Probability', Ramsey (2001: 170) explains that what I am calling credence values track 'how far we should act on these beliefs'. Ramsey (2001: 174) then goes on to suggest that our beliefs are governed by some type of mathematical expectation. He continues:

> (…) [I]f p is a proposition about which he is doubtful, any goods or bads for whose realisation p is in his view a necessary and sufficient condition enter into his calculations multiplied by the same fraction, which is called the 'degree of his belief in p'(…)

As alluded to above, Ramsey's novelty here is that assigning credence values is, to a large extent, just like betting. This might seem unexciting, but its originality lies in the fact that it ties the probabilistic reasoning to our practical agency and not to some idealised standard by the light of reason itself. Ethnographically, Laolang is placing a higher credence value of him succeeding had he gone to the better ranked school than that of no. 99. But, as we have seen already with regards to Goffman's (2006: 228) point about the extended determination phase of the chancy action, such credence is made on the basis of some undetermined future that has yet to occur.

Ramsey's distinction has garnered renewed attention within Anglophone philosophy. Recently, philosophers have divided claims of probability into objective-chance propositions, which purportedly assigns some probabilistic fact to an object in the world, and epistemic–chance propositions, which does not treat probability as the function of some objective 'chance mechanism', but of 'the relationship between one's evidence and the world' (Buchak 2014: 286). As we have already seen with Goffman, while it is easy to objectively determine the probability of a coin landing on either side, the determination of the probability of some life event is seldom straightforward, making us dependent on *subjective* credence values. These considerations render Ramsey's (2001) 'Truth and Probability' organically amenable to ethnographic application.

The distinction drawn here brings us back to Howlett's discussion. For starters, we can nuance Howlett's (2021: 209) point that various instances of gambling are of sociocultural importance to his Chinese interlocutors 'not in winning prizes, but, rather, in what those prizes signify: good or bad luck in one's life more generally'. We might say that one's credence value regarding life events can be disturbed by other probabilistic activities, whether ordinary like card games or extraordinary in the sense of transcendental divination (see Howlett 2021: 213). This clarifies why Howlett's (2022b: 447) interlocutors were affectively disordered by the perception of bad luck on games of chance ostensibly irrelevant to other arenas of everyday life without attributing to these interlocutors an alternative mode of rationality or even irrationality.

More importantly, credence might also help us better theorise the epistemic consequences of the top–down gatekeeping of examination statistics. To be sure, parents were not entirely oblivious to the inequalities of the *gaokao*. For example, when a 2016 policy change resulted in hypercompetitive *gaokao* provinces like Hubei and Jiangsu increasing quotas for nonlocal students, despite no changes to cities like Beijing, protests erupted, with parents congregating outside official offices in cities like Nanjing (Qin and Buchanan 2021: 894). Nevertheless, for most parents, their awareness of inequalities was imperfect. Although disparities might be acknowledged at the provincial level, there was, to be sure, a lack of hard and precise statistics based on crucial factors like income and level of parents' educational attainment. This imperfect scenario, thus, left 'wiggle room', reflecting parents' probabilistic beliefs about their children's success, bolstered by anecdotes from friends, relatives or online about 'dark horse' (*heima)* candidates who overcome impossible odds (Howlett 2022a: 155).

To be specific, in Hohhot, teachers flouted orders from the higher-ups to keep student test scores confidential without consequence. At no. 99 due to the effects of the COVID-19 anti-contagion policies, which restricted movement in and out of residential estates (*xiaoqu*), home visits were not possible and parent–teacher interactions increasingly became online-first—namely, via WeChat, the popular social networking mega-app, a mixture of Twitter, Instagram, and PayPal among others. Individuals shared videos and photos of school events and high-scoring pupils to their private friends' lists; but, in my experience, these lists were not closely guarded, and people tended to add any acquaintance. Despite online censorship, it was increasingly difficult for the relevant authorities to monitor parent–teacher interactions. After the 2021 *gaokao*, multiple teachers at no. 99 disclosed the achievements of the school to their contacts on their personal WeChat accounts, including the parents of

students at no. 99, via their 'Moments' feed (*pengyouquan*). These posts were accessible to anyone on the poster's contacts list, and people often checked the 'Moments' of their friends to keep tabs on their daily lives. In one shared post by teachers at no. 99, the school administration bragged about its pupils by name: the top science student, an ethnic Mongolian student named Khulan, received 557 points, whereas the top humanities student, a Han Chinese named Zhang, received 549.

In comparison, these top two scores from no. 99, while high enough for admissions to a first-tier university, were inadequate compared with the attainment of no. 102, which, surprising to me, the teachers at no. 99 also broadcast on their accounts in similar ways. The top humanities student at no. 102 that year received 668 points; the top science student, 693.5. Both were the autonomous region's 'top scholar' (*zhuangyuan*) for their respective streams. Since the early days of my fieldwork, my interlocutors never failed to speak highly of no. 102. However, it was not until the end of the 2021 *gaokao* season that I realised just how big the difference between no. 99 and no. 102 really was. At no. 99, not a single student that year came close to 600 points. At no. 102, 96 humanities test-takers passed that threshold, and 262 did so in the sciences.

These cases, where results were shared by word-of-mouth or digitally, to my surprise, did not alter people's perception of the *gaokao* fairness or their belief in meritocracy. Rather, it seemed to reinforce cultural perceptions that students at better schools were more hard-working, or that students within no. 99 who did well possess better study habits compared to their peers. Instead of spurring some awareness of structural inequity, some students were motivated in a 'if they could do it, so could I' manner. Since only scores and names were revealed, what remained hidden were a slew of socioeconomic factors that might have determined *gaokao* success. As Howlett (2021) also notes, it is not merely that people were kept in the dark. Rather, that which has been revealed to our Chinese interlocutors about the probabilities of *gaokao* success seemingly reinforced epistemic–chance propositions at a subjective level that they might not have otherwise endorsed had they had access to objective statistics. It is in this context that I think, we ought to understand Howlett's employment of 'chanciness'.

BEYOND PROBABILITY AND CHANCE

My positive proposal, however, is that ethnographic investigations into probabilistic reasoning using credence reveal a rigidly non-probabilistic corner of epistemic life featuring some interlocutors. I suggest that it is necessary to expand the discussion to consider what happens when 'chanciness' is increasingly taken to its limits, specifically as the likelihood of some event approaches zero.

The intuitive criterion for my interlocutors of judging fairness probabilistically thus far implied that the more determined the results—the less chancy the exam was—the less fair it was. Recall Laolang's frustrations about the rich 'unfairly' increasing one's chances of success by maximising the perceived probability of success using money. Fairness, thus, depended on an equal likelihood of success for him. However, this was not necessarily how others reasoned. For one key interlocutor, Teacher Jing, so long as there was the *possibility* of success (i.e., a nonzero chance), the 'procedural' fairness of the examination was justified. That the rich could increase their probability of *gaokao* success through wealth was largely irrelevant. Why did she justify the exam this way, and how should we make sense of this epistemic position?

Towards the conclusion of the school year at the time of mock and real exams, I watched the Year 3 students, with whom I was not allowed to interact, do problem sets on repeat through the windows of their classrooms. It was difficult to imagine what they thought about the fairness of the exam, and, of course, I could not ask. That day, however, I had my first candid conversation with Teacher Jing about what she thought of the *gaokao*. The encounter was serendipitous. Her office door, located near the stairwell to the Year 3 classes, was open, and I found her grading in silence. In my earlier discussions with Teacher Jing, she gave me generic responses, stating that it was impossible to do holistic admissions in China with its massive population or deferring to more senior teachers citing her lack of teaching experience. That day, she was much more forthcoming.

Teacher Jing was a newcomer to no. 99. She received her first teaching assignment after the Spring Festival break in February 2021, despite having arrived at the school in December 2020. As the school's most recent hire, Teacher Jing was also its youngest faculty member. She earned her undergraduate degree in 2018. She was, like most of the people at no. 99, a native of Hohhot. She was appointed to teach Chinese, a core subject worth 150 points. Teacher Jing was the staff member closest to me in age, having been born in the same year, 1995. Teacher Jing was the only staff member with whom I regularly interacted who referred to me as Teacher Jiang, mostly as a courtesy since I did no teaching, as opposed to 'Little Jiang' (*xiao jiang*), suggesting our status as peers.

What was most surprising to me was the ease with which Teacher Jing openly admitted that the rich were able to bypass the need for schooling to succeed in life, which the poor could not do. She explicitly said that the big bosses did not need to put their children through the rather torturous 'swiping through questions'. Nor did these affluent pupils ever feel a pressure to 'eat bitterness', the Chinese term for 'bearing hardships' highly valued by the Chinese working class since the post-Mao reforms (see, e.g., Loyalka 2013). As Teacher Jing put it, life was easy for the rich kid: the worst-case scenario was 'to work for his own family'. Much as Laolang recognised above, Teacher Jing, too, accepted that navigating the education system in China looked very different based on how much money your father had.

Despite the limits of Laolang's critique, he was nevertheless able to recognise how the putatively just procedures of the *gaokao* could be gamed by the privileged, which rendered the system less than ideally fair to his mind. By contrast, Teacher Jing seemed careful to avoid any suggestion that richer people had an advantage on the *gaokao* through their wealth altogether. What made Teacher Jing like Teacher Fang was that they shared an unwavering belief that the *gaokao* was procedurally fair. However, they too differed in terms of how Teacher Jing openly accepted that there were many advantages for the rich when it came to these tests, something that Teacher Fang seemed to have denied outwardly in his comparison of art versus traditional *gaokao*.

In defending her position, Teacher Jing never claimed that these things that money can buy did not increase one's chances of success nor that poor children had it harder. As she admitted, the pressures of having to support one's family financially while still in school would be detrimental. Such an obligation would mean diverting students' energy and time from their studies. Meanwhile, the lack of a comfortable material environment at home—such as a noisy bedroom shared with many occupants—would predictably disturb students writing their homework. Nevertheless, what mattered to her

was that, despite all these burdens that came with being poor, 'It is still possible for the poor kid to do better.' She continued as follows:

> Aside from things like art students or athletes, if we are just talking about regular students, the *gaokao* provides a uniform standard for all: the connection between wealth and success on this exam is not a necessary one.

Although Teacher Jing also based her argument on a procedural justice, I suggest she was unique in that she refused to entertain the explanatory powers of statistical likelihood entirely. As she asserted, even if wealthy students were born with silver spoons in their mouth and received the best education that money could buy, they might still fail the *gaokao*. However unlikely it was for this to happen was for her irrelevant: 'Even if a student, who is much richer than the other, does better than another student in the same classroom, the *gaokao* is still fair.' This is because that rich student could have failed. And, this conceptual possibility of the *counterfactual* made it fair. In sum, she did not view fairness as a function of statistical probability. Rather, her image of meritocracy was based on possible scenarios she imagined—however unlikely they were to be actualised.

It was not as if Teacher Jing never reasoned probabilistically, in the sense of positing how various factors from one's environment would help or harm the likelihood of attaining one's goals. In fact, she made it clear this was how she reasoned in her personal life. Many of the students at no. 99 talked about their aspirations to leave Inner Mongolia, hopefully never to return. Once upon a time, Teacher Jing was no different, having shared the same dreams of mobility to more affluent or central regions. Having attended public schools in the city for both her own primary and secondary education, she headed off to university in another province closer to the capital. She moved to Hebei to study Chinese at a university in Shijiazhuang, a city of 11 million people, a population nearly four times that of Hohhot. Upon graduation, however, her life quickly diverged from the imagined life trajectories of the young aspirants she would end up teaching—the ones who hoped to make it to the bigger places and remain there. After a period of working as a 'trainee' teacher in Hebei post-graduation, for motives that were at first unclear to me, Teacher Jing returned to Hohhot, even after she 'made it out'. As she explained:

> After I left, I thought I shouldn't come back. I had already made it out. But I had to calculate and compare the different environments. As the saying goes, 'calculate 100 steps for every step you take'. I realised Hebei was too competitive [in terms of the *gaokao* for students]. Students started independent study at 5:00 am every day, and you had to be there with them [stressful factors related to the job she hoped to avoid in Hohhot].

In the place of her duty or obligation to her family, Teacher Jing justified her decision to return based on the likelihood of achieving her own goals. The work environment in Hebei where she trained was too intense compared with Inner Mongolia. She aimed to teach in a more 'comfortable' location. It was not as if the students in Hebei were simply more ambitious than those elsewhere or just demanded more out of their teachers. Rather, the competition at the high school level in Hebei was driven by the much larger population of the province, which could not be accommodated by the disproportionately limited number of

university places available to Hebei students at China's top institutions. In Hebei, there was a higher demand for a low supply of university acceptances, which she believed would make her life harder as a teacher.

For her, the return also made financial sense. She was an only child and had moved back in with her parents, resuming life in her childhood bedroom, effectively living without expenses—eating at home and paying no rent. Jing told me she planned to stay put until marriage. At that point, she would move in with her future husband, although she was single at that time. In response to this, I asked if she would leave Hohhot if her husband wanted to go elsewhere in search of better career opportunities. She was not opposed to the idea, but insisted that she would need to do a cost-benefit analysis, probabilistically based on what I have called her epistemic-chance propositions. What was most likely to give her the life she wanted? 'What were the schools like where she was going [for her child]? How far would I be from my family? How were the jobs there?', she asked rhetorically.

EPISTEMIC STANDARDS AND PRACTICAL IDENTITY

Why did Teacher Jing go from a probabilistic mode of reasoning in her personal life to a non-probabilistic one in her vocational life? I argue that the switch was a metacognitive strategy to preserve the perceived fairness of the *gaokao* and the reality of meritocracy, upon which her practical identity depends. Anthropologists of ethics have long been interested in how individuals exercised their freedom to organise their *practical* lives in pursuit of the good life (Laidlaw 2002: 327). Far fewer have sought to investigate ethnographically how one's practical ideals, values, models, practices, relationships, and institutions—one's idea of the good life—yields profound effects on one's *epistemic* lives.

As Jonathan Mair (2018) has suggested in a comparative examination between Inner Mongolian Buddhists and 'post-truth' Euro-American media consumption, the beliefs generated in both ethnographic contexts, from practitioners of a religion, on the one hand, and sceptics and consumers of fringe media, on the other, both result from a self-conscious recognition of one's own uncertainty and the practical demands of obtaining truth and certainty in one's lifetime, despite their obvious differences. Neither the Buddhists' dependency on the teachings of some enlightened authority nor the post-truther's appeal to the authoritative status of charismatic conspiratorial figures can be treated merely as passive responses to structural forces (*cf.* Sangren 1995), but rather as active efforts in search of truth and certainty albeit in a manner that deviates widely from, say, the epistemologies of the 'scientific method'. Teacher Jing behaves analogously.

When I asked Teacher Jing if her life was fulfilling, even without any financial compensation for the moment, she told me, in a rather matter-of-fact way, that 'There are two types of fulfilment [for me].' What were they? 'Long-term,' she said, '[fulfilment] is when students do well on their exams. Short-term, when students can memorise their classical Chinese passages properly, as an example.' When I asked if there was anything else, she paused, staring at me blankly. The division between her so-called 'two types' seemed only temporal. From my perspective, these two types of fulfilment pertained to the same goal: that of being a good teacher. She seemed to agree. 'A sense of fulfilment for teachers has to be tied to the students' academic success obviously', she said.

The role of the 'teacher' in Chinese society has garnered much attention within anthropology and beyond. Andrew Kipnis (1997) notes that, in rural northern China during the reform era, the term 'teacher' still functioned in Chinese society as a kinship term akin to 'uncle'. The term designated a particular role in the relational fabric of society. As one villager said to Kipnis (1997: 32), 'Once they teach you, you call them *laoshi* for their whole life'. In this case, the moral relationship between the teacher and the student was characterised by the personal connection between the two individuals, which has arguably been the groundwork for Chinese moral life. In Fei Xiaotong's (1992: 75–76) classic work on Chinese morality, he argues that all 'traditional' Chinese moral discourses are confined to particularistic relationships, as exemplified by the Confucian emphasis on 'filial piety, fraternal duty, loyalty, and sincerity'. While it would be difficult to demonstrate that China remains deeply 'Confucian' in morality (*cf.* Bai 2019; Bell 2010), Teacher Jing evidently saw her ethical duties as a teacher in such particularistic terms: to help her students navigate the complex system of schooling leading up to the *gaokao* as the student aspired to change the circumstances of their life. Reciprocally, I observed students honouring the teacher with a sense of veneration. I think this is the key to understanding Teacher Jing's maintaining that the *gaokao* was all-things-considered fair.

A valuable comparison can be made to the wealth of post-socialist ethnographies, particularly the last generation of Soviets. As Alexei Yurchak (2006) has described, many Soviets' faith in socialism was motivated by their aspirations to live a good life in the USSR *pragmatically* in the face of the material realities in which they found themselves. As one of Yurchak's (2006: 97) interlocutors put it retrospectively after the collapse of the USSR:

> [He first describes all his grievances against the Party] (…) And, yet, despite all this, I had always had a strong conviction, perhaps since I was kindergarten age, that socialism and communism were good and right (…)

Even if Yurchak's interlocutors seemed aware of the corruptions of the socialist state itself, their belief in 'socialism' in the abstract remained unshaken, because without it, the ends of their ethical lives became increasingly obscured.

Notably, just as students may find motivation to continue to strive on the *gaokao* owing to an inflated credence in the possibility of success, the inverse is also true. When the perceived possibility of success hit zero, individuals began to abandon past aims and seek out alternatives. Consider Doudou, another 16-year-old interlocutor in Year 1–Class 6, who most closely approximates the nihilistic case of 'lying flat' or 'letting rot', which I discussed at the beginning of this paper. Although Doudou had placed into the top humanities class earlier that year, she had consistently ranked in the bottom on mock *gaokao* since then. Doudou described herself as the daughter of 'coolies' (*kuli*), and did not share any details of her parents beyond that. After yet another round of disappointing mock *gaokao*, she suggested, while wandering around aimlessly during physical education, that she was hoping to drop out at the end of the school year. Unlike any of her other peers, she denied that doing well on the *gaokao* meant worldly success beyond university. As she told me, her aunt had a Master's degree in English from Nanjing University and still failed to get her dream job teaching at no. 102 in Hohhot. So, what were the chances for someone like her, who could not get into such a prestigious school

in the first place? In her view, it was better to get some practical work experience as soon as possible. Here, the myth of meritocracy has been eroded seemingly beyond repair, whereby Doudou has been forced to pick up the pieces to construct a new aim for the good life.

On the flip side, as someone who evidently valued her job so much, whose identity was so closely tied to her role as a teacher—to a vocation whose own *raison d'etre* was to help students navigate the education system leading up to the exam of their lives—did Teacher Jing ever feel limited in how much she could do when it came down to helping these young aspirants? Imagine a student who excelled in classical Chinese, but whose parents were also classical Chinese scholars. Imagine another student who did well on their *gaokao*, but only because they skipped all public-school classes and simply went to the best cram classes money could buy. To what extent would Teacher Jing attribute the success of these students to the teachers of the school?

Ultimately, I suggest Teacher Jing tied her own teleology as an ethical self with that of her vocation, whereby the normative criteria used in assessing the success and failures of 'being a teacher' influenced her choice of epistemic standards. The reason that Teacher Jing did not want to make socioeconomic factors over-determinant—occasionally invoking highly improbable counterfactuals to justify her point—was to uphold her own sense of identity, to see her in the way that she wants to be seen and that she sees herself. If socioeconomic factors were over-determinant, then her endeavours as a teacher in the public education system start to look inconsequential. The idea of meritocratic fairness preserves the cognitive possibility of her vocation.

But, as the comparison earlier between Teachers Fang and Tang—between their seemingly different vocational aims as teachers—illustrates, while academic success has long been a normative criterion of evaluation in Chinese schooling from a young age (Xu 2019), it is not the only one. In the face of a lack of academic success, some teachers clearly retreated into alternative discourses to maintain the value of their vocation, as Teacher Tang seemed to have done. Nevertheless, Teacher Tang's turning away from academics was not shared openly and was comparatively rare. By contrast, the various teachers and officials of no. 99, despite recognising the uninspiring *gaokao* scores of their graduates, insisted that the school remained academically successful as an institution. To justify their claims, they sought out some unconventional standards of their own, citing how their graduates received a higher score on the *gaokao* than they did on the *zhongkao*, an entirely different test, three years prior. It felt to me, however, as if they were comparing apples to oranges.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite anthropological attention in recent years on the ethical life and the teleological cultivation of selves in both transcendental and 'ordinary' contexts (e.g., Das 2020; Laidlaw 2014; Lambek 2010), I suggest that more work needs to be done in investigating how the possibility and probability of attaining the good life are cognitively affected by individuals' attempts to understand the world in which they find themselves. For China specialists, these issues are pertinent as the country faces increasing youth unemployment after decades of radical economic and political change, marked by sustained regional inequalities as demonstrated by the rise of nihilistic tendencies. But, for anthropologists with other regional interests, the ethnographic themes explored in this paper

remain equally relevant, especially with regards to articulating higher-order concerns about the relationship between individual striving and structural limitations.

The implications of this paper extend beyond Hohhot or Inner Mongolia. One pronounced effect of economic reform and development has been the rapid rise of the urban population, which today outnumbers the rural. Throughout the first two decades of this century, China was responsible for nearly half of the world's total urban expansion (Sun et al. 2020: 7). Today, China's third-tier cities still far outnumber the country's megacities of international renown. In this respect, the research presented in this paper has offered a glimpse of what 'average' life looks like for China's 'average' youth. However, the possibility of realising that the myth of meritocracy has been just a *myth* all along, as one comes of age and enters into adulthood and forms a family of one's own, looms over this generation of my student-interlocutors. The effects of such potential realisations remain to be seen.

Retrospectively, though one might have expected the increased competition of the examination regime to have heightened antipathy amongst the student body, the opposite seemed to be the case in my field site. That students voiced their hushed complaints to me, an outsider, perhaps revealed the limited reach of such counter-narratives amongst peers and teachers, many of whom straightforwardly told me that they did not accept deterministic notions like 'losing at the starting line' (*shuzai qipao xian*), a phrase which referred to the structural limitations associated with one's circumstances of birth.

As Kipnis observed not too long ago, rigorous testing works to filter out 'resentful' and 'anti-school' pupils (2001: 481). Notably, aside from the occasional quiet critique of the exam, other forms of resistance that Kipnis mentioned, like disrespecting teachers and ostracising other academic peers, were wholly absent at no. 99. Meanwhile, technological advancements, as I stated earlier, made cheating nearly impossible. One hypothesis is that the increased rigour and competition on the *zhongkao* has only filtered out more students than previously. An alternative epistemic explanation might be that, when social and physical mobility has become so tethered to examination results, most of my interlocutors, whether student or teacher, were simply unwilling to forfeit the cognitive possibility of success. To be resentful or actively anti-school, or to adopt a nihilistic position such as Doudou's, seemed to involve acceptance of the futility of one's own aspirations toward one's previously held life goals—no doubt a difficult pill to swallow.

Finally, this paper has offered a glimpse of what might be conceived as the 'fringes' of ethical life, revealing an ethnographic flash of the possibility of agentive failure, usually overlooked in the literature of self-cultivation. This point might be made by revisiting the analytic assumptions of the anthropology of ethics. Consider James Faubion (2012: 37), who declares that 'the subject is, by analytical fiat, "free"'; 'If a subject is incapable of anything that could be identified as the exercise of his or her or its work or activity or agency or responsibility (…) then it falls—by analytic fiat—outside of the ethical domain'. Such a claim might be understood trivially in the sense that ethical life could not be conceptualised in merely causal terms, hence the necessity of noncausal concepts like self-determined work, activity, agency, and responsibility. In that case, this reading would need to be supplemented by, say, James Laidlaw's (2002: 323) further point that the exercise of freedom is not merely the absence of constraints to make choices, but activities

that are historically contextualised within arrangements of social institutions that might not have been freely chosen by its participants. But, while anthropologists of ethics have rightfully challenged the one-sided conceptions of a freely lived life as typified by resistance against the binding powers of structural forces, from my ethnographically informed perspective, what is missing in their frameworks is how self-conscious reflection about structural forces and social institutions might render ethical life impossible.

Along this vein, the phenomena mentioned in this paper, such as 'lying flat' and 'letting rot', illustrate the ways in which agency appear obstructed and perhaps even destroyed in cases of unexpected but cognitively acknowledged structural injustice. Specifically, the nihilistic realisations of failed navigators of the system like Doudou illustrate how first-person acceptance of one's own futility as a result of 'unfair' institutions come to reveal how previously acknowledged activities of freedom were ersatz exercises all along. Thus, in realising the importance of cognitively holding onto a possible picture of the world to one's ethical life, as exemplified in this paper by my interlocutors' insistence that meritocracy is real, we also realise the consequences of the negation of such a picture. These nihilistic and less-than-ideal cases all seem to be 'outside the ethical domain' as defined by Faubion above. Nevertheless, as I hope to have shown in this paper, they are hardly irrelevant to ethical life.

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NOTES

1 Following anthropological convention, the name of this institution, as well as of individual interlocutors, have all been replaced by pseudonyms.
2 For a history of the region, see Bulag (2004)
3 For an account of the protests, see Bulag (2020).
4 For a historical discussion of involution in the Chinese context, see Duara (1987).
5 I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for pushing me to consider these possibilities.

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