

the public sector and foreign enterprises, the two most desirable types of employment for college graduates (chapter seven). Compared with their counterparts, rural college graduates also constitute the majority of the “ants,” an epithet for educated youth living in poor conditions on the city periphery (chapters four and six).

Gender-based inequality in education and employment is systematically dealt with in chapters nine, ten and eleven. Li shows that in line with the global reversed gender trend in education, in China since the 1990s, girls have been outperforming boys in school and in the national college entrance exams. Women students have been outnumbering men students at higher education institutions. However, this has not helped women in the labour market, where they face greater obstacles in finding jobs than men and they tend to end up in lower status jobs. The gender-based labour market discrimination is further discussed in chapter ten, which offers a broader analysis of the dynamics of gender inequality in China.

The book’s title does not quite match its content. While “inequality” is comprehensively dealt with, there is little systematic account of “diversity.” There is also little discussion of the relationship between “diversity” and “inequality.” One may also miss a greater engagement with relevant social theories (e.g. those on social change, youth and generation) and international literature on contemporary Chinese youth. The quality of the chapters are uneven. Whereas most of them offer solid empirical findings, (parts of) chapters two and 16 appear rather impressionistic. Some parts of the book are repetitive. Relevant as it is, chapter 12 is not directly about Chinese youth. Besides, a general conclusion chapter and chapter abstracts would have helped the reader (although the extensive introduction by Cheng Li is helpful). These weaknesses may at least partly be due to the fact that rather than a planned monograph, this book is a collection of works previously published in diverse venues and for particular audiences and purposes inside China.

Notwithstanding the “lacks,” this book makes a valuable contribution to sociological studies of contemporary social change and youth, with particularly useful statistical details and insights about Chinese youth presented in a very accessible style. A more comprehensive account of inequalities among Chinese youth is rarely found in previous books published in English. This book will be of great value to anyone interested in present-day China and its youth, and more broadly, social transformation and inequality.

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Meritocracy and Its Discontents: Anxiety and the National College Entrance Exam in China

ZACHARY M. HOWLETT

Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 2021

266 pp. £108.00

ISBN 978-1-5017-5443-2 doi:10.1017/S030574102200100X

If you were to read just a handful of ethnographic books about contemporary China, Zachary Howlett’s book *Meritocracy and Its Discontents: Anxiety and the National College Entrance Exam in China* could in my opinion very well be one of them. By offering a window into the black box of the Chinese National College Entrance Exams (*gaokao*), the book provides deep insight into both the inherent unfairness

of the exam as well as its near universal appeal within China. *Gaokao* examinees largely eschew play and leisure and work diligently for twelve years to acquire the capacities and virtues necessary to take the exam. Why do so many Chinese believe that there is no real alternative to the fateful event of the exam, despite the gruelling pressure some nine million high-school seniors in China endure every year? And what is at stake if the belief in meritocracy – in China and elsewhere – is displayed as a kind of “cruel optimism”? What might follow meritocracy?

It is often regarded as a truism that the Chinese Communist Party can retain political legitimacy and avoid major social unrest as long as China’s booming middle-class continues to get richer. Howlett adds an important dimension to this idea by arguing that *gaokao* and by extension a moral need for a measure of societal fairness in fact plays a significant role here. He quotes a rural high school principal who said “Without Gaokao there would be social revolution in China.” So, rather than economic progress in and of itself, the *gaokao* entails a social contract that the *gaokao* can provide a medium of social justice – the premise being that it is relatively genuine and true as opposed to many of the obviously growing social disparities in China (and most of the world). It remains China’s relatively fair competition. This assessment is constantly heard all over China. Rather than being determined by social connections (*guanxi*), in theory every young person has one shot at beating the odds or winning the “final battle” – and even rural students can through diligence and mastery of their character achieve social mobility.

The book consists of six well-written chapters which convincingly take us through the social, historical, political, economic and also religious dimensions of the Chinese examination system as seen from the periphery – a rural mountain county of China. Howlett’s artful linguistic mastery of the Chinese language as well as his knack for the social life of many colloquial idioms makes it a joy to read. For example, he writes that local administrators disparagingly refer to fake study-abroad programmes as “advertising dog meat with a lamb’s head” (p. 113) or borrow a metaphor from ping-pong to describe it as an “edge ball” – legally within bounds but impossible to return. The book is full of such humour and ethnographic/linguistic detail.

Howlett not only shows that he is a skilled ethnographer, who has cultivated close relationships with his interlocutors at all levels in the education system, but that he also uses his ethnographic material as a space from which to think. Without giving away the whole story, he convincingly demonstrates that meritocracy is largely a myth. Paraphrasing Sigmund Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1919), which argued that modern societies breed guilt and anxiety as people strive to live up to impossible societal ideals, Howlett argues that meritocracy is by and large a sophisticated societal lie which he unravels as “the fabrication of fairness.” While he acknowledges that the top test-takers may display great distinction, “the opportunities to accumulate this merit are unevenly distributed” (p. 6). His point is not only that although examination results are presented as individual achievements they are really socially produced, but also that the *gaokao* produces a belief in individual merit. Put differently, the central question of the book unravels two sides of the myth of meritocracy, namely the false promise of a socially equalizing effect as well as the role it plays in recruiting the majority of Chinese into *believing* in individual merit.

I was particularly impressed and intrigued by chapter six, “Magic and meritocracy: popular-religious responses to examination anxiety.” In this chapter, Howlett demonstrates that no cultural world is internally consistent or coherent. It refers back to the image on front cover of the book – a photograph of *gaokao* test-takers, parents and possibly teachers burning incense in a Daoist temple in order to game the chanciness

of fate in “the final battle.” Backstage rituals and prayer go hand in hand with front-stage secularism in high schools. In fact the *gaokao* is even referred to as a “magnet for magic” (p. 187). At the end of the day, in spite of all of the belief in meritocracy and the value of diligence and character-building, many Chinese feel that it is impossible to completely account for the inherent uncertainty of this fateful event. According to Howlett, a belief in cosmic reciprocity stemming from popular religion is a common way of attempting to master this unbearable anxiety. He writes, “[a]lthough the exam presents itself as an objective, scientific form of selection, it actually represents a hegemonic negation of particular social interests. This contradiction results in a gap between ideal and reality – a gap that is simultaneously personal and social. The gnawing awareness of this incoherence produces tremendous anxiety, which magic helps to salve” (p. 190). In other words, although from the perspective of the Marxist party-state rhetoric such actions are regarded as feudal superstition, it is a widespread “open secret” that many teachers and even school principals take part in temple pilgrimages before the big event – seeing the *gaokao* as pronouncing not only the universalistic judgement of the national community but also the verdict of transcendental powers.

The final intriguing epilogue centres on the discontents of (the belief in) meritocracy. He ponders what the future may look like if the *gaokao* – and by extension also Xi Jinping’s Chinese Dream of economic progress through individual diligence – loses its appeal. What will happen when social mobility diminishes and it becomes obvious that China is a “hereditary meritocracy”? The current trend among young people to “lie down flat” and reject the hamster wheel of endless striving is a new phenomenon which makes his book timely and significant. While providing no final answers, Howlett reminds us that it would be a failure of political imagination to see hereditary meritocracy as the end of history. This is an important book that will stay with me for years to come.

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Dialect and Nationalism in China, 1860–1960

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Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020

275 pp. £22.99

ISBN 978-1-108-74569-7 doi:10.1017/S0305741022001151

Gina Tam’s book *Dialect and Nationalism in China, 1860–1960* is an outstanding work that provides crucial historical insights for understanding language in contemporary China. Tam has already been awarded the 2020 Berkshire Conference of Women Historians Book Prize for a first book in any field of history, and there will hopefully be more accolades to follow for this important book.

Dialect and Nationalism’s central question concerns the role of *fangyan* in Chinese nationalism. Tam examines how *fangyan* came to be defined as “dialects” in the making of the Chinese nation, and the complex, fluctuating tensions between authenticity and standardization that accompanied this process.

This book is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand the role that language plays in Chinese nationalism, from the mid-19th century until today. A